



(Illustration by Winter)

A cone of narrow brilliance moved out; moved in a slow, uneven arc, then stopped abruptly as it fastened on a moving creature. It was a fantastic nightmare figure.

The Mole-Men of Mercury

by Arthur K. Barnes

TIME and her capricious Boswell, History, play strange tricks with the record of the centuries. At once rich and barren, tender and merciless, with seeming wantonness, she distorts facts, obscures motives, sucks heroes into her whirlpool of dishonor and oblivion, and spews forth fools and scoundrels to the utmost pinnacles of fame and adulation. Perhaps nowhere will this anomaly be found so true as in the great body of legend that has come down to us in the twenty-third century concerning the epic exploits of the gallant, hardy members of the Interplanetary Legion—wild, romantic tales of danger and courage and superhuman strength and sacrifice and victory in the face of overwhelming odds—tales calculated to appeal to the public imagination, propagated by a clever publicity manager, unhampered by any reliance on fact or probability. And surely not even in this extensive folklore can be found a story more completely conducive to the ironic laughter of the Fates than the incredible case of George Gower and the metal mines of Mercury.

Of the antecedents of young Gower we know little. He was born in Portland, Oregon, and his father was a retired lumberman^[1]; so much is a matter of record. Presumably he was passed through the state educational system with nothing discreditable to his record, then took the place in the business world assigned to him. There are no data available, however, on these points, and for twenty-five long years we lose sight of him utterly until Destiny, in her unpredictable way, caused him to be seated upon a park bench in Los Angeles, friendless, dispirited, without funds.

¹ As late as 2070, trees were still being destroyed for their wood, to be used in the construction of dwellings, the making of paper, etc.

George Gower had the makings of a man. He was well over six feet tall, big-boned, and heavy. To the casual observer, he was a splendid creature, vibrant with health and strength. Only a shrewd scrutiny revealed the weak chin, the loose lips, the wavering glance that never seemed to rest and the tell-tale softness of his body. Gower had both brains and brawn, but he lacked that vital spark which glories in the fight against odds, which drives men on to success in spite of themselves.

Across the street from where he sat, a large poster fronted one of the older buildings of the block. It had once been gayly colored in red and green; now every wind that blew down the canyoned street shredded a few more tatters from its torn surface. Pencils and pocket-electels had scarred and initialed the huge board. Gower could barely decipher the lettering. It read:

INTERPLANETARY LEGION

Join the Legion
and See the Universe

A thousand men and women passed by every hour, as they moved along the lower traffic levels, and glanced at that ragged sign. And a thousand pairs of lips twisted in cynical amusement. Likewise did George Gower's lips, as he stared moodily across the park, twist in ironic laughter. For the Legion had been debunked.

At one time, the Interplanetary Legion had been vested with all the color and romance proper to a dashing military unit that year in and year out fought gallant battles against inhuman monsters and won over insuperable odds in their brave struggle to preserve the integrity of the solar system.

Young lads, fired with the enthusiasm to do great deeds, kissed sweethearts good-by and rushed off to the legion to fight their way to fame and fortune. The three years' service required of all who joined was looked upon as a sort of comic opera war, just a background for the real high point—the triumphal home-coming with banners waving and crowds cheering mightily along the main level. But ugly rumors began to drift about. The young lads failed to return to their waiting sweethearts; there were no triumphal home-comings; no banners waved; no crowds cheered. A sweeping investigation was ordered at Geneva by the Supreme Council of the Nations. The pretext—alleged misrepresentation of the conditions of the service—was trivial in the extreme. But the discoveries made by the investigating committee rocked the world.

WHEN the civilization of the inner planets (Mars, Venus, Earth) began to extend their sphere of influence into the further reaches of the System, in an effort to establish a sort of cosmic empire, they met with incalculable difficulties. The risk of long flights in space, the dangers of gravitations and atmospheres on other planets and their satellites, the hostility of monstrous and malignant forms of life—all these tended to nullify what hard-won advances were made. These inimical life-forms can never be wholly conquered; they can only be held in check. For that purpose, the Interplanetary Legion was conceived as a permanent military unit to guard the frontiers of civilization where-ever they existed, dedicated to constant struggle and hardship. Enlistment in the Legion was for a minimum period of three years. Of the thousands of men who had joined, including some of the finest specimens of life from three planets, fully ninety per cent never returned alive. Of the few who did come back, most were twisted and blinded and broken, ghastly human wrecks whose daily prayer was for

speedy release from a pain-wracked existence.

Small wonder, then, that the popularity of the Legion was snuffed out in a moment. Small wonder that people glanced with distaste at the neglected posters that had once decorated every major city on three planets. Small wonder that George Gower muttered scornfully, "Not for me."

"That Legion stuff seems to be washed up."

Gower turned, saw a stranger seated beside him. He was neatly but poorly dressed, and one sleeve of the heavy singlet that was the prevailing dress mode was pinned up. Gower grinned at him.

"You're talking, friend. I may be flat, but I'm joining no suicide clubs yet." He stuffed his hands into his pockets and smiled in the complacent fashion of one who thinks he knows when he's well off.

The stranger nodded agreement. "So long as I've a check^[2] in my pocket, I'm staying away from that place."

One can only guess as to how the conversation went along, or where it was carried on. But it ended in an automat restaurant, where the one-armed man finally took Gower to treat him to a meal. As they left the place, young Gower suddenly took ill. He reeled dizzily, clutched at his companion's arm, carried his hand to his head like a man dazed by a blow. As he peered at the other, he was mildly surprised to see him grinning. Grinning like a smug cat. Grinning That was George Gower's last conscious recollection for many hours.

From this point forward in our chronicle, we are on firmer ground. From the secret archives of the Legion, available only to a privileged few, from camp records, log-books of Legion space-ships, diaries of some of the men, and from scattered reports, we glean our material for the connected tale.

² Credit check—the unit of exchange in United America at this period of history.

Hence, it is a recorded fact that Gower's first audible remark, when he finally awoke from his drugged sleep, was,

"Well, what the hell?"

He sat up, shaking his head to clear it. He was in a tiny windowless room, furnished barely. There were four cots, a table and chairs. A miniature wash-bowl occupied one corner of the room. Everything seemed to be fastened down. George glanced at his clothing. It consisted of a one-piece suit of rubberized material, dark green in color. Stenciled in red just over the left breast was a monogram: "IL." George was no fool. He knew he was on a Legion ship, kidnaped in the crudest sort of way. He felt rage mounting hotly to his temples.

The murmur of voices caught his attention and he turned in time to see the door swing open. Three men came in, clumping awkwardly with their heavy magnetic shoes, and moved toward the beds. Gower leaped up, then found himself flopping like a fish against the ceiling. Striking out wildly, a lucky push sent him floating down to the floor again. The strangers were laughing at him as he fumbled for the heavy shoes at the bedside. But George was in no mood for humor. A terrible sinking sensation had gripped at his vitals; a numbing fear assailed his cowardly heart. He was in space! A black pall descended upon him like a poison mist, the room whirled, and he experienced a sickening illusion of falling, falling through vast distances, falling faster and faster, falling interminably

George Gower felt the shock of ice-water on his face. Rough hands were holding him upright. A voice asked:

"All right now?"

George blinked. "Yes Yes. I'm all right. What happened?"

"Touch of space sickness. You'll have these spells for a week or so, then it'll pass away." The man turned aside indifferently.

George remembered his grievance, and with remembrance came a new accession of

rage. He called out:

"Are any of you officers on this crate?"

One of the men raised up from his cot. He was pock-marked and scarred, with thick lips and dark, heavy hair and eyebrows, a typical thug.

"I'm your sergeant," enunciated the thick lips. "It's customary to address your superiors respectfully." He laughed harshly. One of the others passed a coarse remark.

George flushed, then yelled: "I demand to be taken back to earth at once. You can't shanghai^[3] me like this. It's illegal. You can't do this and get away with it!"

The third man jerked a thumb at George. "He *demands* to be taken back. Haw, haw!" All three guffawed.

The sergeant stood and toed into his shoes. "Come along," he said. "You can see the captain."

Together the two of them left the tiny cubicle, marched along dark corridors that burrowed through the bowels of the ship, and finally entered another room, larger and more comfortable than the one they had left. George became conscious of a growing murmur that throbbed annoyingly against his eardrums, more felt than heard. Through dozens of thicknesses of exalite and beryllium, from a distance equivalent to several city blocks, George Gower, with a new and terrifying sense of intimacy, was listening to the thunder of the rocket-tubes.

CHAPTER II

Shanghaied Into Space

THE captain was a hard-bitten little Frenchman, wiry and battle-scarred and tough.

³Ancient sea-faring term, now obsolete, used to describe the kidnaping by force of men to serve on sailing ships of the nineteenth century.

His tones were brittle as he spoke.

“I am Captain Marchand. What is it you wish?”

Gower drew a deep breath and began to bluster. “Captain Marchand, I have been detained against my will on this ship, kidnaped in defiance of the law of—”

“What is your name?” There was a pitying contempt in the little man’s glance.

“George Gower. And unless I am immediately returned—”

The captain raised a hand wearily. “Yes, yes. The authorities will hear from you. The law will be upon me Now, get this, Mister George Gower. It will be three years before you ever see the earth again, other than as a pin-point of light in the sky. Three long, bitter, heart-breaking, dangerous years. Three sweaty, painful, disease-filled years. Three years of living death. Three years that will either take the putty out of your spine or leave you a frozen corpse somewhere in space Now get out of here, and remember that if I hear one more word about turning back, you’ll be burned down^[4] for treason.

Gower was suddenly deflated, aged. “B-but where are you taking me?” he managed to ask. His soft chin trembled.

“Training camp on the moon. Now get out.”

The thick-lipped, grinning sergeant dragged George out of the room and down the myriad corridors to his quarters. There was a suspicion of tears in his eyes as he lay down on the bare little cot.

There is no doubt that young Gower shirked his duties as much as possible during the two weeks’ intensive training period. The Legion aimed to harden its recruits in the shortest time consistent with thorough instruction. Life on the moon was one

continual round of drilling in formation under the huge oxygen bells or “igloos,” then skirmish practice in space suits outside, sham battles, life boat drill, and preparation for the hundred and one emergencies that constantly harass the luckless legionnaire. This, of course, was entirely unsuited to George’s temperament. He tried once merely to absent himself from drill without excuse. For that offense he received twenty lashes on his bare back. Again, he feigned illness, but the camp doctor pronounced him in good health. For that offense he spent half an hour in the Chamber of Horrors^[5], as it was called by the men. They brought him out unconscious, but his screams had been heard all over the bell. After that experience, Gower played a different game. He ingratiated himself with the officers, and was finally appointed orderly to Captain Marchand, thus relieving himself of some of the more arduous duties. Marchand continually kept telling him, “This won’t get you out of anything when the fighting begins. It’ll be so much the worse for your soft belly.” But Gower continued his toadying just the same.

AT the end of two strenuous weeks, a few days of relaxation were allowed the men. This was spent largely in horse-play and rough games, and enabled the men really to become acquainted with one another, something they had been unable to do during the stiff training period. They were an unprepossessing lot, for the most part. The governments of the planets had long recognized the inestimable worth of the Legion, so to help keep the ranks filled, immunity was guaranteed to any criminal who joined the Legion for so long as he served, and the chances were acknowledged good for complete pardon if he lived through the

⁴ Although the lethal gas chamber was used almost universally for crimes carrying the death penalty, offenders in the Legion were subject to military law and were stood up before the heat-ray squad.

⁵ Simple torture chamber, once used to force enemy prisoners to talk, later used in the Legion for “disciplinary measures.” This shocking item was one of many revealed by the investigation.

ordeal. Hence, a good seventy per cent of the men were of this class; thieves, racketeers, murderers, riff-raff from the darkest corners of the universe. Illiterate, uncouth, boisterous, they disgusted and irritated young men like Gower who had been forced into their company via a rap on the head or a pill in their coffee. George came in for a good deal of ragging, some of it good-natured, some of it not. So it was with a sensation of relief that he heard the order come to depart at once.

Gower was in Marchand's office at the time, as befits the dutiful orderly, when the radio man hastened in with a message. The captain read it, frowned, and turned to George.

"We leave here, Gower, in three hours. Summon all commissioned officers here at once. Tell the men to pack. An emergency call from Mercury. The metal mines are in danger."

The metal mines of Mercury! We can guess what thrills went up George's spine when he heard that. For what schoolboy of that time had not read a hundred stories of the incredible adventures that befell the pioneer miners on Mercury? And what youngster had not longed to see for himself the very planet where history and romance had been forged from blood and steel? George hastily summoned the officers, then ran to the barracks and spread the news. In five minutes the entire camp was in an uproar.

George was plied with incessant questionings. The metal mines were in danger from what? Will there be fighting? Did the old man look worried? How the hell are we gonna get ready in three hours? Is it serious? George shook his head, tried to answer as best he could, but he knew no more about it than the others, so eventually the groups dispersed to begin their packing. At the end of the third hour precisely, bugles sounded a general assembly under the main bell. The men gathered quickly and quietly, watched in silence as Captain Marchand mounted the small platform. He disdained the

loud-speakers, preferring to speak to his men directly.

"You men know we're leaving shortly," he began in a high ringing voice. "You're all wondering why. We learned long ago that it's useless to try and hide things from the ranks." His thin lips twisted in a little smile. "So I'm going to explain the situation to you."

"The mining machines on Mercury have dug too deep, and have broken into a series of underground caverns on that planet. It seems that there's a race of vertebrate creatures living there beneath the surface, and they've proven actively hostile toward the mining companies. By climbing out right up the sheer walls of the mine shafts they attacked the engineers there and killed a considerable number. A sort of guerilla warfare has been going on for some time, and all work has been abandoned Now many of you know that the material used in spaceship construction is called exalite⁶. But what most of you probably do not know is that Mercury is the sole source of this metal in the System. Hence, this is a crisis in the progress of interplanetary civilization that cannot be regarded lightly. The very existence of that civilization is threatened."

There were a few catcalls and ironic cries of "Hear, hear!" at Marchand's sonorous speech, but they were quickly drowned in the whole-hearted cheer that arose. The men were eager to go.

The first leg of the journey began comfortably enough for Gower. Discipline on board was only moderately strict, there was no great amount of work to be done, and Gower himself came into a sort of popularity by

⁶ Exalite, the extremely light and durable metal from Mercury, which has the curious property of partially nullifying the force of gravity. Every school child today is familiar with these facts (though, indeed, scientists have not yet satisfactorily explained them) but they were not common knowledge at the time the above incident took place.

virtue of his being a sort of go-between from the officers to the men. Often his duties as orderly took him into the navigation room, where the commander of the ship and his picked crew of technical experts labored constantly to keep the ship safely on her course as she annihilated time and space in a powerful rush through the void. George loved to linger, though he knew Marchand would bully him for it, in the little glass-walled room, gazing awe-struck at the vast black panorama of the heavens, freckled with bright diamonds, relieved perhaps by the exhaust of some wandering space-car as it flared its faery tracery across the sky. The scene never failed to move him profoundly.

CHAPTER III Trouble on Mercury

THE FIRST discordant note in this peaceful trip came when they were eight days out.^[7] One of the men in the barrack-rooms came down with space-fever. To this very day, of course, medical science has failed to isolate any micro-organism that may cause this strange malady, and doctors are still vociferous in asserting that it is non-contagious. That is poor consolation, however, to the poor devils cooped up in a ship with a space-fever victim, for invariably, most of the other members of the party fall ill too. Young Gower, on that same day, reported to Marchand that he felt poorly.

“What kind of complaint have you thought up now?” asked the captain. “I hope it’s something new. I can forgive you if you’re original.”

George looked reproachfully at his superior, then said:

“I’m not—just not feeling well, that’s all.”

Marchand chuckled. “I told you, back in camp. You’re soft; you can’t stand” He paused abruptly.

Terrible pains had suddenly shot up Gower’s spinal column, an iron band seemed clamped around his head, and all muscular coordination was lost. He screamed aloud, staggered in circles for nearly a full minute, then collapsed in a dead faint. There was no question of malingering this time; Marchand sent for the ship’s surgeon at once and carried the boy to bed. In two hours he had vomited everything from his stomach and was running a temperature of 104. He talked deliriously.

The harassed doctor, with three other patients already on his hands, resorted to the safest kind of treatment he knew. Taking blood serum from one of the men who had had the disease before, presumably containing anti-bodies with which to combat it, he injected this into Gower’s pain-twisted limbs twice a day. He tried to control the remaining symptoms as best he might. About half the Legionnaires and several of the crew came down with the strange malady. Those who did not, including Captain Marchand, were men who had had it before, and they were weakened by constant demands on their blood by the doctor. It was a sad-looking bunch that finally staggered out on firm ground again as they made port on Venus, half-way point on their flight.

Gower was convalescent during the week’s stop-over, but was too weak to be inclined to join the others as they caroused about the rougher end of town (Tunjäl—equipped with the finest space-flight facilities of any place in the system at that time) drinking and gambling and wenching as only they knew how. He also remained in ignorance of certain facts which the rest of the men learned from a remnant of a Venusian regiment just returned from Mercury. Facts about the conditions there and how the

⁷ Time, until the men were actually landed upon another planet, was always reckoned in Tellurian period! by earth-men, in Martian periods by Martians, etc.

fighting was going. Facts they were that sent the men back to their ship sobered and silent, with a haunted, horror-stricken look deep in their eyes. Facts that inspired a few attempted desertions, quickly rendered abortive by Marchand. Facts that sent the Legion ship back into space as soon as the men could be rounded up and driven aboard. Gower's first inkling that the stopover had been cut short was the faint roaring of the rocket tubes, the brief straining of the ship as it rose, and the distant whine of the wind as she knifed through the cloud-laden atmosphere and drove full speed ahead for distant Mercury.

THE EXALITE mines of Mercury are located in the twilight zone^[8], the only inhabitable portion of the planet. When the Legion ship nosed down to its unobtrusive landing, there was no cheering crowd, no fanfare of trumpets, no photographers or news-caster men to greet it. Just a series of gentle pushes, the slight jar of contact, and the men were ordered out in full space-suit attire.

George was one of the first out. He gazed about with interest. All around him stretched the barren landing field, its metallic surface pitted and scarred by many rocket blasts. To the far distant right, a brilliant white arc of the sun peered over the edge of the horizon, its blasting rays, neither distorted nor diminished by the tenuous Mercurian atmosphere. And on the left darkness crept up, a faintly purplish haze which obscured none of the landscape, and which was relieved by a weird reddish glow from a distant volcanic cone that reared its ugly head into the sky. Faint wisps of steam puffed up, to be

dissipated at once in the thin air. Quite distinctly, young Gower felt the earth beneath his feet rumble at frequent intervals. Objects seemed curiously at once close and far away—close because of the ease with which even the farthest could be seen, far away because of the utter lack, of sound. Even the roar of the still-acting rocket tubes seemed oddly muted.

Gower's reverie was broken, as someone pushed him roughly aside.

"One side there; y'in a trance?" It was Marchand's clipped tones. "Others to come out besides you."

Gower moved aside, asked: "Where do we go from here?"

The little captain laughed. "A short, tough march ahead of us, softy. Think you can bear up?" He turned to shout some orders at the stragglers still coming out, not waiting for George's reply.

A half hour's march, in which even the heavy magnetic shoes failed to keep the men from soaring awkwardly about at each incautious step, brought them close to the mines. The sun had disappeared, leaving behind a legacy of bitter cold that pierced through the insulated suits and numbed every muscle and nerve. The men, cheered hoarsely as they came in sight of the great quartzite oxygen bells that housed the mining engineers and soldiers, looking- like so many grotesque and misshapen glass igloos squatting somnolently in the dusk.

As they tramped toward the bell with the monogram of the Legion marked upon it, the men were passed by two Martians carrying a third between them. The thick-lipped sergeant paused a moment to speak to them. Gower heard the question and answer through his earphones, but did not understand the language. As the trio passed on, one sagging with sinister slackness, George spoke to the sergeant.

"What happened to the poor fellow?"

The sergeant looked at him queerly,

⁸ Although Mercury shows but one face to the sun, the eccentricity of orbit gives her an oscillating movement, or libration. There is an area of some hundreds of miles, therefore, which have a sort of day and night. The point where the mines are located is toward one side of the zone. Consequently, the "night" is only some four or five days long, while "day" takes up the remainder of the 90 days of Mercury's revolution about the sun.

then said, "He died on sentry duty. Frozen to death, the lucky devil. Never felt a thing."

George's mouth turned suddenly dry, and he jumped violently at Marchand's crackling command:

"Order in the ranks! Keep moving there!"

Moving quickly across the mining company's grounds, the men paused before the Legion bell while the air-lock was being manipulated. Just beyond stood the last of the row of "igloos." A ragged hole had been smashed in the side, and the ground was littered with quartzite fragments and twisted steel girders which had been tossed and mangled like straws under the terrific outrush of air. There were still a few bodies lying about, and a hospital crew worked hard at disposing of them. George spoke to someone near him.

"What in the universe happened there?" He pointed to the wreckage-strewn landscape. "An accident?"

The man shrugged. "No accident; they meant it. The mole-men slipped through the outposts with a cutting tool of some sort. None of the men had any idea what was going on 'til she blew open." He shrugged again, eloquently.

CHAPTER IV

The Mole-Men of Mercury

GEORGE'S last glimpse before he passed into the air-lock was of the broken bell standing there in the twilight—shattered, empty, forlorn. He shivered, but not from cold.

A warm shower, the business of unpacking and selecting bunks, and a hot meal failed to take young Gower's mind away from brooding over its first close-at-hand experience of the utter ruthlessness of life. His nerves were still jumpy when the call came for sentry duty that night. He was chosen for the

second shift.

The men quickly sought their bunks, exhausted by the short but hard march and emotional stress produced by the strange surroundings and shocking sights. Many drugged themselves. One by one the lights in the oxygen bells winked out, leaving only dim night lamps burning high up in the domes. Restlessly, George awaited the call, biting his nails, trying to read the months-old papers that lay around, vainly fiddling with the tele-viso. It was a relief when the three-hour period ended with the pleasant sound of buzzers and the flashing of a red light in the main barrack-room. There came subdued conversation, the quick, sharp rustle of men clambering into space suits, and the rasp of metal shoes passing out through the hissing air-lock. George left the others almost immediately, made his way cautiously to his post. He exchanged salutes with the relieved sentry, then listened with apprehension as the man walked away and vanished into the night.

It was not entirely dark. There was no diffusion, of course, but a dim grayish glow from some sort of phosphorescent activity in the rock near by lightened the blackness. Above him; stars shone with a hard brilliance from the vast cup of silence that engulfed him. All about was the intense cold of interstellar space. George forced himself to walk in effort to keep warm. He found himself at the extreme edge of a lava flow, and paralleled it in his march. The volcano was closer now, and its grumbling seemed to have lessened. The ground no longer trembled and only the faintest glow came from the crater. Gradually Gower's mind ceased to think, and he plodded mechanically back and forth, back and forth—a human robot. An hour had gone by when Gower first suspected something out of the ordinary. The sensitive earphones in his helmet were attuned, not only to the tiny microphones that each man wore for inter-communication and for the reception of

orders, but also to outside noises⁹. They picked up a curious sound from somewhere in front of him, a slithering, sucking sound that popped and whispered like a giant's kiss. George's hair prickled on the nape of his neck, and he quickly unslung his flashlight. A cone of narrow brilliance knifed out, moved in a slow, uneven arc, then stopped abruptly as it fastened on a moving creature. It was a fantastic, nightmare figure. About four feet in height, it was, looking roughly like two eggs set one atop the other—a fat, oblong body covered with reddish hair, and a smaller ovoid head resting on narrow shoulders. The face, which seemed featureless in the uncertain light, twisted and grimaced constantly. Short arms carried a pair of metal instruments shaped much like the ancient miner's hand-lamp. There were scarcely any legs at all, the base of the body consisting of long, mobile flaps of flesh covered with innumerable powerful suction cups.

IN AN instant, young Gower whipped out his heat-ray weapon and red. The ray sizzled comfortingly; a red glow joined the white of his torch. The mole-man seemed to fall back, roll around without actually leaving his feet, then bobbed upright again unharmed! George gasped, then began to laugh hysterically. The thing was just like one of those round-bottomed, weighted toys that couldn't be knocked over. He sprayed the thing again, without result. The impact of the rays apparently pushed it around, but in another moment it advanced and raised a stubby arm. George saw nothing but the hard ground, the hideous little mole-man, and the arm pointing at him, but instantly he felt a terrible sense of impending horror. The air about him became alive with unseen menace; his body tingled to an electric shock. Death's wing hovered close.

Something snapped inside George

Gower. Whirling, he flung aside his weapon and his light and dashed wildly, recklessly away from that spot, screaming madly at every step. The camp was in an uproar when he reached it. Lights were flashing on everywhere. Scantily dressed men rushed about the igloos, finding weapons, fumbling into space-suits. Voices clamored excitedly, hands seized at George as he ran past. But he did not stop until he had fallen at the feet of Captain Marchand and blubbered out his tale. Tears streamed from his eyes as he stammered:

"... and I rayed the thing, Captain. I rayed it twice. An' it kept right on comin'. We can't stop 'em, Captain; no man can stop 'em. They'll kill us all. Let's get outa here now."

He tugged with pathetic and disgusting eagerness at the captain's sleeve, muttering, "Let's go now. Let's get outa here."

Marchand spat in contempt, groaning inwardly as he thought of the splendid traditions of the Legion, traditions built up by scores of fighting men with courage unbounded, to be mocked and destroyed in a second by this parody of a man who whimpered and groveled on the floor. He shook the young man violently, slapped his face.

"Snap out of it!" he yelled. "Where's your viscera? Pull yourself together."

He continued slapping George until the latter controlled himself. Then he said:

"You used your heat-ray, I suppose. I meant to tell you that the 'heaters' won't harm these fellows. They're spawned in the heart of the planet, roasted from birth and weaned in hell-fire. Of course the heaters won't bother 'em. But the cathode-ray will. And that's the weapon you're to use. My fault perhaps that I didn't warn you. But not my fault that you turned yellow and deserted your post!" He toed Gower from the room. "Get to your quarters."

A hastily formed skirmishing party found no trace of the mole-men, so they

⁹ Sound was received in two ways! through the thin, poorly-conducting air, and through ground vibration.

returned to their beds, and the sentries, minus George, continued patrol. The long night passed. The flaming arc of the sun once again thrust up over the horizon, sending its shafts of blinding, searing heat leveling across the plain. The sound of buzzers made pleasant cacophony throughout the igloos. Men aroused, stretched, dressed for their first meal in the daylight of Mercury, and prepared to go forth to die.

MARCHAND quickly assembled the men in company front and marched them to the edge of the lava flow which marked the outer sentry line. Here he halted them, spoke curtly through his tiny microphone. "We have a slight advantage, men, in that we can profit by the costly mistakes of the Legionnaires who have been here before us. For instance, before twenty hours have passed, this plain will become absolutely insupportable to human life, even in suits insulated from the sun. Hence, we must push forward at once and accomplish our problem without delay."

He turned, pointed up the long, low slope of jagged and broken lava which led in the general direction of the volcano, which was beginning to puff and fret and steam again.

"The shaft which broke into the mole-men's caverns is very near the crater up there. You can see the shattered framework of the oxygen bell if you look carefully. The mole-men retire voluntarily underground at darkness; they can't stand the cold for long, though apparently they absorb enough heat to enable them to move around a bit outside when the sun is down. They'll be coming out pretty soon now, and our first task is to work across this 'aa' flow^[10], and bottle 'em up in the mine. Advance as skirmishers!"

¹⁰ Lava flow which is jagged and broken by the violent escape of gases at the time of cooling, or by crust breakage due to the flow of viscous lava beneath. The word "aa" is an obsolete geologic term, taken from the language, supposedly, of an extinct Pacific island race known as Hawaiians.

It was a herculean task merely to traverse the rough lava. At first the men tried to cover ground by prodigious leaps. Several hard falls and sprained limbs, however, checked the men's enthusiasm for this sport. Finally, one of them fell on one of the needle-like points that thrust upward everywhere and at all angles, impaled his space-suit, and gasped out his life before anyone could reach him. George, who was well to the rear, shuddered violently and adjusted his pace to the demands of safety.

Progress was slow when taken step by step, picked laboriously through a miniature forest of stone. Before half the slope was traversed, their presence had been discovered. The mole-men began to creep from the hole and form an irregular line facing the advancing legionnaires. Quietly and horribly they perched at the top of the hill, red-brown and hairy and menacing with their small lamp-like weapons, a straggling crescent of blasphemous little idols about to pronounce dread judgment upon the toilers below.

"Fire!"

The command crackled in every ear. Weapons were raised in an instant, aimed, and all hell seemed to break loose along the hillside. Though at the disadvantage at being unable to use their heat-ray weapons, the legionnaires were well-trained in the use of the clumsy cathode guns, which required recharging after every bolt. A solid sheet of white-hot, crackling flame burst from the front rank of men and the individual bolts snapped up the hill spitefully, spreading destruction wherever they struck. Several of the mole-men jerked upright, seemed to sag within themselves, then rolled over and out of sight. Encouraged, the men pressed forward more rapidly, hastily re-loading. Suddenly, on the extreme left, someone flung up his arms, screaming shrilly again and again. Many turned to look, then stopped in amazement. The stricken man was twitching and bobbing like a madman in some strange dance, and the

hellish laughter of a tormented soul rang out without cessation. Another legionnaire abruptly flung his weapons aside, fell down, and began to jerk and scream. And another, and another, and another. The thin air was surcharged locally with electricity. George drew back in fright as his neighbor whirled round and round in tight circles, presenting a horror-drawn, pain-filled face at every gyration, shouting and laughing with maniac fury.

George cowered back against Captain Marchand. "For God's sake, Captain, what is it? What is happening to them?"

Marchand thrust Gower away. "It's those infernal hand weapons of theirs, of course, you fool. Move around a bit, so you won't make quite a perfect target." The captain's tone implied that he didn't give a damn if George did make a good target.

"But what makes them jerk around and—act like that?"

"How the hell do I know?" Marchand snapped. "An electrical discharge of some sort. Probably disrupts the nerve currents—makes a short circuit in the nervous system—blows out their neurological fuses." He laughed harshly, then pushed on. "But never fear; the mole-men can't stand the barrage we're laying across that slope. Look!"

CHAPTER V

"Annihilate the Entire Race——"

THE MOLE-MEN were indeed falling back. Numbers of them lay strewn about the ridge; the remainder were converging on the wreckage of the mine's oxygen bell and disappearing into the earth. Taking courage, George rushed headlong up the slope and reached the top with the rest of the men. It was here that a sudden rally of the mole-men caught him in its vortex. A small party of the chunky, red-haired little creatures darted back

up the mine shaft and attempted to capture two or three of the legionnaires in the van of the attacking wave. In an ecstasy of fear, George lay about him frenziedly, battering with the butt of his weapon, lashing out with boot and fist, flinging his lighter enemies about astonishingly. Stunned by the proximity of the cathode-ray bolts, sickened by contact with the mole-men, he nevertheless proved a veritable demon when cornered, and with his companions, drove the enemy off their feet and took their weapons away from them.

The scuffle gradually drifted from the mine shaft and up to the very top of the ridge, where the last of the mole-men gave up and fled. George paused to look about, tired and trembling, yet vaguely proud of himself. To one side lay the mine-shaft, littered with bodies and the wreckage of the bell, with the rest of the men arriving as fast as they could in safety. To the other side lay the vast crater of the volcano, a gigantic funnel which twisted steeply downward into the bowels of the earth, paved completely except for the small vent in the center with dark, gleaming, slippery volcanic glass. George stepped out upon it and immediately saw his feet spin about like a novice on skates. He sat down lightly and seized the rough rock on the ridge-top to pull himself back. He grinned. A regular devil's slide; it would be a thrill to go skidding down there.

The volcano was beginning to work itself into a heat now; steam poured out at regular intervals and the ground trembled to earthquake shocks frequently. At the far side, one or two of the mole-men still lingered forlornly, hoping to find a way to get underground again. On a sudden impulse, Gower re-charged his gun and fired at one of them. Luckily, he scored a partial hit and sent the creature flying, head over heels, down the slippery crater side. It was at the very edge of the final drop that he managed to halt his progress. George swore in disappointment as he watched his victim begin the long climb

back, aided by his queer suction-cup feet. Quickly, George reloaded, then looked up to see an amazing thing. The little mole-man had stopped and was writhing about in unmistakable agony, pawing at his head. Abruptly he collapsed, slid slowly downward till his head dangled over into the pit—dead.

IT WAS then that George was smitten by his great idea. For long moments he stood on the lip of the crater, pondering silently, gloating over its cleverness, its magnitude, its—

“Disconnect ground-phones!” Captain Marchand’s voice crackled sharply into the helmet. George mechanically obeyed, then turned to see what was going on. The legionnaires had cleared away the mine-shaft, and reserves were bringing up high explosives—deadly little hydroxyl bombs which acted with such devastating effect. Marchand was preparing to seal up the shaft by blowing it to pieces; had the ground-phones not been disconnected, the men would have been permanently deafened by the noise. George watched abstractedly as the blasting crew quietly and efficiently bombed the mine out of existence, felt the ground tremble beneath him from the rending detonations far in the earth below, gazed with vague appreciation at the rocks, dust, smoke plumes, and flames which rushed upward in awesome silence from the hole in pyrotechnic display.

A small outpost was left on the hilltop while the main body of troops went back to the camp. The officers wished to consult on their next move. George noticed that all the “wounded” had been removed somehow. He understood. When back at the oxygen bell, he observed a double row of bodies lying in the shadow far off to one side, rigid and still.

He sought out Marchand immediately after camp was reached.

“What,” he asked nervously, “are you going to do now, Captain? Sealing one hole won’t stop the mole-men from coming out of

another. There’s a dozen other mines within a quarter-mile of the volcano, I’m told; they’ll soon be coming through them. We’ll have a guerilla warfare on our hands, and we’re no match for ’em at that game.”

Marchand shrugged irritably. “I hope you’re not under the impression that that’s news to me. I know all about that, and more. But what are you going to do about it, oh wise man?”

Gower ignored the sarcasm and sidled closer, earnestly. “The only way is to completely annihilate the entire race of mole-men. Wipe them out...”

The captain applauded softly. “And just how does the Oracle propose to do this?” Marchand was prone to be bitter when frustrated or worried.

George flushed at this, but refused to give up. “It can be done, in this way. The caverns all seem to center about the volcano—possibly because of some convenient metallic deposit, or because of its warmth, or perhaps some other reason which doesn’t matter—but I know that the mole-men do not live within the volcano itself. The gases that come from it are fatal to them; I saw one not a half-hour ago get too close, and he died almost instantly from the gas.” George paused in triumph.

“And so?” Marchand began to see what his despised orderly was driving at, but at first refused to admit to himself that it could be of any real worth. George, on the contrary, was warming to his task.

“And so just this,” he answered. “Instead of waiting around for the mole-men to reach the surface again, we’ll attack them. By bombing the volcano itself, we can crumble whatever walls stand between it and the caverns and seal over the top. In no time at all the tremendous pressure will send the deadly volcanic gases through every inch of those tunnels, and the menace of the mole-men will be ended forever.” George concluded with a flourish intended to be dramatic and telling, but which succeeded

only in being melodramatic and cheap.

Marchand looked at Gower oddly, as if to say, "Oh, well, we must get our help where we can find it," and shrugged.

"Sounds pretty good," he began grudgingly. Then, being eminently a fair man at heart, he acknowledged freely, "In fact, it's a damn' good idea, Gower. I'll place it before the council immediately. There's no doubt in my mind that it'll be found the plan of greatest possibilities yet presented." And so it was.

CHAPTER VI Gower's Plan

MANY HOURS had passed already since the sun had risen, and even the insulated suits of the legionnaires were beginning to heat up unbearably. Marchand, therefore, ordered the plan to be executed at once, as before long only the most hardened old Mercurian prospector would be able to remain outside more than a few minutes at a time. A blasting crew and sentry were taken up the hill to relieve those still on guard. Then the most expert thrower took one of the hydroxyl bombs and hurled it toward the distant, smoking vent. It fell short. A terrific, soundless explosion rocked the men to their heels, tore a gaping hole in the dark obsidian slide. Another one fell short, by far. Two other men with the finest throwing arms in the Legion tried their skill, and failed. Young George, who was included in the party in deference to the fact that it was his scheme, began to feel suffocated. The sun's glare, reflected from the smooth rock, made his head reel and ache. It was growing warmer every minute.

The bomb-throwing was abandoned. Several cans of explosive were brought up from the mining company's storerooms. Percussion caps were arranged in them so that they would explode with any severe jolt. The

first one was sent rolling its merry way down the steep slope, but struck one of the hydroxyl bomb shell holes and blew up prematurely. The second was started farther to one side, and headed straight for the main vent, gaining momentum with each second, until it fairly flew the last few yards, plunged heavily downward, and disappeared. And then an amazing thing happened. Instead of the expected explosion, the heavy can suddenly shot upward, intact, almost a hundred feet into the air, then fell on the far slope, bursting into a thousand fragments as the powder went off.

Marchand stared dumbfounded, then began to curse bitterly. He turned to Gower. "Maybe you can tell us what's wrong now."

The men were discussing the phenomena excitedly, a bit fearfully. Gower licked his lips, replied:

"Yes, sir. I think I can. There's a great outrush of gases coming from the mouth of the volcano, invisible from this point. But if you move around so that the crater is between us and the sun, it will easily be seen."

Obediently, the party moved around to see. And sure enough, the distortion of the sun's rays as they passed through the gas proved George's guess correct. But it improved Marchand's temper not at all. His face, seen through the glass-faced helmet, was a dark flame as he raged in quiet fury against the fate that balked him thus. He had counted heavily on Gower's plan. And still the sun beat hotter and hotter.

"All right, men," he snapped out. "Back to camp before we're roasted alive." Then, switching on the long-distance phone, he spoke to headquarters. "Round up a skeleton crew for navigating the big ship. Turn out a surface car."

Wearily, the men trudged down the broken slope. George stood by while they rolled out one of the curious "puddle-hopper" surface cars, rocket-propulsion affairs which, with their weak blasts, covered the ground in long jumps of a quarter-mile at a time. The

crew piled in, George among them, and they swooped away toward the ship. In less than an hour, the giant space-ship hovered, vulture-like, over the volcano, slowly drifting near the vent.

“Be sure that pile of junk is lashed tight.” It was Marchand speaking. He pointed to a number of cans of explosive tied together with several metal shoes, bits of machinery, and odds and ends, to give it sufficient weight. “This ought to be heavy enough to go down that hole.”-

THE EXPLOSIVE was placed in the forward bombing rack, ready to be dropped on command. Marchand shouted his readiness to the navigator, and the space-car glided directly over the volcano. In a trice, the floor up-ended sickeningly beneath George’s feet, and he was flung down the length of the room to pile up against the rear wall with a dozen others. Pitching violently from side to side, the mighty ship was tossed back like a toy, and dropped almost to the ground before the sweating navigator managed to switch on the under-tubes and send it rearing skyward again. George cracked his head on some metal fixture and remained semiconscious until they landed again. When he awoke, the ship was motionless once more on the bare landing field. The crew stood about uncomfortably, waiting for the airlock to open, while Marchand, vocabulary exhausted at last, paced to and fro, a caged lion in his terrible, glowering silence

Hours had passed. The heat outside was terrific. In the dry coolness of the council chamber, eleven officers hung intently on Captain Marchand’s clipped sentences. He was saying:

“... so it would be madness to try that again. The ship might be irrevocably damaged; men might be needlessly destroyed. There remains but one thing left. “The Legion ships, of course, are equipped for all sorts of unpredictable emergencies. In our ship there

are several space-suits prepared for use on some light-gravity asteroid or satellite where the magnetic shoes may prove impracticable. They are designed to carry small packets of neutronium^[11], heavier than any element. These suits have been broken down, the neutronium extracted and built into a single belt of sufficient length to circle a man’s body.” An uneasy stir passed through the audience. Men’s glances turned to meet one another, then slid away to the floor. Marchand continued.

“It will be necessary for one of us— one of the men—to strap the belt about him, fill his space-suit and both hands with hydroxyl bombs, and cast himself into the pit. We have tried to lash the belt firmly to a bomb container, but the chances of its slipping off, allowing the belt to fall and the bombs to be flung back, are too great to risk the only one we have. Someone will have to make the supreme sacrifice.”

A deathly silence fell in the chamber, finally broken by someone’s sneering comment:

“For the glory of the Legion and the persistence of civilization, eh? Bah!”

Another officer asked quietly, “Didn’t this idea come from your orderly, Captain?”

Eleven heads swivelled round; eleven pairs of eyes fastened with grim meaning on George. The young fellow flinched, burst out:

“Don’t look at me. I thought it up; I did my share. Let someone else do the rest. Oh, no. Oh, no. Not for me.” George waved his hands nervously and wagged a sweat-beaded forehead.

“There is a tradition,” began Marchand, then broke off.

Someone bellowed loudly, “You wouldn’t demand another to die carrying out a

¹¹ Or neutron: a state of matter in which all molecular activity ceases. The atoms thus contracted in upon themselves—there is no longer any space between electrons and protons—acquire tremendous weight.

plan you were smart enough to think up and not brave enough to carry out, would you?"

Several of the men crowded around Gower and began to work on his frayed nerves. Young George cowered away from them, refused to be the goat. But with quiet and deadly persistence, the officers tore at the fabric of his self-control, beat down his resistance, persuaded, begged, bullied him. Finally he screamed aloud.

"Stop! Stop! Of course I'll go. I'll have to go. But it isn't fair. I don't want to die. I'm young; I have everything to live for. I don't want to die yet!" He flung himself on a low divan, sobbing.

CHAPTER VII The Supreme Sacrifice

THE TOUGH little captain stared at Gower's shaking shoulders a bit contemptuously. An uneasy scowl wrinkled his brow.

"We might," he commenced, "find a volunteer...."

The officer who sneered before now laughed mockingly.

"My dear Marchand. A volunteer to throw himself into the maw of a volcano? As likely that you yourself will volunteer."

Marchand's black eyes were little diamonds, glinting, as they looked steadily at the speaker. "Less likely, considerably. I think the officers of the Legion have acted unlike legionnaires themselves in this matter. I intend to go with Gower. I am volunteering."

They stood outside the air-lock of the oxygen bell, George Gower and Captain Marchand, preparing to make their last march of life. About Gower's waist, outside his space-suit, was fastened the tremendous weight of the neutronium belt. He wore no magnetic shoes. For some time he had been muttering and acting strangely. Marchand carried a container filled to the brim with

hydroxyl bombs. The pockets of both men's suits were crammed with the deadly little missiles. A scant half dozen of the hardest old-timers stood about ready to accompany them on their last journey.

There was no dramatic farewell, no waving of hands. The little group quite simply moved away from the shelter of the bell, struggled up the long lava slope, then paused on the lip of the crater for rest. Marchand spoke shortly to the men.

"I advise you to go on back, though you know better than I how much sun you can take. Nothing you can do here, though. It won't be—pleasant—to watch. So long."

The older men nodded gravely, refused to leave. Marchand grasped Gower, who was acting like a drunken man, by the arm, and stepped onto the glassy slide. In five seconds their feet were in the air, and they were whizzing downward with breath-taking speed, not to halt until they smashed into one of the ragged holes made by the thrown bombs. By a miracle, none of their live bombs went off. Gower mechanically seized a projection to slow his progress. It broke off in his hand, a sharp, jagged dagger of obsidian; he still clutched it while the two continued their downward journey.

On the very brink of the vent, the two men found a roughened spot on which they could stand. Far to the left, the dead mole-man still dangled over the edge. Gower was in a pitiable state, whimpering and moaning, nerves a-jangle, more than half blinded by the terrible glare of the sun. In his ears was the vast roaring of that Brobdingnagian gas-jet as the volcanic gases rushed outward to oblivion in a never-ending stream. It stifled and dulled the mind; it bludgeoned the senses. George clapped his hands to his head and began to laugh and shout insanely.

Marchand seized and shook him vigorously, but Gower seemed not to feel it. He unfastened the neutronium belt and laid it on the ground beside him, one end draped

over the bomb case. Marchand leaned close and yelled:

“Keep it on, you fool. I’ll cling to it as we go down. Put it back on!”

Gower laughed again, horribly. “What do you mean ‘we?’ I’m not going to die yet. It’s you who’re going to wear the belt. You who’re going’ to jump into the pit! You who’re going to die! You, not me. D’ye hear? You, you, YOU!”

GOWER shrieked and began to batter at the glass face of the captain’s space-suit like a madman. Marchand flung him aside, stiff-armed the younger man as he tried to rush in. George, relieved of the weight of the belt, used his muscles incautiously and was sent bounding into the air several feet. He floated down slowly, squirming and twisting like a dying fish in his rage. His hand found a heat-ray weapon at his belt. As he struck the ground, he whipped it out and fired. Marchand raised one arm and closed in, conscious of a burning, searing pain that tortured every nerve in his body. His left arm dropped uselessly at his side, but his right hand neatly twisted the heater away and tossed it many feet to one side. Mouth foam-flecked, George went completely berserk, flailing with both hands at the metal helmet that covered his enemy. In spite of the poor leverage, his blows were heavy, and Marchand slipped and fell with George on top. It was only then that the latter discovered that he still held the long sliver of obsidian in his hand. In a flash, he stabbed into the captain’s space-suit, then sat back to watch his handiwork. His expression, seen through a mist of steam that poured around the two of them, was that of a cat at a mouse-hole.

Air hissed as it rushed from the suit, and the tiny air-o-stat pumped madly to build back pressure; Marchand’s breathing became faster and more labored, and his face turned gradually red and congested. His one good hand fumbled to pinch together the rent in his suit. He managed to partially check the

oxygen outflow, but much of it still seeped through. Minutes passed, yet Marchand did not die. It took more than a lack of air to quench the vital spark that flamed in his breast. Laboriously he climbed to his feet and stood looking at Gower. The tatter’s expression was pop-eyed now, ludicrous. Suddenly he screamed out:

“Fall! Fall, you fool! You’re a dead man and you don’t know it! Why don’t you fall? Why don’t you die?”

He lunged at Marchand again, striking furiously with his crude dagger, trying to slip through Marchand’s weakening guard, beating the smaller man down by main brute force. The little Frenchman, with nothing but annihilation staring at him from Gower’s fear-crazed eyes, resorted to a trick he had found useful in rough-and-tumble fighting long before young George had been weaned. He pretended to lose balance, grasped one of Gower’s arms, and caused himself to fall backward underneath the other’s body. Gower took the bait and piled on. Instant Marchand, who had fallen curled up, lashed out with both feet and struck Gower squarely in the stomach. The stratagem was successful beyond his wildest hopes.

WEIGHING a good bit less than one-third his normal weight, Gower could do nothing to stop his precipitate flight toward the brink of the vent. At the very edge, he checked himself momentarily, then lost his balance once more. He screamed wildly, reached out to seize some projection, and his hand convulsively clutched the end of the neutronium belt, became entangled in it. George Gower plunged into the volcano, dragging after him the belt and bomb-container, which had become caught in the crude buckle the men had fashioned for it. Only once did the gas fling his body up, jerking desperately as he strove to loosen the tangled belt; then the tremendous weight of it dragged him down faster and faster until he vanished from sight.

From the bowels of the planet came the tremendous, prolonged explosion of hundreds of the deadly bombs. The earth rocked violently; myriad cracks appeared magically across the glassy surface of the crater. Steam, smoke, and flame shrieked skyward from the mouth of the volcano; great masses of red-hot lava and debris showered the landscape. The noise was deafening, stunning. The rock about the edges began to crumble and fall into the hole, adding the roar of avalanche to the din. Captain Marchand smiled quietly at it all, still clutching at his torn suit, and lay down to die.

But Marchand was not destined to die a hero's death that day. The half dozen hardened troopers who had watched the whole scene from above now came plunging down the long slide, aided by the cracks and splintered portions. Eager hands seized the captain and raised him upright. A hasty patch was slapped over the tear and they slowly began the upward climb.

The terrible pitching and heaving of the ground beneath their feet continued undiminished.

An eternity of toiling, seizing at dangerously sharp projections and hauling with all strength, struggling and crawling along the slippery parts, negotiating deep crevices, eventually brought the group to the top of the crater. From then on, the journey was completed with comparative ease. Half-way back they were met by a party from

the camp. Marchand spoke only once during all this time. One of the men asked:

"You both wanted to be the one to go, wasn't that it? We could see you fighting for possession of the belt."

Marchand glanced at the speaker strangely, then muttered light-headedly, through raw lips, "There is a tradition...." Then, aloud, "Yes. Yes. Gower wanted to go alone. I protested. He—insisted," Marchand laughed harshly, bitterly, then lapsed into unconsciousness again.

IT IS a matter of record that George Gower's strategy was successful in the extreme. From that day to this, no mole-man has been seen by human eyes in any part of the twilight zone of Mercury. But the ironic aftermath is a jest worthy of the devil's own pleasure. For the name of George Gower is set down in history and in legend as one of the greatest heroes of all time, synonymous with all that is high-minded and courageous and manly.

While Captain Marchand, retired from service because of disability, lived out his remaining years on a miserly pension, with a crippled arm and bitter memories for company, then died, a poverty-stricken and forgotten man.

VERILY, Time and her capricious Boswell, History, play strange tricks with the record of the centuries.