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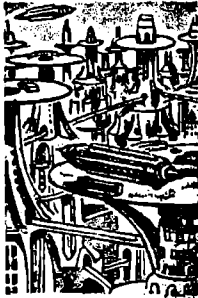
THRILLING WONDER STORIES

The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction



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Winter, 1945

Next Issue



DEVILS FROM DARKONIA

An Amazing Complete Fantastic Novel

By

JERRY SHELTON



VENUS SKY-TRAP

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ON THE COVER: Painting by Earle Bergey depicts a scene in Arthur K. Barnes' novel, FOG OVER VENUS.

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Read our Companion Science Fiction Magazine—STARTLING STORIES



Vedralia Crown was curled up on the divan, coolly smoking a cigarette of Jovlan tobacco

I GET OFF HERE

By FORD SMITH

Dr. Devore Ragon, Head of the Solar Observance System Detective Agency, Solves the Teleportation Kidnaping of Lovely Vedralia Crown!

THE room was a circular chamber with all the dainty appurtenances of a lady's boudoir of the Twenty-second Century. There were no windows for the upper wall was of silicoplast, which served to conduct curving curtains of soft light from the generating source around the base of the room within the wall. A button-studded panel controlled the amount of sunlight admitted or kept out.

On the bed lay a young woman, clad in diaphanous material. She lay curled there like a kitten, her shoulder length red-gold hair forming a tousled frame about her

piquant face. Her weight scarcely dented the rubber-foam mattress, thanks to the gravity-repellent charge which nullified nine-tenths of her mass.

The light sound of her breathing was interrupted by a soft click, sufficient and alien enough to arouse the sleeper. Vedralia Crown started faintly, stirred and opened her gentian blue eyes.

She sat up, rubbing sleep from her eyes. For a strange thing was happening. The weaving curtain of moonlight was growing dim—being sucked through the west wall as a ventilator fan sucks smoke from a chamber.

It was more than uncanny. It was a fantastic nightmare—a state of subconscious chaos that people were no longer aware of, thanks to the Benson psycho treatments. Vedralia had been psyched. She knew she was not dreaming. At the same time, she knew that light vibrations could not be sucked out of a room like smoke—and through a solid wall!

Swiftly, she reached out for the control panel, and pressed button after button. Nothing happened. Utter darkness remained. She switched on the three-dimensional news screen in the wall opposite the foot of her bed. Again nothing.

Alarmed, she felt blindly for the televis hand-set on the bedside table, deciding to summon aid from other quarters of the Crown apartments. The line was dead and the tiny screen failed to light up.

She was completely cut off from the rest of the world!

PANIC was laying its icy hand upon her when a voice spoke aloud through the blackness. It was a man's voice, a soft, cultured baritone.

"Do not be alarmed, Miss Crown. You are simply experiencing the effect of the ultra-gamma tight beam."

"Who are you?" the girl demanded. "How did you get into my apartment?"

"My name means nothing to you, and I am not in your bedroom. You may call me Mr. Hermes."

"Where are you? You sound within ten feet of me."

"We are separated physically by great distance, but for conversational purposes, you and I are together in an isolated section of space the size and shape of your charming bedchamber."

"I'll scream," the girl said, staring at the empty blackness.

"Why not?" Mr. Hermes answered indifferently. "No one will hear you but I."

"I won't scream," she decided, fighting for self-control. "What do you want?"

"That's better. You aren't the least bit curious about the ultra-gamma beam which cuts off all outside contact?" He sounded disappointed.

Vedralia Crown thought rapidly. This ultra-gamma ray, whatever it was, cut off all outside contact. But the beam didn't damp out any electric power within its radius of influence. Or did it? She moved slightly, felt a thrill of hope. Her weight on the bed still remained at one-tenth gravity, thanks

to the battery-charged gravity unit built in its base.

This meant that the autovox should work. The autovox was the Twenty-second Century's development of the dictograph. It recorded all sound within the radius of its sensitive microphone and, on a secondary cylinder, recorded all conscious thought directed through a mind disk when the latter was held against its operator's forehead.

Stealthily, Vedralia groped for the tuggle-switch of the autovox. Her strange visitor apparently couldn't see in the darkness, either. Coughing loudly to cover the noise of the clicking switch, she clamped the slim metal disk to her forehead and began to think as calmly as she could.

"Yes," she said aloud. "I'm curious, but I don't understand."

"You wouldn't," answered Mr. Hermes condescendingly. "Your father educated you in the social economics, with extra attention to the ramifications of the great Crown Interplanetary Newscaster Service. You would know nothing of the higher mathematics of electrical energy. The ultra-gamma beam operates on a frequency of two hundred quintillion and a wave length of approximately one-billionth centimeter—more than twenty octaves above the frequency of visible light rays."

Vedralia Crown thought these incomprehensible terms into the autovox, not knowing whether the primary cylinder had picked up Mr. Hermes' words.

"Which means?" she asked gropingly.

"That I am working in a field of frequencies and wave lengths above that at which atomic nuclei disintegrate—higher than any man has ever gone before. It has enabled me to reach you through all the safeguards with which the doting J. Harvard Crown has surrounded you."

"But what do you want of me?" she demanded desperately.

"Ah!" murmured Mr. Hermes. "Your father is an enterprising man, Miss Crown, although an extremely short-sighted one. Are you familiar at all with the details of the Arthur Sturgeon case?"

Vedralia Crown's eyes went wider in the darkness.

"You mean the disappearance of the roving telecast reporter—that Sturgeon?"

"None other. Arthur Sturgeon stumbled upon something he had no right to know that day in Mars City Two—something which would have caused disaster if put on the interplanetary telecast beam. Fortun-

ately, he did not have his telecast equipment with him at the time. Unfortunately, he did have his micro-recording apparatus along and recorded information which he mailed by rocket ship to J. Harvard Crown before he was—er—apprehended.

"Your father must not reveal its contents to a single person. He must make no copies. And I must have the original back in my hands before tomorrow night, Earth time. It is through you that I expect to exert my will on your illustrious and news-minded parent.

"He is to deliver Sturgeon's micro-cast to your chamber by eighteen o'clock tomorrow with registry seal unbroken and contents intact."

Vedalia marshaled her thoughts. "In exchange for—for what?" she asked unsteadily.

"In exchange for you, my dear," mocked Mr. Hermes. "Now, if you have reported all this information on your autovox, shall we be going? Or must we go over the matter again?"

Vedalia Crown gasped. How could he have known? Did he wear some sort of lenses which enabled him to see through blackness?

"Answer me, Miss Crown." His voice was impatient.

"I recorded it," she answered faintly.

"Excellent. We get off here."

Before Vedalia could move, she became aware of a physical contraction of the bullet-shaped area of blackness. Gradually the light returned, and the silicoplast wall ran riot with colors. The tele-audio came to life, began babbling news of a spacemen's riot at Moon Station Ten while the televis unit glowed pulsingly on the house hand-set on the bedside table. The autovox continued to record soundlessly, the cord of the thought disk trailing from machine to the disk on the bed.

But Vedalia Crown had vanished as completely as though she had never been!

DEVORE RAGON, doctor of science, was a well set-up chap of the Type C class on the threshold of his thirties. He was young to be the head of an organization as powerful and unique as the Solar Observance System.

Solar Observance System occupied the top two floors of the Sol Building in New Washington. The centermost room was a circular affair, more like a rotunda than the heart of the most famous detective agency of the Twenty-second Century. The dome was made entirely of silicoplast which was impervious

to weather and light alike. It had the traditional feature of vibro-shielding which made it possible to shut off the room from all prying and peeping inventions of man.

Dr. Devore Ragon waited at the fiftieth or private helicop level for a pneumatic car to shoot him up to the SOS offices, forty-nine floors above. He glanced with casual disinterest at the three-dimensional telecast audio about which a small crowd of office workers were clustered to see and hear the latest interplanetary news as they awaited pneumatic lifts.

Dr. Ragon wasn't interested. He had already enjoyed a pre-view of these re-cast items on his private tele-audio along with his breakfast. He turned and pressed the signal button of lift number seven, one of the battery of twelve cages which ascended all the way to the top floors.

Thus, he was the only person who saw exactly what happened.

The red neon signal indicating the downward approach of a pneumatic car in number five shaft glowed. There was the gentle sigh of an air-cushioned stop, and the bronze doors of number five parted silently. A man stepped out. His head was turned as he spoke over his shoulder.

"Thank you," he said politely. "I get off here."

He nearly bumped into Devore Ragon, recovered himself in time, and tipped his plastic helmet with an air of Nineteenth Century courtesy.

"Pardon me," he said, and stepped around Ragon to the helicop landing platform to signal for a taxi plane.

Ragon stared briefly after him, memorizing his every external detail. Then he whirled back toward the closing lift doors. With a swift lunge Ragon caught and held them apart.

Something was crazy here. The polite stranger had spoken as though addressing an elevator operator. Yet the pneumatic lifts were self-operating and there was no pneumatic cage in sight!

The courteous stranger had stepped out of empty space!

Devore Ragon drew back, and the number five doors slid silently together. The green neon of the ascending number seven lift glowed, and various persons came over from the tele-audio.

"Did you see that?" Ragon asked the first, a florid-faced man with a double chin. "Did you see the man who just went out on the landing platform?"

"Did he drop something?"

"He did," agreed Ragon cryptically. "He dropped a fundamental law of physics and smashed it into atoms."

"I beg pardon?" said florid-face.

He was an import broker who was only interested in the rising or falling of prices on the Venusian tarpox crop.

"Granted," said Ragon, entering the lift and punching the ninety-ninth button. He shook his head impatiently to clear it of the annoying problem. The nullification of gravity had, to a great extent, been accomplished. Witness the anti-gravity units installed in the framework of beds to insure more comfortable sleeping.

But nobody had yet found out how to carry an operable five-hundred-pound unit around with him. And nobody popped out of an empty pneumatic shaft, conversing with an imaginary elevator operator!

Obviously, Dr. Ragon was sick and seeing things. He was sicker when he got to his private office. Before he had time to settle himself, the signal flashed on his televis set.

"Mr. Crown has been calling you for thirty minutes, Dr. Ragon," his secretary announced. "He seems to be frantic."

Ragon waved his assistant away and flipped the switch. The head and shoulders of J. Harvard Crown appeared in the panel.

"Yes?" said Ragon. "Good morning, Mr. Crown."

"Good nothing!" roared the head of Interplanetary News. "Where have you been, Ragon? I've been trying to contact you for the past hour."

"Thirty minutes," corrected Ragon precisely. "I was en route from home. What is it? Not Vedralia again, I hope."

"She's vanished! Not a trace, but all the gadgets running wild in her bathroom."

"Where are you now?"

"In Vedralia's room," snorted J. Harvard Crown.

"Stay there!" ordered Ragon crisply. "I'll be right over. And don't touch anything else."

FIFTEEN minutes later, Dr. Ragon faced the highly aroused telecast head across Vedralia's bed. An imposing-looking man Crown had a mane of iron-gray hair, steel-gray eyes, and jutting blue-gray depilated chin. J. Harvard Crown would never submit to the hair hormone treatments to control the growth of hair. He thought it was silly, and continued to use the old-fashioned depilatory shave.

Ragon, with his smooth, hairless cheeks and wavy black hair, looked almost boyish beside the older man.

"You're probably to blame," stormed Crown. "Ever since my daughter invested her personal fortune in your observance agency, I've been afraid of something like this."

Ragon winced.

"You seemed quite pleased with the idea. You said it would tie up closely with your telecast system. And if I've tried once I've tried a hundred times to buy Miss Crown's interest out. It was to have been a silent partnership, you know. And has Miss Vedralia Crown kept even the letter of the agreement? She has not! But you know your daughter better than I. What happened here? Was Vedralia at home last night?"

"Certainly! She vanished during the night. There isn't a sign of a struggle—but she's gone, and all this stuff going full blast!"

He flung one arm around expressively, indicating the rioting wall lights, the babbling tele-audio, and the autovox thought disk.

"It's like a nightmare!" he exclaimed.

"A subconscious state that you thoroughly understand, I have no doubt," agreed Ragon.

"You haven't been psyched for that, either."

"I haven't been anything!" bellowed J. Harvard Crown. "I don't believe in ultra-modern inventions. I want you to find my daughter!"

"Yet you managed to build an interplanetary empire on 'ultra-modern inventions.' Did you touch this autovox?"

"I did not," snapped the head of Interplanetary News.

"It's running," observed Ragon, adjusting it to play back from the beginning.

He and Crown stared at each other as the speaker attachment repeated verbatim the strange conversation between Vedralia and the disembodied voice. At its conclusion, Ragon started imperceptibly. The voice said something that rang a tiny bell in his mind—"We get off here."

Snatching up the thought disk, he pressed it to his temple, starting the secondary cylinder for a play-back.

"Dee, darling," the intensity of the thought image bespoke the acute distress of the thinker. "I know you will find this record. I'm trying to be calm, but I'm terribly afraid. Something impossible is happening . . . Mr. Hermes sucked all the light out of the room. I don't understand this tight beam of ultraviolet rays . . . (the figures followed).

"About Arthur Sturgeon's disappearance—Dad said to keep it quiet . . . I don't know anything about a micro-cast sent to Dad . . . Mr. Hermes intends to abduct me somehow . . . I'll try to think of some way of communicating with you . . . I know how capable you are, and—"

That was all. Vedalia Crown had vanished. His fingers trembling, Ragon handed the thought disk to Crown and re-set the player. J. Harvard Crown pressed the disk against his temple, stood there unmoving until the recorder reached the end of the recorded thought.

"Who the space vortex is Dee?" he demanded.

Ragon blushed.

"At times Miss Crown annoyed me by using that nickname. My give name is Devore. But do you get anything informative out of the record?"

"Only that my daughter seems to be in love with you," snorted Crown.

Ragon shuddered.

"You are mistaken. That was due to stress. Actually we clash violently. But this is no time to discuss psychopathic tastes. What about this Arthur Sturgeon case?"

"The blundering fool uncovered some political intrigue on Mars, I suppose. The Mars central office notified me a week ago that he had dropped out of sight. I didn't know any more until Sturgeon's micro-cast was delivered to me yesterday afternoon."

"What had he recorded?"

"I haven't opened it yet. A note with it said not to for ten days. But I want to know what's happened to my daughter."

"So do I," said Ragon, frowning intently. "I think I know what happened to her, but I don't know why, and I don't know where she is. Perhaps that micro-cast from Sturgeon will give us a clue."

"What happened to her, then?"

"If this Mr. Hermes—a name chosen, by the way, from Greek mythology to represent the messenger of the gods, a Hermes as fast as light—has really been able to harness ultra-gamma rays beyond the disintegration of the atom, he has learned the secret of teleportation."

"Meaning what?" demanded Crown.

"Meaning that he can dematerialize matter and transport it with the speed of light from one place to another where he re-assembles it."

"Why, that's ridiculous!"

"You'd better pray," said Ragon tersely.

"For, if it is, your daughter's atoms are scattered from here to eternity. Because Hermes certainly dematerialized her right here in this room last night."

THE head of Interplanetary News paled, and there was dread lurking in his sharp eyes.

"What can we do?" he asked distraughtly.

"The first thing we can do is examine that micro-cast."

"Is that wise?" asked Crown. "Nothing a telecast reporter could send me is as important as my daughter's safety."

"Or so you think," said Ragon. "We have about nine hours left. To ease your mind, let me tell you that SOS has ways of examining the contents of telecast records without opening sealed packages. This is a little development of Dr. James Arnold's and mine."

"Arnold? The electric radiation wizard?"

"Yes. A number of scientific instruments employed by SOS are results of our private research. Get the package quickly. I promise you I won't affect it in any way. If worst comes to worst, you can still comply with the terms of Mr. Hermes."

Arrived at the agency offices, Ragon placed the package from the vanished Sturgeon on the plate of a complicated machine which faintly resembled the archaic diathermy apparatus. He adjusted controls and hooked up a subsidiary recording machine while the older man watched anxiously. Then he pressed a switch, and soft violet light focused on the foot-square package from Mars.

"This instrument is called the A-R Detec-tograph," Ragon explained. "It is the only one in existence. First, we learn the nature of the contents of Sturgeon's shipment—whether visual pictures, voice recording or what—and then we transcribe a copy or duplicate record."

"That's great," exclaimed J. Harvard Crown, professional interest sweeping aside all other emotions. "Interplanetary News could use a thousand of these instruments, Ragon."

"You don't get them," said Ragon coolly. "There's little enough privacy in the System now." He peered through a bi-focal eyepiece into the machine.

"There's one small reel of micro-pictures and one cylinder of camera phonetic recording here. Just a minute and we'll have duplicates."

The subsidiary machine came to life, be-

gan whirring and clicking. After a few moments, Ragon nodded and cut off the power. Uncoupling the second machine, he rolled it over toward his horseshoe desk, focused the projector lens at a small screen and set the cylinder mike for a vocal play-back.

Crown glanced at the original package still reposing on the plate of the primary machine, still sealed and unharmed, and he sat down. Ragon darkened the curtain light, and both men leaned forward to watch the screen.

They saw the interior of a typical Martian room with walls of stellakite and Gartula tapestry. The angle of the picture indicated that the cameraman had shot it from a high spot in the room—doubtless from the grilled mouth of a ventilator shaft.

Two men were in the chamber, both humans. Oddly, Ragon and Crown each recognized both men, one by name and the other by sight.

"Dr. James Arnold!" exclaimed Crown. "And Martin of Inter-spaceways!"

"Arnold," concurred Ragon, tensely, "and the man who defies gravity."

"Dr. Arnold," said the voice of the man Crown had named as Martin, "I regret the necessity of keeping you prisoner, but your ultra-gamma research cannot be permitted to proceed further without control."

Both Crown and Ragon started.

"Mr. Hermes!" they murmured simultaneously.

"But how can that be?" went on Crown in amazement. "Hermes—or Martin—was here on Earth last night."

"And why not?" said Ragon. "He could get here as quickly as a mail shipment. But listen."

"This is an outrage, sir," Dr. Arnold protested. "You know the penalty for molesting the person of an Earth citizen."

"I know," interrupted Martin-Hermes. "But this crisis goes beyond mere personalities. For the last time, I will pay you one million erg credits for ultra-gamma, ten percent of all net profits and furnish you with a laboratory for the supervised continuation of your research."

"I refuse to deal with an unscrupulous pirate," replied Arnold hotly. "Why, my experiments are scarcely past the initial stage. I don't even know that teleportation will prove practical."

"I know," said Martin-Hermes, smiling coldly. "I am willing to take the chance."

"And if I refuse?"

"I am trying to deal with you on a fair ba-

sis, Dr. Arnold. Your work, as far as it has progressed, is in my hands. You cannot go free if we do not come to terms. The ultimatum, my dear Doctor, would be unpleasant."

"You—"

WITH a metallic, scratching sort of squeak, the screen went blank and silent.

"Sturgeon must have slipped down the ventilator shaft," observed Ragon. "No wonder Hermes wants this evidence. You called him Martin. Who is Martin?"

"Sidney Martin is one of the high officials of Inter-spaceways Freighting Service," said Crown heavily. "What is Dr. Arnold doing on Mars?"

"He was pursuing research on ultra-gamma rays," said Ragon grimly. "I'm beginning to understand certain factors of this muddle."

"Then explain them to me," snapped J. Harvard Crown. "What was that you said about defying gravity?"

"Inter-spaceways is a pretty big concern," replied Ragon thoughtfully. "A lot of capital and ships and men are tied up in interplanetary freighting."

"The biggest corporation of the five colonized planets," amplified Crown.

"What would happen to them if Dr. Arnold perfected a means of transporting matter from one planet to another via ultra-gamma?"

"They would be ruined," Crown whispered. "But, great gods of space, man—they are not criminals!"

"Obviously, Mr. Martin is," answered Ragon succinctly.

"I'll have him apprehended by the I. P. immediately," decided Crown. "Interplanetary News has more influence than some people think."

"If you lay hands on him—what happens to Vedalia?"

"If she is still alive," groaned Crown.

"She is," declared Ragon. "At least, she was early this morning."

"How do you know?" pleaded the anxious father.

"At times I dimly understand the way her brain works. She left the thought record hoping she would get in touch with me. Well, she did. She tricked or argued this Martin-Hermes into paying a visit to SOS this morning. Knowing my daily routine, she managed to arrange for him to meet me at the helicop level.

"He didn't defy gravity. He teleported himself from this office to the fiftieth level. Vedralia sent him to this office so I could see him. Perhaps she led him to believe that you had turned Sturgeon's shipment over to me. And that gives me an idea how we can trap him!"

"I don't follow you, but what shall we do?"

"First, we prepare an autovox message to Mr. Hermes, telling him that the package is here in this office. We will place the message on Miss Crown's autovox in her boudoir and arrange it to play automatically upon the coming of the ultra-gamma tight beam. Mr. Hermes will shift his beam to this spot and pick up his package."

"And what good does that do us?"

"I neglected to say that another little instrument will be secreted in your daughter's bedroom, and a duplicate will be functioning here. These are radiation detectors invented by Dr. Arnold and myself. They will record the direction from which the ultra-gamma tight beam comes. A reading from the detector in your home and a reading from the detector here will give us a triangulation."

"I see," cried Crown, nodding. "Where the two lines cross—"

"We should find Mr. Hermes and Vedralia—if we act quickly," finished Ragon. "I'll have to leave the vibro-shield down so Hermes can get through."

"But suppose Martin suspects a trap?"

"It's too logical to be a trap. Hermes threatens you through your daughter. You had already called SOS in on the case of Arthur Sturgeon. You now prevail on me to surrender, unopened, the Sturgeon package. You leave a message for Hermes in the bedroom."

"He switches here and procures the package. As for a possible trap, within that tight beam, he knows himself to be invulnerable. It is afterward that we must trap him."

"Get busy," said J. Harvard Crown grimly.

At eighteen-five that evening, Ragon and Crown crouched in the next office to Ragon's central chamber and saw a sphere of solid black form in the air above the horse-shoe desk and rapidly expand to engulf and hide the solid piece of furniture with the Sturgeon package resting thereon. It was an eerie experience.

Then the sphere shrank and was gone—so was the package from the desk.

"Incredible," murmured the news magnate.

Ragon was busily working with a queer little bronze machine at his side. Then he

sprang up and rushed to the televis instrument, which was flashing signals from his desk. The head and face of the trusted operative he had stationed at the Crown home came into view.

"You have your readings, Lamont?" Ragon asked quickly.

"Yes, sir," said the operative, holding up a pad of penciled figures.

Ragon copied them off, did some quick calculations and reached out his hand toward a huge hemi-globular map of North America. Swiftly he laid out his projections, placed his pencil tip on a spot just north of New Washington.

"There we are, sir," he said to his companion. "Let's go."

"The nerve!" breathed Crown. "Within twenty miles of here."

Five minutes later, three helicopters dropped on the grounds of the winter home of Carson Drake, the tomato king, who was idly cruising in his space yacht, unaware of what was going on at his residence.

ARMED with electro-paralysis weapons, eight determined men broke into the Drake library. The scene that met their eyes was bizarre and exotic, to say the least. Still attired in her bewitching nightdress, Vedralia Crown was curled up on the Jason-built divan, coolly smoking a cigaret of Jovian tobacco.

Facing her beside a machine that looked like an insulated transformer with octopus legs, was Mr. Hermes. He held the now opened Sturgeon package and was triumphantly examining it.

He looked up, startled, at the very prosaic sound of splintering doors. Swift comprehension was one of Mr. Hermes' strong points. He recognized Crown and Ragon instantly, understood how he had been traced.

"Paralyze, Mr. Hermes-Martin!" ordered Ragon.

Hermes' answer was a mocking laugh.

"You are mistaken, SOS," he said. "This is where I get off!"

Before the paralysis bolt from Ragon's weapon could reach Hermes, a black ball of nothingness leaped magically into being and spread like an ink pall before his chest. It swelled to engulf both man and machine. Then it contracted swiftly.

Hermes and his machine had vanished!

"A second ultra-gamma control a step beyond this one," Ragon cried in vexation.

Vedralia Crown uttered a cry of delight

and sprang to her feet.

"Dee!" she cried. "And Dad! I knew you two would do it."

Ragon narrowly side-stepped being drawn into the girl's double-armed embrace as she reached for her father and partner at the same time.

"Take her home, Mr. Crown," he said tersely. "You may use my helicop. I'll ride back with one of the men."

"Oh, Dee—Dr. Ragon," cried Vedalia, "I must tell you how I got Mr. Hermes to go to the agency office without letting him know it was also my office."

"Let me be the first to congratulate you," interrupted Ragon, averting his eyes from her revealing garment. "But tell your father about it. I've something important to do that's been delayed too long already."

"What are you going to do, Ragon?" demanded J. Harvard Crown.

"I am personally going to Mars to find out what happened to Arnold and Sturgeon," said the head of SOS harshly.

"Now, isn't that a coincidence!" exclaimed Vedalia. "I had just decided to make that investigation myself. When are we leaving, Dee?"