

## DAVY JONES' AMBASSADOR

Raymond Z. Gallun



In the era of Gernsbackian science fiction, young Raymond Z. Gallun was one of the big name writers. He first began publishing science fiction as a teenager; by 1935, the date of "Davy Jones' Ambassador" in *Astounding Stories*, he was one of the experienced writers in a genre not yet ten years old. Like the "locked-room" mystery, the "first contact" (with an alien being) tale has become a special pleasure for sf readers—another example in sf is the "time paradox" story. Gallun's innovation was to locate the story not in outer space but at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean (as James White did later in his novel *The Watch Below*).

"Back in 1935, I couldn't find a statement anywhere about what the water pressure at the bottom of the ocean actually was. So I calculated the weight of a column of water one square inch in a cross section, and two-and-a-half miles high. I added a little for the salt content. The result was too much for me to believe, so I cut it back some. Actually I was close to right in the first place." Those were the days when accuracy to known science was established as part of the aesthetic goal of science fiction, laying the groundwork for Campbell's Golden Age. "The more important purpose," says Gallun, "was to portray, with some semblance of truth, the first meeting of two totally different sentient creatures from vastly different environments." Aliens under the oceans are a central element still in the eighties, in Gregory Benford's "Swarmers Skimmer." But it was Gallun and his peers in the late twenties and early thirties who first claimed and settled the territory for science fiction. Sea monsters have never been the same.

Like Poe's "A Descent into the Maelström," this is a sea story told by a sailor. At one point, his behavior is inspired by a volume of Kipling's poetry. But the visions of undersea creatures and the portrayal of the alien scientist are all Gallun. This is an early, influential hard sf story by a writer who is still publishing in the field in the nineties.

I

It didn't look like a jet of water at all. It seemed too rigid, like a rod of glass; and it spattered over the instruments with a brittle, jingling sound, for such was the effect of the pressure behind it: more than four thousand pounds per square inch—the weight of nearly two and a half miles of black ocean.

Cliff Rodney, hunched in the pilot seat, stared at the widening stream. It made him see how good a thing life was, and how empty and drab the alternative was going to be. Cliff Rodney was young; he did not wish to die.

A few seconds ago all had been normal aboard the bathyspheric submarine.

The velvet darkness of the depths, visible beyond the massive ports of the craft, had inspired awe in him, as it always would in human hearts; but to Cliff it had become familiar. The same was true of the schools of phosphorescent fish shining foggily through the gloom, and of the swarms of nether-world horrors that had darted in the bright golden path of the search beam.

Clifford Rodney, during his explorations, had grown accustomed to these elements of the deep-sea environment, until they had assumed an aspect that was almost friendly.

But the illusion that it was safe here had been abruptly broken. Sinuous, rusty shadows, which bore a suggestion of menace that was new to him, had surged toward the submarine from out of the surrounding murk and ooze.

Attenuated, spidery crustaceans with long feelers had burrowed into the shelter of the mud beneath them. Little fish, some of them equipped with lamplike organs, some blind and lightless, all of them at once dreadful and comic with their needle-fanged jaws and grotesque heads, had scattered in terror.

Bulbous medusæ, contracting and expanding their umbrella-shaped bodies, had swum hurriedly away. Even the pallid anemones had displayed defensive attitudes in the guarded contraction of their flowerlike crowns.

With canny craft the unknowns had avoided the search beam. Cliff had glimpsed only the swift motion of monstrous, armored limbs, and the baneful glitter of great eyes. Then the blow had fallen, like that of a battering ram. It had struck the forward observation port with a grinding concussion.

A crack, looking like a twisted ribbon of silver, had appeared in the thick, vitreous substance of the pane. From it, water had begun to spurt in a slender, unstanchable shaft that grew ominously as the sea spread the edges of the crevice wider and wider apart.

Automatically Cliff had done what he could. He had set the vertical screws of his craft churning at top speed to raise it toward the surface. But, in a moment, the blades had met with fierce resistance, as though clutched and held. The motors had refused to turn. The submarine had sunk back into the muck of the Atlantic's bed. An S O S was the last resort.

Cliff had sent it out quickly, knowing that though it would be picked up by the *Etruria*, the surface ship that served as his base of operations, nothing could be done to help him. He had reached the end of his resources:

Now, there was a breathless pause. The blackness without was inky. Cliff continued to gaze impotently at that slim cylinder of water. Ricocheting bits of it struck him, stinging fiercely, but he did not heed. It fascinated him, making him forget, almost, how it had all happened. His mind was blurred so that it conceived odd notions.

Pretty, the way that jet of water broke apart when it hit the bright metal of the instruments. You wouldn't think that it was dangerous. Flying droplets scattered here and there like jewels, each of them glinting in the shaded glow of the light bulbs. And the sounds they made resembled the chucklings of elves and fairies.

A small creature of the depths, sucked through the breach, burst with a dull plop as the pressure of its normal habitat was removed.

He and that creature had much in common, Rodney thought. Both were pawns which chance had elected to annihilate. Only he was a man; men boasted of their control over natural forces. And he himself was a blatant and ironic symbol of that boast: They had sent him here in the belief that even the bed of the Atlantic might soon yield to human dominance!

The submarine gave a gentle lurch. The youth's eyes sharpened to a keener focus. A yard beyond the fractured port a pair of orbs hung suspended. Beneath them was a fleshy beak that opened and closed as the creature sucked water through

its gills. Black, whiplike tentacles swarmed around it like the hairs of a Gorgon beard. And the flesh of the monster was transparent. Cliff could see the throbbing outlines of its vital organs.

Nothing unusual here—just another devil of the depths. So Cliff Rodney would have thought had it not been for certain suggestive impressions that touched lightly on his blurred faculties. That beaked mouth was vacuously empty of expression, but the great limpid orbs were keen. The tentacles clutched a little rod, pointed at one end as a goad would be. The impression was fleeting. With a ripple of finny members the horror disappeared from view.

"That rod," Cliff muttered aloud, "I wonder if that thing made it!"

He felt a cold twinge, that was an expression of many emotions, ripple over his flesh. He moved quickly, his booted feet sloshing in the water that was now six inches deep within the stout hull of the submarine. He turned a switch; the lights winked out. It was best to be concealed in darkness.

Once more the bathyspheric submarine rocked. Then it was whirled completely over. Cliff Rodney tumbled from the pilot chair. Icy fluid cascaded around him as his body struck the hard steel of the craft's interior.

He managed to protect his head with his arms, but contact with the metal sent a numbing, aching shock through his flesh. Electricity; it could not have been anything else. He tried to curse, but the result was only a ragged gasp. Clinging desperately to the sunset edge of oblivion, he fell back among his instruments.

Impressions were very dim after that. The submarine was being towed somewhere by something. Water continued to pour into the hull, making a confused babble of sound. Rodney lay in the growing pool, the briny stuff bitter on his lips. Too near stunned to master his limbs, he rolled about the inundated floor.

With each eccentric motion of the craft, churning water slapped viciously against his face. He choked and coughed. If only he could keep his nose above the flood and breathe!

In some foggy recess of his mind he wondered why he was fighting for life, when the broken port alone was enough to doom him. Was instinct, or some deeper, more reasoned urge responsible? Cliff did not know, but for a fleeting instant the blank look of pain on his face was punctuated by a grim smile.

He was not the mythical iron man; he was a median of strengths and weaknesses as are most humans. And, among humans, courage is almost as cheap as it is glorious.

Cliff could still hear the swish of great flippers shearing the sea beyond the eighteen-inch shell of the submarine. Harsh to his submerged ears, it was the last impression he received when consciousness faded out.

## II

Reawakening was slow agony. He had been half-drowned. When his brain was clear enough for him to take stock of his surroundings he did not immediately note any remarkable change.

He was still within the stout little undersea boat that had brought him to the depths. The vessel was nearly two thirds full of brine, but by luck his body had been thrown over a metal brace, and for part of the time his head had been supported above the flood.

No more water was entering the hull through the eroded crevice in the window. In fact there was no motion at all, and except for a distant, pulsating hiss, the stillness was tomblike.

The air was heavy and oppressive. It reeked with a fetid stench that was almost unbearable. Mingled with the odor was a faint pungence of chlorine, doubtless brought about by the electrolysis of sea water where it had penetrated some minor fault in the insulation of the submarine's electrical equipment. A gray luminescence seeped through the ports, lighting up the interior of the vessel dimly.

Soaked, dazed, battered, and chilled to the bone, Cliff struggled to the fractured window. There was air beyond it, not water. He had not extinguished the searchlight, and it still burned, for the storage cells that supplied current had been well protected against mishap.

There was no need to waste power to produce light here. A faint but adequate radiance seemed to come from the curving walls of the chamber in which the submarine had been docked. Cliff switched off the beam.

Groping down under the water, he found a lever and tugged at it. A valve opened, and the brine began to drain out of the submarine. The gurgling sound it made was harsh to his ears. Evidently the atmospheric pressure here was far above normal.

Next, he unfastened the hatch above his head, and hoisted its ponderous weight. Wearily he clambered through the opening and dropped down beside his craft.

The room was elliptical, domed, and bare of any furnishings. Its largest diameter was perhaps thirty-five feet, twice the length of the submarine. Puddles dotted the floor, and the walls were beaded with moisture which showed plainly that the place had been flooded recently. At opposite points there had been circular openings in the walls, one much larger than the other. Both were blocked now by great plugs of a translucent, amorphous material.

Cliff had two immediate urges: One was to get a better idea of where he was; the other was to find, if possible, a means of allaying his discomfort.

He started his investigations with the larger of the two plugs. It was held in place by a tough, glutinous cement, still sticky to the touch. From beyond it came a distant murmur of the sea. This, then, was the way by which the submarine had entered the chamber.

After the entrance had been sealed the water had been drawn off by some means through the several drains in the floor. The stream from the valve in the side of the submarine still gurgled into them, pumped away, perhaps, by some hidden mechanism. So much was clear.

Cliff's attention wandered to the walls, in quest of some explanation of the phosphorescence that came from them. Their surface was hard and smooth like that of glass, but the substance that composed them was not glass. It had a peculiar, milky opalescent sheen, like mother-of-pearl. Squinting, he tried to peer through the cloudy, semitransparent material.

At a depth of a few inches little specks of fire flitted. They were tiny, self-luminous marine animals. Beyond the swarming myriads of them was another shell, white and opaque. He understood. The chamber was double-walled. There was water between the walls, and in it those minute light-giving organisms were imprisoned for the purpose of supplying illumination.

It was a simple bit of inventive ingenuity, but not one which men would be likely to make use of. In fact there was nothing about his new surroundings that was not at least subtly different from any similar thing that human beings would produce.

The glass of the domed chamber was not glass. It seemed to be nearer to the substance that composes the inner portion of a mollusk's shell, and yet it had apparently been made in one piece, for there was no visible evidence of joints



where separate parts of the dome might have been fastened together. The blocks that sealed the openings in the walls were almost equally strange. Among men they would surely have been made of metal.

Clifford Rodney became more and more aware of the fact that he had come in contact with a civilization and science more fantastic than that of Mars or Venus could ever be. Those planets were worlds of air, as was the Earth he knew, while this was a world of water. Environment here presented handicaps and possibly offered advantages which might well have turned the sea folk's path of advancement in a direction utterly different from that followed by mankind.

Continuing his investigations, Cliff discovered that the air under the dome was admitted through four pipelike tubes which penetrated the double walls of his prison; but, of course, he could not discover where they originated. The air came through those tubes in rhythmic, hissing puffs, and escaped, he supposed, down the drains through which the water had been drawn, since there was no other outlet in evidence.

He wondered how the rancid stuff had been produced, and how his hosts had even known that he needed gaseous oxygen to breathe. He wondered whether they could have any conception of the place whence he had come. To them a land of sunshine must be as ungraspable as a region of the fourth dimension!

He remembered the electric shock that had almost stunned him at the time of his capture. Electricity was produced here then. But how? As yet he had not so much as glimpsed a scrap of metal in his new surroundings.

Cliff shuddered, nor was the dank, bitter cold alone responsible. He could realize clearer than before that beyond the barriers that protected him was a realm of pressure and darkness and water with which his own normal environment had few things in common.

Belatedly it occurred to him that he was being watched by the curious of Submarinia. Standing now in the center of the slippery floor, he scanned the dome above him for evidence that his logic was correct. It was. Spaced evenly around the arching roof, more than halfway toward its central axis, was a ring of circular areas more transparent than the surrounding texture of the double walls.

Though not easily discernible at a casual glance, they were plain enough to him now. Through each, a pair of huge, glowing eyes and a Gorgon mass of black tentacles was visible. The ovoid bodies of the creatures were silhouetted against a nebulous luminescence originating from some unknown source beyond them.

The gaze of those monsters seemed cool and interested and intense, though Clifford Rodney felt that one could never be sure of what emotions, if any, their vacuous, beaked lips and limpid eyes betrayed. It would be difficult indeed to forget that they were completely inhuman.

Cliff's reaction was a kind of terror; though the only outward evidences of it were the strained hollows that came suddenly into his cheeks; still, the realization of his position thudded with ghastly weight into his mind. To those sea beings he was doubtless like a simple amoeba beneath a microscope, a specimen to be observed and studied!

Then his sense of humor rescued him. He chuckled half-heartedly through chattering teeth. At least no man had ever before been in a situation quite as novel as this. It was one which a scientist, eager to learn new things, should appreciate. Besides, perhaps now he could bring the adventure to a head.

He waved his arms toward the pairs of eyes that gazed steadily at him. "Hello!" he shouted. "What in the name of good manners are you trying to do to me? Get me out of here!"

They couldn't understand him, but anyway they could see by his gestures that

he had discovered them, and that he was insisting on some sort of attention. Cliff Rodney was cold, and half-choked by the rancid air.

Things had to happen soon, or his stamina would be worn down and he would no longer be in a position to see them happen. The dank, frigid chill was the worst. The air would not have been so bad if it had not been for the retch-provoking stench that impregnated it. If he only had a dry cigarette and a match, it would help a lot.

That was a funny thought—a cigarette and a match! Had he expected these ovoid beings to supply him with such luxuries?

However, since there was no one else to whom he might appeal for help, he continued to shout epithets and pleas, and to flail his arms until he was nearly spent with the effort.

Yet, the sea people gave no evidence of special response. The vital organs throbbed within their transparent bodies, tympanic membranes beneath their beaked mouths vibrated, perhaps transmitting to the water around them signals of a kind of vocal speech, inaudible to him, of course; and their tentacles scurried over the outer surfaces of the spy windows, producing a noise such as a mouse scampering inside a box might make, but Cliff saw no promise in their evident interest.

Every few minutes, one pair of eyes would turn away from a window, and another pair would take its place. The ovoids were managing the scrutiny of him just as humans would manage a show featuring a freak. He could imagine them out there waiting in line for a chance to see him. It was funny, but it was ghastly too.

Exhausted, he gave up. Probably they couldn't help him anyway. If he only had something dry to keep the chill away from his shivering flesh!

Hopefully he scrambled up the side of the submarine and lowered himself through the hatch. There was a little electric heater there, but a brief examination of it confirmed his well-founded suspicions. Soaked with brine, its coils were shorted and it refused to work. He had no means of drying it out sufficiently, and so he turned on the search beam. If he crouched against the lamp, he might capture a little heat.

He climbed out of the dripping, disordered interior. Before dropping to the floor of the domed chamber he stood on tiptoe on the curved back of the submarine and attempted to peer through one of the spy windows in the rotunda over his head.

Even now the mystery of what lay beyond the glowing walls of the room beneath the sea could fascinate him. But his vantage point was not quite high enough, nor was there any easy means to make it higher. He saw only a flicker of soft, greenish light beyond the motionless, ovoid shape that occupied the window.

He slid weakly off the submarine and pressed his body against the lens of the searchlight. The rays warmed him a little—a very little—enough to tantalize him with the thought that such a thing as warmth really existed.

He thought of exercise as a means to start his sluggish blood circulating faster; he even made an effort to put the thought into execution by shaking his arms and stamping his feet. But he felt too far gone to keep up the exertion. His head slumped against the mounting of the searchlight.

Some minutes later, a throbbing radiance caused him to look up. At one of the spy windows was a creature different from the sea people. Its body was flat, and as pallid as a mushroom.

It was shaped curiously like an oak leaf with curled edges. Its mouth was a slit at the anterior extremity of its queer form. On either side of it were pulsing gill openings, and above were beady eyes supported on stalky members. From the thin

edges of the creature's body, long, slender filaments projected, glinting like new-drawn copper wire. And the flesh of the thing glowed intermittently like a firefly.

After several seconds this phenomenon ceased, and another far more startling one took its place. The creature turned its dorsal surface toward the window.

Then it was as though some invisible hand and brush were printing a message in letters of fire on the pallid hide of the monster. They were old, familiar letters spelling out English words. One by one they appeared, traced with swift and practiced accuracy until the message was complete:

I am far away, man; but I am coming. I wish to write with you. Do not die yet. Wait until I arrive.

#### THE STUDENT.

If Clifford Rodney had been himself, his consternation at this odd note and the outlandish means of its transmission would have been greater, and his analysis of the phenomena involved would have been more keen. As matters were, he was still able to discern the shadows of the causes underlying the enigma.

This was the subsea version of wireless. He was too tired to construct a theory of its principle; he only glanced at the fine filaments projecting from the body of the creature that had served as an agent of the miracle, and dismissed the vague germ of an idea that had oozed unbidden into his sluggish mind.

Even though this was a science completely inhuman, still it was self-evident that there were logical explanations. At present Cliff didn't care particularly whether he ever learned them. Nor did he ponder for long the riddle of how this distant spokesman of the ovoids was able to write English. Somewhere there must be a simple answer.

However, the wording of the message, strikingly demonstrating the broad physical and psychological differences between his kind and the unknowns, won somewhat more attention from him. It was "I wish to write with you," instead of "I wish to speak with you." The ovoid tympanums, vibrating in water, could not produce or convey to him the sounds of human speech.

"Do not die yet. Wait until I arrive." Did those two simple commands express naïve brutality or—Cliff scarcely knew how to think the thought. No human being would have expressed an idea of that sort with such guileless frankness. The meaning, of course, was perfectly clear; and Cliff knew that he had been afforded a glimpse into a mind differing radically from those of men.

"The Student." That at least had a familiar aspect. Because of the way the message was signed, the anger and depression which it aroused in him subsided.

The lettering vanished from the flat back of the creature which had been the means of conveying to Cliff Rodney the first expression of subsea thought. Another fire-traced message appeared, letter by letter:

We have waited too long for the arrival of one of you, man. We must learn more about your kind before you die. All in our power has been done for you. If you require more, perhaps it is beyond the small sealed exit. Unseal it. Live until I come.

#### THE STUDENT.

Rodney cursed and shook his fist feebly at the messenger. Nevertheless, hope gave him fresh energy. He proceeded to obey the suggestion. Returning to the

submarine he procured a heavy knife, extinguished the search beam for economy, and came forth again to attack the smaller door.

The cement here was thoroughly hard, glassy; but tough and elastic rather than brittle. Cliff worked at it fiercely, digging out the gummy stuff with the point of his knife. For a time it seemed that the stubborn block would never yield; but at length, when his expiring energies were all but burned up, and little specks of blackness flitted before his vision, success came.

The plug of amorphous material toppled from the opening and thudded resoundingly to the floor. For a minute young Rodney lay exhausted beside it, a rustle in his ears that he knew was not the distant whisper of the ocean.

Then, rested a bit, he crept through the opening. He was too dazed to be very conscious of the things around him. The character of the chamber was much the same as that of the one he had just quitted, except that it was larger, and the floor was a much more elongated oval. It had the same kind of pearly, phosphorescent dome equipped with spy windows.

Even now the windows were being occupied by the grotesque forms of the sea people, eager to observe the fresh reactions of their strange captive. The air, though, was drier, for the place had not recently been flooded, and it was musty with the odor of ancient decay, like that of a tomb.

The floor was piled high with a numerous assortment of things—every one of them of human origin. Cliff let his eyes wander over the array. There was a generator, part of a ship's turbine, several life preservers, a fire extinguisher, books, tattered and pulped by sea water and pressure, rugs, and so forth. There were even two human figures.

They were propped on a dilapidated divan, and were fully clothed. Whoever had placed them there had apparently made some attempt to arrange them naturally.

Cliff Rodney came closer to examine them. One had been a man, the other a woman. Their flesh was gone, their faces were only skeleton masks. The woman's dress had once been white and beautiful, but it was just a mottled, gray rag now. Yet, the diamond pendant at her throat still gleamed as brightly as ever. The pair clutched each other with a fierceness that was still apparent. Perhaps they had died in each other's arms like that long ago. A grim tragedy of the Atlantic—

Rodney's reactions were not quite normal. He felt sick. "Damn museum!" he grumbled in a sort of inane disgust. "Damn stinky museum of Davy Jones!" He choked and sneezed.

The haze of his numbed faculties was not so dense that it obscured the animal urge to seek comfort, however. He picked up a heavy rug which, though rotted and odorous, was fairly dry.

He stripped off his soaked garments, and wrapped himself in the rug. Tearing up a book and heaping the fragments into a pile with the intention of making a fire, was quite natural and automatic. So was locating his cigarette lighter and attempting to make it work. Here, though, he struck a snag. Sparks flew, but the wick was too wet to burn.

Out of his angry chagrin an inspiration was born. He unscrewed the cap from the fuel container, poured a few drops of benzine onto the paper, and applied the sparks direct. The tinder flared up merrily, and grotesque shadows leaped about the walls of the eerie chamber. Delighted, Cliff huddled down beside the blaze, absorbing its welcome heat.

Only once did he glance at the ovoids watching him. He could not have guessed what wonder his activities provoked in the minds of those strange people of the depths.

"Go to hell!" he called to them in dismissal.



The air didn't smell so bad with the smoke in it. As the embers began to die, Clifford Rodney drew the carpet tighter about him and sprawled on the pavement. Worn out, he was quickly asleep.

## III

Through the gloom of the bottoms, seven slim shapes were speeding. They were neither crustaceans nor sharklike elasmobranchs; they bore some of the characteristics of both.

Their bodies were protected by horny armor, and were tapered in such a manner as to suggest the lines of a torpedo, a comparison that was heightened by the waspish air of concentrated power about them. Rows of flippers along their flanks churned the dark water, sending them swiftly on their way. Folded carefully against their bellies were pairs of huge claws resembling the pinchers of a crawfish, though much larger. Projecting like swollen cheeks on either side of their heads were protuberances of modified muscle—their most effective weapons.

These monstrous creations were not entirely the product of nature. The knowledge of a gifted people working on their kind for ages had achieved a miracle, making of them efficient, dependable, fighting machines.

They swam in a military formation. The largest individual of the group formed its center. Above, below, ahead, behind, and on either side—one in each position—the others swam. There was a reason. Every now and then schools of small, devil-fanged fish would glide out of the darkness to attack the cavalcade. The nearest members of the escort would leap to meet them.

For an instant, many fierce little teeth would try to penetrate the tough shells of the fighters. Then the latter would strike back, invisibly, except for a momentary flicker of lavender sparks around their snouts. The attacking fish would stiffen and go drifting limply into the darkness again, dead or stunned.

The fighters were protecting their master, he who had named himself "The Student." He rode the central individual of the formation, suckerlike cups on the ventral surface of his body clinging to its back. He had flattened himself against his mount to minimize the surge of water that swept past him. His eyes peered ahead with an expectant glitter.

He changed position only to trace queer symbols, with a goad of glassy material, on the flesh of the fragile messenger that clung beside him, and to scan the phosphorescent replies to his queries, that came in return. But within him, dread and eagerness were mingled. He had received the call that he had both hoped for and feared. And he was responding.

Out of the murk and ooze that blanketed the sea floor ahead, an emerald glow arose like some infernal dawn. The cavalcade continued to speed on its way, and the radiance brightened.

A broad depression in the bottoms emerged from the fog of suspended mud, gray like tarnished silver. Above it swarmed myriads of minute, luminous animals, forming an immense canopy of green light, limned against the blackness of the depths. That canopy looked as though it had been placed there for a purpose.

To paint the scene beneath, would have challenged the genius of Gustave Doré. It was as abhorrent as the visions of a mad demon; still it possessed elements of majesty and beauty.

A city was there in the hollow—a city or a colony. The seven fighters were moving close above it now. The valley was pitted by countless small openings,

arranged edge to edge after the fashion of the cells of a honeycomb. Into them and from them, ovoids swam, going about whatever business was theirs. Here and there, queer structures of a pearly, translucent material reared twisted spires that seemed to wriggle with the motion of the water.

Monsters were everywhere, vague in the shifting shadows. Scores of types were represented, each type seemingly stranger than its associates. All of the monsters were busy, guided in their activities by alert ovoids that hung in the water, goads poised, flippers stirring idly.

Some of the monsters wallowed in the muck, digging with broad, spatulate members. Wormlike in form, pallid and smooth, one knew that their purpose in life was to dig, and nothing else.

Others kneaded their bloated, shapeless bodies, forming elfin creations around them, seemingly from their own substance. Some fanned the water with long, flattened limbs, perhaps performing a function akin to ventilation. Others—they were fighters like The Student's escort—guarded the colony, swimming steadily back and forth.

And so it went. Each of the horrors followed the vocation for which it was intended. Each was a robot, a machine of living flesh, capable of some special function.

A man would have been held spellbound by this teeming, alien activity; but The Student scarcely noticed it at all. Everything—the lights, the motion, the whispering, slithering sounds that found their way to his auditory organs—held the familiarity of life-long experience, of home.

His gaze, though, wandered intently across the valley to the place where the gutted hull of an ocean liner sprawled half over on its side, its form almost obscured by the dusky murk of the depths.

Slim ribbons that had the appearance of vegetation streamed up from it, waving like banners. They were not vegetation, though they were alive. There were no plants here, away from the sunshine; and the fauna of this world was dependent for its sustenance upon organic debris settling from above, where there was sunlight, where chlorophyll could act, and where both fauna and flora could exist.

Always the wrecks of upper-world ships had interested The Student, as something from another planet would interest us. He had rummaged through their slimy interiors, examining and exploring this and that.

Of all their wondrous contents, books had fascinated him the most. With a zeal and care and love that an archeologist would understand, he had made copies of those fragile, water-soaked storehouses of knowledge, tracing the still legible parts of them on a parchment that could withstand the action of the sea.

He had studied the queer symbol groups they bore; he had discovered the value of the dictionary. And as the Rosetta Stone had been the key to Egyptian hieroglyphics, so the dictionary had been his means of solving the riddle of mankind's literature.

There was another thing that won a brief glance from The Student, as he guided his mount and escort toward the concourse of ovoids that had collected around the structures which housed the reason for his coming.

On a low rise a circular vat, filled with living protoplasm, squatted. Above it two crudely hammered bars of iron converged together. Between their adjacent ends blue sparks purred. The apparatus was a recent development which would have startled the wise inventors who had contributed so much to another culture.

With a thrusting motion The Student hurled himself from the back of the fighter. The flippers along his sides took hold of the water with powerful sweeps.

The crowd made a lane for him as he approached. Tympanic voices buzzed around him, questioning, demanding; yet, he paid no heed.

## IV

The Student reached a spy window in the dome, looked down. The man was there, sprawled motionless amid the relics of his civilization. A piece of ragged fabric wrapped his pallid body.

Revulsion, fear, hope, and anxiety were not beyond The Student's understanding, and he felt them all now.

Was the prisoner dead? Was all that had been promised to end in disappointment? Paradoxically The Student would have been more at ease if such were the case. There is no harm in an enemy whose vital functions have stopped. Yet The Student himself did not live for peace and security alone. The boon of existence had many meanings.

He moved to a window in the smaller dome, and surveyed the bathyspheric submarine, marveling at the smooth, metal hull, and the precise perfection of each detail. No ovoid could fabricate such wonders.

Patiently he waited until the buzzing tympanic voice of the throng about him impinged on his sense organs, telling him that the time had arrived.

Coolly The Student returned to the window of the museum chamber. The man was awake. He stood unsteadily in the center of the floor, the rug still wrapped around him and his eyes turned upward.

Two peoples, two cultures, two backgrounds, two histories, and two points of view were face to face at last, ready for whatever might come of the meeting. The bizarre stood versus the bizarre from opposite angles. Between them the abyss was wide. Was there—could there be—any sympathy to bridge it?

It was up to The Student to open negotiations, and he did not hesitate, for he had planned well. From a pouch, which was a natural part of him, he removed a stylus of chalky material. Then, concentrating on what he had learned during his years of study, he printed a command on the pane of the window: "You made fire, man. Make it again."

He traced the letters in reverse, so that they would appear normally to the being inside the dome.

The prisoner seemed uncertain for a brief spell; then he obeyed. Paper, a daub of liquid from what appeared to be a tiny black box, a swift movement, sparks, and finally—flame! The man held up the blazing paper for his visitor to see.

The Student watched the phenomenon of rapid oxidation, drinking in the marvel of it until the flame was burned out. The water had washed the chalky letters from the window. He traced another message: "Fire gives you metals, machines, power—everything you have?"

If, before it had happened, Clifford Rodney had had an opportunity to construct a mental picture of what this meeting would be like, he would no doubt have expected to be amazed. But he could not have conceived beforehand an adequate idea of his own wonder. Tangible truth was so much more startling than a bare thought could be.

Here was a thing which bore many of the outward characteristics of the marine animals with which he was acquainted—pulsing gills, stirring flippers—organs used in a medium which must ever be foreign to those forms of life that live in air and sunshine.

There was even in the visage of the thing—if visage it might be called—a

deceptive look of vacuity which only the cool glitter of the great eyes denied. And yet, clutched in the being's tentacles was a crayon, with which it was writing in English, words that displayed a considerable knowledge of human attainments!

Cliff almost forgot that he himself was a delver after hidden facts. Then his own calm purpose conquered. His sleep had refreshed him; and though he felt stiff, sore, and uncomfortable, he could still respond to the appeal of an enigma.

He looked about for some means to answer. His attention was drawn to a small area of unencumbered floor, on which a thin layer of sea sand had been deposited. With a finger he traced words in it: "Yes. Fire brought us out of the Stone Age, and kept us going since. You got it right, friend. How?"

And the swift-moving tentacles traced a reply: "I have translated books—men's books. I have read of fire. But we have never produced fire. We might produce fire from electric sparks—soon."

Rodney looked with a quizzical awe at the gleaming orbs of the ovoid. Behind them, he knew, was a brilliant brain, whose brilliance had perhaps been augmented by the very handicaps which it had faced and overcome. The truth concealed behind this intriguing statement was already dimly formulated in his mind. Now he might clear up the matter completely.

He smoothed out the sand and printed another message: "You have electricity, glass, and a kind of wireless—still, no fire. It is too wet here for fire; but how did you do it all? And you write like a man—how?"

The Student chose to answer the last question first. "I mimic the writing of men," he printed. "I must—so men understand. Glass, *electricity*, *wireless*, and other things, come from animals. Nearly everything comes from animals. We have made the animals so. We have developed the useful characteristics of the animals—great care, selection, breeding, crossbreeding—a long time—ages."

It was a confirmation of the vague theory that Cliff had formulated. Handicapped by the impossibility of fire in their normal environment, the sea folk's advancement had followed another path. Controlled evolution was what it amounted to.

Cliff remembered what miracles men such as Luther Burbank had achieved with plants—changing them, improving them. And to a lesser extent, similar marvels had been achieved with animals. Here in the depths of the Atlantic the same science had been used for ages!

Without visible excitement Cliff traced another note in the sand: "Electricity from living flesh, from modified muscle as in the electric eel or the torpedo? Glass from— Tell me!"

And on the spy window the answer appeared: "Yes. Glass from animal—from mollusk—deposited and grown as a mollusk's shell is deposited and grown. And it is formed as we wish. Electricity from modified muscle, as in the electric eel or the torpedo. I have read of them. We have animals like them—but larger. The animals fight for us, kill with electricity. And we have—electric batteries—metal from the ships. Rods—protoplasm—"

The Student's black tentacles switched and hesitated uncertainly as he groped for words that would express his thoughts to this strange monstrosity of another realm.

But Clifford Rodney had captured enough of his meaning to make a guess. "You mean," he wrote, "that you have developed a way of producing a steady current of electricity from a form of living protoplasm? A sort of isolated electric organ with metal details and grids to draw off the power?"

"Yes."

Cliff thought it over, briefly but intensely. Such protoplasm would need only



food to keep it active, and it could probably obtain food from the organic dust in the sea water around it.

"Splendid!" he printed. "And the wireless, the radio beast—tell me about it!"

The Student concentrated all his powers on the task of formulating an adequate response. Slowly, hesitantly, now, he began to trace it out; for he was thinking almost in an alien plane, working with words and ideas subtly different from his own. To make the man understand, he had to choose phrases and expressions from the books he had read.

"It is the same," he inscribed. "A characteristic developed to usefulness. Long ago we studied these animals. We discovered that they could—communicate—through—over great distances. We increased—improved this power by—by—"

"By choosing those individuals in which the power was strongest, for breeding purposes, and in turn selecting those of their offspring and the descendants of their offspring in which the characteristics you desired to emphasize were most prominent," Cliff prompted. "Thus the abilities of these messenger creatures were gradually improved. Right?"

"Yes. Right," The Student printed. "Now, we make marks on the flesh of a messenger creature. The irritation produces stimuli—a sequence of stimuli through nerves of skin, through brain, through—communicating organs. Other creatures, far off, pick up the impulses. Again there is a sequence of stimuli—communicating organs, nerves of skin, luminous cells of skin. The luminous cells which—which—"

Cliff had followed the strange explanation keenly, and now his own quick analytical powers grasped the idea which The Student was trying to express.

"The result is that the luminous cells in the skin of the receiving animals, corresponding in position to the luminous cells in the skin of the transmitting animal, are stimulated so that they emit light. Thus the symbols are made visible on the hide of the receiving messenger, just as they were originally traced. Is that correct?"

"Correct," the ovoid printed.

"There are entomologists who have suggested that certain insects have the power to communicate over distances like that," Cliff answered, "the cockroach, for instance. Their antennæ are supposed to be miniature wireless sets, or something."

The Student did not offer to reply to this immediately, and so Rodney scratched one word in the sand. It was "Wait." For a minute or two he was busy piling odds and ends of wreckage beneath the spy window. Then, equipped with a piece of board, and a pencil taken from his discarded clothing, he scrambled to the top.

# V

For the first time, he viewed the colony of the ovoids, the green canopy of luminous organisms, the hordes of sea people, the welter of infernal activity, the protoplasmic battery sparking on its isolated knoll, the moving shadows of robot beings, and the alert fighters that patrolled the outskirts of the city, where light and darkness met, like enemies holding each other in deadlock.

And the greatest of these miracles was this devil who called himself The Student, and who had now backed off in revulsion at Cliff's approach.

But there were matters still to be investigated more closely. Dimly visible against the outer walls of the dome was a great shapeless mass that expanded and contracted as if it were breathing. Above the thing, and projecting from the dome like a canopy, was a curious curved shell of pearly, vitreous material.

His deductive faculties keyed up, Cliff was almost certain that he understood

the function of the arrangement. With his pencil he traced two questions on the board he held: "You know chemistry, physics, what oxygen and nitrogen are?"

"Yes. I have learned from research. I have learned from men's books," The Student replied, conquering his revulsion.

"You know that the air bladders of fish are filled with a mixture of oxygen and nitrogen?" Cliff asked. "You know that these gases are derived from the blood through the capillaries that line the air bladders, and that this oxygen and nitrogen is drawn originally from the oxygen and nitrogen dissolved in sea water, by means of the gills?"

"Yes."

"Then," Rodney went on, "the air in this place comes from animals too! That creature out there under that roof arrangement—it has gills which take the gases from the sea water and deliver them into the blood stream.

"Part of the oxygen is used to keep the creature alive, of course; but another part of it, together with the nitrogen, is discharged through the walls of capillaries as an actual, free gas, just as a portion of the oxygen and nitrogen in the blood of a fish is discharged into its hydrostatic organ or air bladder! The roof arrangement probably collects it in some way, and delivers it here to me!"

"That is correct," The Student printed. "Several animals work to give you air. Something new—ages to produce."

"Ages all right," Cliff breathed fervently. "I can well believe it!" He had spoken aloud.

But he was not finished yet. His face was flushed with eagerness, and his pulses were pounding. He had another question to print: "How is the water kept out of here? Nothing of flesh could prevent it from entering when the pressure is so great."

"There our skill failed," The Student responded. "We used the skill of men. We made pumps from parts of ships, and from materials which were our own. Air is pumped into the domes and from the domes—and water, when necessary."

The black tendrils withdrew from the window. Transparent lids flickered over the ovoid's great eyes. The transparent body swayed languorously, reminding Cliff of the first sting ray he had seen in an aquarium when he was a child.

It was clear at last, this alien science. Low down beyond the window, and against the shell of the dome, he glimpsed vague motion, where a monster toiled, swinging the lever of a rusty mechanism back and forth. The machine was a pump. Its operator was forcing to him the air which those other monsters produced. And beyond extended the murky, unbelievable reality of this submarine world.

"It is all glorious," Cliff printed in tribute, "even beautiful, almost—your achievements, your ways of doing things!"

The Student's tentacles stirred uneasily, but he made no reply.

A climax had been reached and passed. Rodney's enthusiasm began to cool a little, leaving him to become more cognizant of his own position. He thought of people and friends that he had known, and experiences he had enjoyed. The thoughts made him feel very cold and lonely.

His pencil scratched in the silence. "What are you going to do with me?" he was demanding.

"Keep you," was the response.

"Until I rot?"

"Until you rot."

It was a simple statement, devoid of either malice or compassion. Yet it was loaded with a dread significance. It meant staying here in this awful place, dying of starvation, perhaps, if the icy dankness didn't get him.

It meant death in any event; probably it meant madness. There would be ovoid

eyes watching him, studying him; there would be ovoid beaks opening and closing vacuously—crazy, wonderful things everywhere, but only his submarine, and the depressing relics in the museum, familiar!

They had conversed, The Student and he. They had been almost friends. But beneath their apparently amicable attitudes toward each other had lain mistrust, broadened and deepened by the fact that they had so very little in common. Cliff saw it now.

Fury smoldered within him, but he held it in check.

He tossed aside the board, which was too covered with messages to be of any further use, and selected in its stead the pulped remnants of a book from the stack of things which supported him close to the spy window.

On one of the illegible pages he printed a note and held it up for the ovoid to see: "I know a better way for you to learn about my mind. Why not establish friendly relations with the world above? Certainly we have many things that you could use. And you have many things that we could use."

"No!" The Student's slender, boneless limbs seemed to jerk with emphasis as they traced the word and repeated it. "No!"

"It will happen anyway," Cliff promised. "Soon my people will come in machines of steel. They will make you understand what is best."

"Men coming here will not return," The Student answered.

And Clifford Rodney, remembering his own capture, and seeing now the waspish fighters patrolling the city of the ovoids, had no reason to doubt the weight of the statement. The sea people could protect themselves in their native element.

"You fear us? You mistrust us?" Cliff wanted to know.

The response was frank: "Yes."

"There is no reason."

To this The Student offered nothing.

Cliff tried a new angle, printing swiftly: "What do you know of the place we live in, really—sun, stars, planets, day, night? You have read of such things, no doubt. Wouldn't you like to see them? They are beautiful!"

"Beautiful?" The Student questioned. "Beautiful to you. To me—to us—horrible. The sun, the great dazzling light—it is horrible—and the heat, and the emptiness of air. They make me afraid. But they are wonderful—interesting, very interesting."

Some emotion seemed to stir the nameless soul of the ovoid, making him hesitant and uncertain.

Clifford Rodney thought he glimpsed a shadow of hope. He scarcely understood why he argued; whether he had some dim idea that he might save himself, or whether he was trying to advance the cause of mankind in its demand for expansion into alien realms.

Perhaps he was urging this queer intelligence of the deeps only because it is in the nature of any strong, healthy-minded youth to fight even the most adverse circumstance.

"You are interested, but you are afraid," he wrote. "Why don't you give your interest the chance it deserves? Why don't you—" He hesitated, not knowing quite what he wished to say. "Why don't you try to make contact with my people?"

For a flickering instant The Student paused, in a way that betrayed some hidden process within him. Then his decision seemed to come. "The world of men is the world of men," he printed. "The world of the sea is our world."

Further urgings on Cliff's part met only with flat refusal. He desisted at last, feeling oddly like a salesman, who, through a slip in technique, has lost a sale. But

that comparison could not be true either. He felt that The Student's obstinacy was too deep-seated to be overcome by mere salesmanship.

Dejectedly he watched the chalky words of the ovoid's last rebuff being washed from the window by the ocean.

Then those black tendrils holding the crayon went to work once more. "You wish to escape," they printed, "it would be interesting, man, to watch you trying to escape."

Startled, Cliff wondered what bizarre mental process had given birth to these statements. Hope was resurrected.

"I cannot escape," he printed warily. "A glass port of my submarine needs repairing, for one thing. I have no materials."

"We will give you materials," was the astounding assertion.

"Eh?" the man said aloud, before he remembered that the ovoid could not hear his words, or understand them if he had been able to. "I could not get out of these domes anyway," he wrote. "It is useless."

Cliff Rodney was trying to make a subtle suggestion, in the hope that his unfathomable jailer would offer him a chance for freedom.

"Men have many tricks," The Student responded. "Watching you make use of tricks will be very interesting. We will learn much. Men have powerful explosives."

"I have no explosives!" Cliff insisted truthfully. A feeling of exasperation was rising within him.

"Men have many tricks," the ovoid repeated.

It was a tribute, nothing less; a tribute of mingled awe and mistrust, which the people of the depths felt for the people of the upper air. It was an example of other-world minds at work.

"You expect me to escape?" Cliff demanded.

"You will not escape," was the answer. "This is a test of your powers—a test of men's powers—an experiment. If you escape from the domes you shall be recaptured. We understand caution, man."

Thus Rodney's hopes were broken. But before this message had faded from the spy window, he wrote on a page of the tattered book an acceptance of the challenge: "Good! Get the materials you promised, and go to the devil!"

"Materials shall come," was the reply. "Go to the devil."

Breaking off the conversation thus, The Student wheeled in the water. His silvery fins flashed, and he vanished amid the throng of nightmare watchers.

Cliff wondered in a detached way what emotion, if any, had prompted the ovoid to repeat his angry epithet. Was it fury, amusement, some feeling beyond human conception, or just another bit of mimicry? Cliff didn't know; and because he didn't, the skin at the back of his neck tightened unpleasantly.

## VI

The Student was out there among his fellows, giving orders in buzzing, tympanic tones, and preparing for the test. None could see the turmoil inside his brain—fear pitted against intense eagerness and interest.

He had made no decisions yet, nor would the decision he had in mind be sanctioned by his people. And it is certain, too, that he had no sympathy for the man who had fallen into his clutches, nor any desire to help him win his way to freedom.

Clifford Rodney did not immediately climb down from his position atop the



wreckage he had piled up. Instead he remained by the window, looking out, for no particular reason. The only sound, the gentle, pulsing hiss of air being forced into his prison, had a monotonous effect that was more oppressive than absolute silence.

The weird colony wasn't so very different, though, from the cities at home, if you allowed your eyes to sort of blur out of focus; if you didn't see that sunken liner with the wispy ribbons trailing up from it, or the twisted architecture, or the inhabitants. The moving lights made you think of gay places and of gay music and people. One corner of his mouth drew back thoughtfully.

He could see that his chance of getting out of this mess was practically nil: In the first place, he had not the ghost of an idea how he might escape from the two domes. And if he did manage to break free from them, those armored fighters would bar his way. Their great claws would grip the submarine while they discharged their bolts of electric force. The metal hull would protect him to some extent, but not sufficiently, as he knew from experience.

More conscious than ever of the aches in his body, his loneliness and dejection, he looked down at his feet absently. Under them were books. He toed one. Its gilt title was almost obliterated, but he still could make it out—Kipling's "Barrack Room Ballads."

There was a friendliness in those dim, familiar words, and he chuckled a bit. Funny to think of an ovoid intellect trying to read and understand the poems in that volume—"Danny Deeever," "Mandalay"! "If" was one of Kipling's works too: "If you can keep your head—"

Cliff smiled ruefully. Anyway he couldn't go wrong by attempting to improve matters a little.

He cast a final glance through the spy window. The ovoid crowd was growing thicker, anticipating activity. Behind them the fighters were gathering in the dusky shadows. In their claws some of them clutched massive bars of some material—rams, no doubt. Probably it had been one of those rams that had broken the port of his submarine.

Still garmented in the tattered carpet, he started in by setting his craft in order as best he could; straightening a warped propeller blade, draining water out of machines and instruments, and repairing those that were broken, whenever it was possible. At least, he had cloth and paper from the museum to help him mop up the wetness of everything.

The radio was a tangle, but he had hope of fixing it some way so that, by means of its beam, he could get a word up to the boys aboard the *Etruria*, on the surface. They couldn't help him, of course; they could only watch and wait.

Several hours must have passed without incident. While he worked, Cliff kept a close lookout for some sign of The Student. When it came, it was not delivered by the wizard of the deeps in person, but through the proxy of a messenger beast. The oak-leaf body of the creature wavered before a window, and on its hide luminous words appeared: "Food is coming through an air tube. Eat."

Cliff waited. From one of the air passages that entered the chamber, a mass of albuminous substance was blown, and it plopped to the floor. It looked like white of egg. Cliff touched a finger to it, and tasted the adhering dab.

No doubt it was from the body of some specialized marine animal. Probably it was very nourishing, and though it hardly excited Cliff's appetite, he realized that a man might train himself to relish such fare. At present, however, he preferred the brine-soaked chocolate and other food articles that he had brought with him on his adventure.

The messenger now exhibited another message: "Cement for port of the submarine, through same tube."

Its manner of arrival was similar to that of the food. A great lump of clear, firm jelly, probably also the product of a subsea creature.

Rodney gathered it up. As he carried it, a thin film of the substance hardened to glassy consistency on his hands, as collodion would do. He applied the jelly to the submarine's fractured port, inside and out, pressing it as firmly as he could. It would take some time for the cement to set.

He returned his attention to the radio transmitter, but only for a moment. Out of some inner well of his consciousness, the faint shadow of an idea had appeared.

He clambered from the submarine, and with a knife proceeded to dig the cement from around the huge, glassy plug that kept out the sea, just as he had done before with the smaller plug that had sealed the entrance dome from the museum.

He worked entirely around the circular mass, loosening the adhesive substance as deeply as he could probe with his blade. No seepage of sea water appeared. The great block was intended to open outwardly. It was very thick, and beyond it, holding it shut, was the weight of the Atlantic.

But Clifford Rodney's plan was maturing. His efforts were not entirely useless. Undoubtedly that external door was not as firmly placed as it had previously been.

Cliff felt that he might yet demonstrate his ability to get out of the domes, though once beyond them, he could find no glimmer of reason to expect that he could elude the circle of horror that awaited him, even for a few seconds. He could only try to do his best, not so much in the expectation of escape, but to keep his energies busy.

Conscious that his every move was watched with absorbing interest by the ovoid audience at the spy windows, he rummaged in the museum, finding there some wire and strips of metal. These he brought back beside the submarine.

The drinking-water container of his craft was glass-lined. He unfastened it from its mounting, bashed in the top, and added to its contents a small amount of acid from his batteries. Then he carried it up through the hatch and set it on the floor of the chamber.

Into the water, at opposite sides of the container, he placed upright strips of metal to act as electrodes. To each of these he fastened wires, and attached their opposite ends to the powerful storage batteries of the submarine.

Next, with paper and other refuse, he plugged the air tubes and drains of the two domes. Then he closed the switch, sending current through the apparatus he had just constructed.

There was a hiss as of a caldron boiling as the electricity went through the water in the container, splitting it up into the elemental gases that composed it. Free oxygen and hydrogen bubbled away from the electrodes, mixing with the air of the domes.

This crude process of electrolysis was only the beginning. From the museum Cliff collected all the combustible materials he could find, and carried them into the chamber of the submarine—books, wood, a few scraps of celluloid, hard rubber, and so forth. Then, with a little of the glassy cement that remained, he sealed the block that had separated the two domes, back into place.

There was another matter. For a few seconds it puzzled him, but finally a solution came. With wrenches he unbolted the heavy glass lens of the submarine's searchlight. Carefully he tapped the incandescent bulb beneath, breaking it, but leaving the delicate tungsten filaments undamaged. Against them he placed a wad of paper, daubed with the remaining benzine of his cigarette lighter.

So far, so good. He investigated the electrolysis apparatus again, shutting off the current for a moment while he scraped away the interfering bubbles that had collected on the crude electrodes.

Satisfied that his preparations were as complete as they could be made for the present, he shut himself inside the submarine and continued to work on the radio. After perhaps an hour of fussing and tampering, he believed that he might get a code message up to the *Etruria*.

He was almost ready, but there was one thing more. Aboard the craft there were ten flasks of compressed oxygen. Opening the valves of nine of these, he tossed them through the hatch, retaining only one for breathing purposes.

While their contents souged away he disconnected the electrolysis wires and closed the heavy steel door over his head. Working the key of the radio, he flashed out his appeal:

Rodney calling S. S. *Etruria*. . . . Rodney calling S. S. *Etruria*. . . . Captured by deep-sea creatures. . . . Trying to escape. . . . Get position and stand by to help. . . .

He repeated the communication several times. If it were received, it would be simple for his confreres to calculate his position from the direction the waves came in. They'd be waiting to pick him up. He even chuckled ruefully at the thought.

Through the ports he could see that the ovoids had moved back from the spy windows of the dome, anticipating danger; but their forms, and the forms of their fighters still hovered tensely in the luminescent haze of the ocean bed. He could not see many from his unfavorable position, but doubtless they were above and all around the dome, waiting for him to make a move!

## VII

Cliff forced himself to forget these unnerving thoughts. His hand touched the searchlight switch. His face was grim as he directed his gaze through another port toward the great, circular block that kept out the sea.

"Any one of three things can happen," he muttered: "The force can be insufficient, in which case what I have done won't accomplish anything at all—I'll still be locked in this dome. Or it can be too great, forcing out that plug all at once and letting the water in here all at once, to smash this steel coffin—all at once. Or it can be just right, admitting the ocean gradually enough so that this old tub can stand the strain."

Even the stout steel hull couldn't withstand the sudden thrust of the pressure of the deeps, he knew. Its position would be something like that of a nut under the blow of a hammer.

Cliff didn't want to give himself time to think. He closed the switch. Almost immediately there was a flash of red, as the hot filaments of the searchlight ignited the benzine-soaked paper that was in contact with them.

The flame spread through the dome in a wave of orange, as the hydrogen in the air burned. The sound which penetrated the thick shell of the craft was not the concussion of an explosion. Rather, it was a whispering, souging roar; for the weight of the sea without was too vast for this feeble beginning of chemical forces to combat.

However, the reserves now came into action. Immersed in a highly oxygenated atmosphere under pressure, the paraphernalia from the museum took fire, and, though damp, rapidly became an inferno of incandescence that threw off enormous volumes of gas, expanding irresistibly with heat.

His heart thumping, Rodney kept his eyes glued to the great block which he

hoped to dislodge. Stubbornly it continued to stand its ground, unmoved. He gritted his teeth as if, by sheer force of will, he sought to move the insensate thing that barred his way.

Moments passed. There was a snap like a muffled rifle shot. The block jerked, shuddered. Around its rim a curtain of glass appeared—no—not glass—water, screaming like a concourse of mad devils. The flood rolled over the floor, found the fire, and burst into steam, the pressure of which added to the titanic forces combating the titanic weight of the deeps.

More moments—the chamber was half full of water. Then, with a sort of majestic resignation, the plug yielded, folding outward like a dying colossus. The ocean was in then, swiftly—so swiftly that a living eye could not capture its movements. The thud of it was heavier than a clap of thunder.

The submarine bobbed in the maelstrom like a bit of flotsam. But its hull held, even though it was flung repeatedly against the walls of the dome.

A minute went by before Clifford Rodney was able to do anything. He picked himself up from the place where he had been hurled, and scrambled to the controls. He could see the opening which led from his prison. The motors throbbed and the submarine turned, heading through the still surging water.

It did get clear of the dome. Cliff almost thought he had a chance. Maybe the confusion produced in the vicinity by the suction when the sea had entered the dome, had unnerved the ovoids momentarily.

He set the vertical screws spinning. Their lift wasn't very good. They had been damaged again. It was hardly remarkable after the way the little ship had been bounced around.

Cliff looked up through a ceiling port. Six fighters were pouncing down upon him, their hinged claws spread wide, their long, armored forms ghostly in the shadows. Others were approaching from all directions, accompanied by a horde of ovoids.

A seventh had joined the six now. Rodney had not seen it dart up from the deep muck of the bottoms, where it had lain, hidden even to the people of the depths. It bore a strange, glassy object of considerable size. Without much attention the man wondered what it might be.

"All right," he muttered, "you win! I hope you enjoyed the show!"

The fighters were upon him. He could hear the scrape of their claws against metal. Clouds of black stuff, like the ink of a squid, surrounded the submarine, hiding everything from view. He was still rising though—rather rapidly, he thought. In a moment the electric bolts would stun him.

Upward and upward he went. Cliff began to be puzzled. He detected scraping noises that he could not interpret. He must have advanced half a mile toward the surface since the start. It was all very odd.

There was a jolt. The climb became halting and erratic. The motors labored doggedly.

The water cleared. Cliff could make out schools of phosphorescent fish, hanging in the darkness like scattered galaxies. He was alone, far above the bottoms. There were no fighters around him, though he thought he glimpsed dim shapes vanishing beneath. They could not endure the reduced pressure that existed here.

Matters were better, far better, than he had dared to expect—mysteriously so. Now if the vertical screws continued to function at all—The submarine appeared to be badly damaged. It seemed clumsy, heavy.

Cliff came into a region of deep bluish light, beautiful as some fairy-peopled realm of infinity. Not long thereafter the bathyspheric craft broke through the



sunlighted surface of the Atlantic. Cliff opened the valves of a pressure tank, inflating the bellows like water wings which supported the heavy submarine when it was on the surface.

How had this all happened? There was still the mystery. He almost forgot that he must gradually reduce the pressure around him, to avoid the "bends."

At length he opened the hatch and crawled out onto the rounded top of the undersea boat. An egg-shaped object was fastened to the metal shell just behind the hatch. Rodney approached it, unable yet to fathom its nature. Glassy cement, like that with which he had recently become acquainted, held the thing in place.

It was a massive object, six feet through at its greatest diameter. It was made of the same material as the domes, except that this substance was darker, perhaps to shield what it covered from the fierce sun.

Rodney peered into the semitransparent depths of the object, discerning there a huddled form enveloped in a milky, semiliquid film. The form was delicate; vital organs pulsed visibly beneath its skin. It had flippers, and masses of black tendrils. Its beaked mouth opened and closed, giving it an air of vacuous solemnity, but its eyes were keen. Its tentacles clutched a white crayon. It was The Student!

Clifford Rodney's mind was a whirl as he sought to solve the riddle. Then, since no other means of printing a message was available, he traced words with a finger on the wet surface of the oval object:

"You helped me—how?"

The Student's tendrils trembled as he printed the answer on the inside of his protecting shell: "I helped you. The six fighters, and the seventh, were mine. They did not attack you. Concealed by the liquid that darkens the sea, they raised your submarine upward.

"They attached me to the submarine. They raised it as far as they could climb. It was a trick to outwit my people. They forbid traffic with the upper world. They are afraid. I was afraid, but at last I chose. While you prepared for the test an idea came. I used it, outwitting my people. I am afraid. But I am glad."

Rodney was lost in the fantastic wonder of it all. "Thank you, my friend!" he printed.

The Student plied his crayon again: "Friend? No. I am not your friend. What I did, I did for myself."

"Then why in reason's name are you here?" Cliff printed. "Men will put you in an aquarium, and stare at and study you!"

"Good," was the response, "I am glad. Men study me. I study them. Good. That is why I came: to see the accomplishments of men, to see the stars, to see the planets. Now I see the sun and sky—dreadful but interesting—very interesting. Good."

"Good if you don't smother before you can be transferred to a suitable aquarium," Rodney traced.

"I am safe here," the ovoid answered with a nervous flurry of tendrils. "The pressure is normal. There is much oxygen in the fluid which surrounds me. But do what you must, man. I am waiting."

Cliff was accustomed enough to the situation by now to grin down at the great dark egg. Mixed with his awe there was a curious inner warmth. Man and ovoid were different in form and mind; perhaps real sympathy between them was impossible. But Cliff had found a tangible similarity.

In this sullen devil of the depths eagerness to know the unknown had battled fear, and had won. The Student had placed himself, without defense, in the power of the unknown. It took guts to do that, courage—

Young Rodney thought of many things as he looked out over the water in search

of signs of rescue. A ship was approaching. It was near enough so that he could recognize it as the *Etruria*.

"The boys'll probably call you Davy Jones' ambassador or something," he said banteringly, addressing the ovoid. "I hope you're sport enough to take it, old socks!"

But The Student wouldn't have listened even if he were able. His eyes were drinking in the miracle of the approaching ship.