

THE FLESH
EATERS

by

BASIL WELLS

This printing limited
to 500 numbered copies
of which this is number

9

privately printed
PEGASUS PUBLICATIONS
Box 2075
Buffalo 6, N.Y.
U.S.A.



THE FLESH EATERS

BY

BASIL WELLS

Illustrated by LEE HOFFMAN

HE COULD FEEL THE remorseless drag of near-Earth Normal gravity wrenching at his space-weakened vitals. The pain was goading him back to awareness.

With an effort that set his dessicated frame trembling he forced the heavy stickiness of his eyelids apart.

And panic flooded strength through his sluggish arteries, and flashed emergency signals along disused nerve channels.

He was aboard a befouled one-man escape craft -- and the simple instrument panel below his prone body's eyes showed an altitude of less than three miles with a speed of over a thousand!

Skeleton-thin arms extended toward the parachute-vanes' release -- and to the button that would smoothly lengthen the sturdy nested wings. Last of all he stabbed at the studs controlling the bow jets -- making maximum their retarding blasts . . .

And he was conscious of their soundless vibration battering at the ship. He was flung viciously against the springy crash pads cuppings on his shoulders and skull even as his nerveless fingers dropped.

"Can't hear -- or feel!" his lips and throat screamed.

He could feel his throat muscles, raw and dry as desert-sapped leather, surge convulsively with the words, but his outer flesh, his fingertips, had sent no sensation of velvety-surfaced control trips and studs to his brain.

"It was that spider-thing, that arthropod in the rock-nest on pulva six," his lips -- or was it only his brain -- cried out.

"It stung me, paralyzed my body swiftly -- last of all my brain. They carried me -- carried me back to the ship . . ."

His eyes, slow and dim as was their vision, found a square of greenish paper firmly speared on the audio stud in the control board's inset slot.

"BEE READY TO BLOW" it said in Harmon's rounded script, so MUST TAKE ESCAPE CRAFT -- HOPE YOU MAKE IT!

So the VALERIE had gone up in an atomic explosion out here in this unknown solar-system, and her six-man crew had sought safety in the unfriendly airlessness of outer space! Even should he land safely on this cloud-swarthed planet he would never see the planet of his birth again.

He wondered briefly about Earth, and Mars and Venus, where most of his boyhood had been spent. Were they as beautiful as ever with their green forests, domed cities and floating man-made islands? He remembered their takeoff -- how long ago? -- and the growing threat of the Fifth Atomic War that crowded all news of such things as the vast meteoric cloud they encountered beyond Mars, off the front pages.

He'd never know now, unless, improbable one chance out of a billion, another spacer with the Newton space drive touched on this unfriendly, dark shrouded planet --



And then the misty depths cleared into murky twilight and he caught a glimpse of a vast crater's ringed pockmark lifting above a snowy treeless plain.

Now he could see the flaring blossoms of the bow jets as the tiny craft neared the surface. The wings were fully extended but his numb arms were useless to attempt a soft landing. Only the automatic pilot kept him from immediate death.

Qfirmly he massaged his unfeeling limbs, commanding them to move, even as the snow came swiftly up beneath. And he was still trying to overcome their leaden lifeness when the ship plunged far down into an ice-crustated dune of snow, through it, and skated drunkenly out across the snow-frosted level of an eternally frozen lake. . .

AN HOUR LATER Bradford Foster finished stuffing the zippered pockets of his warm flying suit with food tins, closed the oxygen mask that would help in tempering the chill of gery wind, and took up his compact rocket rifle. Then he climbed slowly out of the cramped ship's pressure cabin.

The powdery snow came well above his knees as he headed doggedly toward a loom of darker rubble and heaped-up snow nearby. He could have sworn, in the hour just past, while he drummed himself with emergency amino pellets and vitamins, that he had seen fire and dark shapes moving there.

He moved in an unreal soundless world of sullen half-light. Often he stopped to rest, his flesh unfeeling as to the cold, but his movements wooden. He realized the very real danger of frostbite in his half-alive condition and yet a stubborn perversity drove him on.

So it was, in the trampled snow at the rim of the untidy knot of snowy mounds and skin covered poles and brush, that he went down, helpless, beneath a concerted rush of a dozen or more shaggy-clad bearded creatures, humanoid in aspect, yet slavering and fiery-eyed.

His starved numb body could not resist. He was dragged into a smoky hut's cramped interior and flung down beside the red coals of the central open fire. And there the shaggy manlike brutes of this frozen world set to work stripping away his fur-lined garments and quarreling, soundlessly, over his possessions.

Smaller beast-things, the humanoids' young he assumed, amused themselves by flipping bits of the red coals upon his naked chest and limbs, and for the first time Foster was grateful for the lingering venom's paralysis.

The shaggy humanoids examined his bony legs and shrunken torso disgustedly and finally knotted lengths of old cloth and rawhide about him before flinging him into a corner of the hut. A moment later he saw them drag another struggling brute beside the fire, from some other hut apparently, and strip him also. And this time the largest and most ferocious looking of the natives nodded approvingly as he drew a huge rusty-looking knife from its sheath at his side. . .

They wasted nothing, even the blood, and most of them ate the steaming flesh without any pretence of broiling it over the fire's darkening coals. Foster could only watch in frozen horror as they finished their ghouliah repast. Only the miracle of his stringy flesh and exposed bones had saved him from a like death.

But when they had finished they turned again to him. Upon him they put the foul fur and the tattered shapeless garments of the butchered one, and led him from the hut into the snowy wasteland again. And here he was joined by a drunkenly staggering female of the natives, her staring gray eyes blank, and the sunken face beneath her tangled mat of dull yellow hair like a ghastly wax-dipped skull.

The unsteady reddened claws of the female found Foster's arm and clung to it as they were driven away from the snowy huddle of huts, toward the left there the crater loomed.



"Her staring grey eyes were
black, and the sunken face beneath
her tangled web of dull yellow hair
like a ghostly wax-dipped skull."

A Hundred yards he staggered across the level expanse of the frozen lake, the woman-- creature clinging to his arm for support, and then the swarming score or more of guards and villagers drove him up a shallow bluff to a level expanse of sullen whiteness.

Less than a half mile distant he saw a notch in the volcano's rolled-back rim, and toward this the wind blurred tracks in the snow led . . . He could not but wonder what strange fate awaited him there.

* * *

THERE WAS NO DOUBT in his mind, half an hour later, as he hung by arms and unfeeling legs between two of the shaggy humanoid, as to his destination. They were swinging him to and fro, each outward lunge carrying him out over the misty yawn of the huge craters abyss.

Already the skeletal woman had gone plummeting down into the depths, her skull of a face writhing horribly in voiceless screams, while grotesquely posturing humanoid s bowed and silently screamed in worship of their crater-housed gods.

And now it was his turn to plunge into those cloudy-shrouded depths.

He did not feel the harsh hands release him but he was abruptly arching out into emptiness. Moist heat was about him, heat that had served to push back the rotten snow-banks a dozen feet or more from the crater's lip. He felt dank air pressure beating at his stiff lips and cheeks.

He fell through thickening fog endlessly, his feet beneath him and his breath locked tight inside his lungs.

And water splashed up at him from below, battering his body even as his legs split it apart. He went under, far under, and then slowly began to drift upward. Until at last his head broke the surface; he coughed, half-strangled, and pain began to lance through his legs, arms and chest.

He swore hopelessly -- and the sound of his voice startled him. Something, the shock of his impact with the water or the subtle internal secretions of his fear - stimulated glands, had restored his body to its natural functioning.

He stroked toward the soft lap-lapping of water on stone that told of an island or a jutting rock, and found a submerged reef of glassy stone that sloped upward. He climbed out of the water and lay, shuttering for breath, there for a long moment.

Something sodden and dripping and cold moved across his extended right arm. Convulsively he lashed out with his doubled fist --- and saw it smash into the sunken death's head of the woman who had preceded him into this abyss!

"Please, no!" begged the woman, rubbing the cheek where Foster's puny blow had landed. And the man was thankful for the weakness that had prevented him from harming this alien female.

Yet -- wait! Had she not answered him in the Earth tongue, WHITERAM. Could this be an Earth colony planted here in some bygone century by a group of malcontents --- perfectionists, imperialists, primalists and their slightly addled ilk? Many such an expedition had blasted into space since uranium had negated Terra's gravity ten centuries since.

"Didn't know who, or what, it was," said Foster sheepishly. "I'll not strike you again."

"You sound kind." The bony fingers clenched. "But I had hoped to find you dead. I am hungry."

Foster drew back as though another spider-thing were striking at him.

"You would have eaten me?"

"Of course," she agreed, "even though I can feel that you too are starving. But any flesh is better than nothing."

"I should kill you for such talk, such desire. That's cannibalism, woman. Feeding on your own kind!"

"There is no other food," mumbled the woman drearily, "since the sun is hidden and the snow has come. Not for many sleeps have I tasted the food in metal boxes that once we dug from the stone villiages."

"And that you will kill me I do not doubt," she paused to laugh hideously. "But you will find my flesh tastless and thin. Since I was captured I have eaten nothing."

"I will not kill you," Foster promised, mentally making a note that he must sleep in a place secure from the hungry teeth of this crazed old hag.

The scrape of a bit of bone, or metal, or the fod-sweated rocks about them reached his newly awakened ears. He rolled aside even as a snarling dark-shocked body plunged down at him from above. A rusty-bladed knife, a makeshift affair it was with a rag-wrapped handle, scraped fur from Foster's foud garment of animal hide.

Foster's fingers encountered a small splinter of stone, fist-sized, and as he came to his knees he hurled this at the man's head. He saw the sunken stomach and ribby outline of the man's skeleton as he lurched backward with the missile's faint impact. The man was a walking cadaver, all his strength wasted in this last attempt to sate his hunger.

And as he fell the knife in his weakened grip lay, point downward, against his throat. Red-rimmed eyes, sunk deep into the bony caverns of his skull, glared insanely up at Foster as he bent over the madman. He reached down to wrest free the weapon.

Only to see the blade plunged deep into the scrawny, corded throat by the man's own hand.!

And then he was struggling to hold the starved woman from the fresh blood that her starved nostrils scented. Finally he dragged her away, after repeatedly pricking her with the knife blade, and set to work contriving a rude hook and line. For out in the foggy depths offshore he heard the unmistakable sound of leaping finny creatures . . .

TWENTY DAYS AND NIGHTS passed down there in the misty lake cupped into the inner wall of the crater. Brad Foster had grown stronger as the unsavory diet of raw fish and mussels rebuilt his wasted body, and the woman's returning flesh sloughed away the appearance of great age.

Ellen Hawn was her name, and impossible though it seemed at first, she was little more than twenty years of age. She had been born in the early days of the Flaming Gods, when the plains and hills were green and warm. But the Flaming Gods had come from the heavens, gouging vast cavities and craters everywhere, and with them they brought darkness and the terrible white coldness of eternal winter.

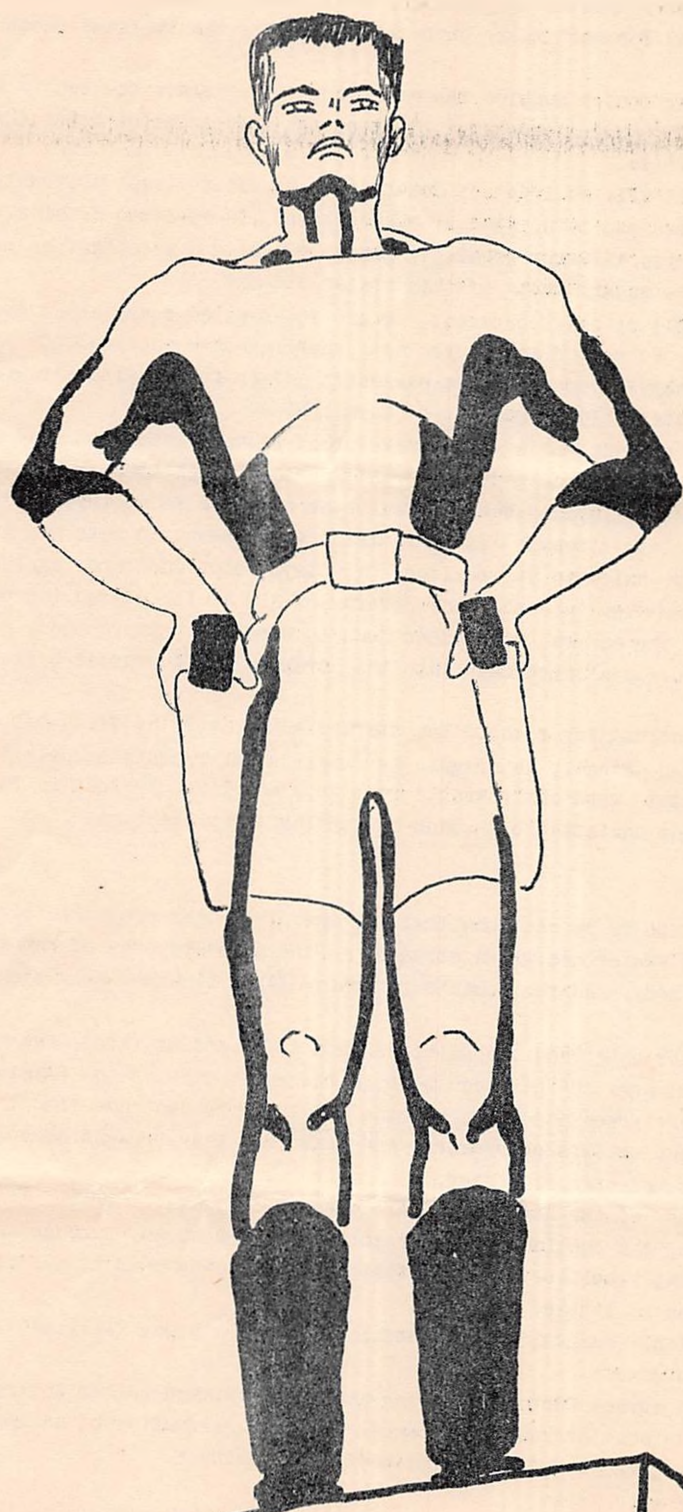
Ignorant, she was, of the history of her race. But it was a miracle that any of them had survived so long the continuing winter coldness. Without any purpose in life, save that of filling their hungry bellies and propitiating the Flaming Gods it was little wonder that Ellen Hawn knew so little.

"I was in Clivilan," she told him doubtfully. "It is a stone villiage far to the west, where a Flaming God came."

"A huge meteor," agreed Foster, frowning at the dimly seen bobber in the turgid water at their feet. "And the name of your city sounds like the corruption of an American name. Your ancestors must have named it after a city they left behind."

"I do not know," said Ellen.

"Your people must have come from the American continents," Foster persisted. "Your name the towns and villiages you name have that sound, Tell me, what did your parents call this world?"



He hoped that the whiteness
of his naked arms against
the sullen blackness of
the cliff would ~~not~~ be
seen.

The girl rose to her feet and backed away.

"I don't know," she almost wailed. "Please do not make me think any more of the child-ness and the great hunger that took my mother!"

And she faded into the gloom.

Foster swore at the unresponsive bobber -- fishing was no longer as productive as it had been; perhaps the pool was fished out -- and hauled it in. Then he set out on the trail of the sobbing woman.

They had explored the rocky darkness of the ledge for a thousand yards or more, until it had pitched off into a narrow way fit only for goats or kindred sure-footed beasts.

And along this ledge the girl had fled!

He heard her moving ahead of him as he reached the narrow stretch of ledge. But so dense was the eternal steaming mist that he could see but a few feet before him.

"Ellen!" he called. "Ellen, come back! I'll promise not to talk again about the great hunger and the Flaming Gods."

A faint distant sighing came to him as he heard the girl moving further away. He heard her quick sobbing breath.

"Go back," she said. "Do not follow or I will have to kill you and eat you!"

Foster's laugh was strained. "Don't be foolish," he said. "Why would you want to eat me?"

"Because the fish and shells are all gone. And I like you. But not well enough to let you eat me."

"Ellen," Foster roared angrily, "how many times must I tell you humans must not eat one another. We will move from here, find another pool, and eat well again!"

"No," said Ellen Hawn decisively, "for there may be no other pools and we will starve and I should not want to eat you but I would."

"Very well," grunted Foster in disgust. "Run along."

He waited for a time until all sound of her clumsy hide moccasins was gone, and then he set out after her. He could not let a half-crazed girl go thus unprotected for long, even though her words and actions angered him.

Gradually the narrow ledge widened until he found he was following a smooth -- worn trough where and icy little brook slid smoothy along. And along the way, in level spots where tiny pools offered lodgement for gravel and dirt, small willow-like brush & greenish leaved plants rooted.

"Brad!" A sudden wail of terror echoed back to him, and then a fading scream that ore hideously at his ears, sent him running and splashing upstream.

Underfoot the smooth channel tilted downward, its current swirling about his ankles, and he lost his footing -- even as Ellen must have done a moment before. He went shoot--ing downward along a glassy-walled chute that afforded his clutching fingers no resist--ance.

The chute's watery groove angled downward unevenly, the constant chafing of projecting angles and walls battering Foster's naked flesh into rawness. After a time all the stren--gth of his arms and legs went into a futile attempt at fending off the projecting ob--stacles along the way.

Other streams from above combined with the primary thread of water, and as the volumn increased the amount of abrasions decreased. He rode now upon a swift rushing river that looped and swerved dizzily down the face of the cliffs. At any moment the smooth flow might cut off sideways and spill downward, hundreds of feet, into the unplumbed shadowey depths of the great rift.

And at last, half a mile or more below his intentional launching point, a prolonged increasing roar warned him of a waterfall close ahead. In vain he struggled to slow his rocketing speed, but the water-slimed walls, wider now than his outspread arms, afforded no handholds.

The overhanging mist thinned about him, and suddenly he was whirled around a jutting shoulder of rock -- with a glancing impact that momentarily dazed him -- into a narrow long lake. And at the farther end of the eddying giant pool lifting spray and a sullen rumbling sound told of the cataract born there.

"Brad!" a breathless voice called faintly. He saw Ellen, waist-deep in the water to his left, reaching out toward him. Somehow she had survived the surging rush of the flood with her clumsy dog-paddling.

She reached out her hand and helped him to the rocky ledge, and a moment later they stood on a sparsely-grassed rocky ledge that was the outer lip of the cliffside lake. Reeds grew thickly here in this pond's backwater, and fish and frogs swam lazily in the warm water.

"Good!" gasped Ellen brokenly, reaching toward them. "We can live here, Brad, forever if we choose!"

And then the night came down around them.

WITH THE GLOW OF A sunless dawn they looked out across the scarred floor of the meteor pit. Three great islands of barren rock lifted from the steaming lake covering the craters bottom, like ridges left by some vast battered chisel's edge. Geysers of steaming water and great swelling mushrooms of watery heat broke the low swells of the water's surface, and here and there miniature cones of lava lifted above the surface to emit smoke and ashes.

Even yet they were more than a mile above the lake, but here the wintry blasts of the planet's surface could not reach. It was a moist semi-tropic warmth that they felt, like a warm cloudy day in summer back on Earth. But the fog blanket now was high above them, directly below a broad fan-shaped jut of level rock pushed a quarter mile out into the water, the final cascade of the series originating with this long pool's overflow, feeding there a large walled-in pool. From this pool a dozen regularly-spaced canals watered the whole green-clad peninsula.

"People live down there!" cried Foster to the girl. "Some of the colonists must have descended to the depths years ago! See, there are generators and turbines spaced along the cliff face below us, and at regular intervals they have erected great lightclusters to supplement the filtered sunlight from above."

"They should be well-fed and good to eat," agreed Ellen, licking her lips. "We can raid them when darkness comes."

Foster grunted silently under his breath. "None of that, my little cannibal queen," he warned. "We'll signal them and join their party. And no more of this talk of eating humans -- these people are civilized."

Ellen shrugged her shoulders scornfully. "Very well," she agreed. "You go down and be eaten. But I remain here."

"Suit yourself, Ellen," he laughed. "Better run and hide, then, because I'm going to throw rocks down at their pool and the dwellings within the wall." They probably know a way up to this shelf, or, better, have a wing that can land here."

Now did Ellen lose any time in scurrying to the mouth of a deep cave, two of the fat legged frogs in her hungry clutch as she ran. Foster scowled, deciding that after a few days of isolation here she'd be glad to join their little community below.

Then he began tossing the rock fragments far out over the steep precipices that fell far below, pausing to wave his arms wildly from time to time. He saw men moving like black specks of soot in the pale green fields, and after a time saw a shining black air-wing go rocketing out across the sea toward the nearest of the islands.

The island, now that he examined it more carefully, was also patched with green. Apparently a fairly large group of the colonists had taken refuge in the depths when the pall of dust, aftermath of the meteoric storm, brought a swift age of ice to the planet.

"Your stones do not reach beyond the first waterfall," a soft voice at his elbow said suddenly, "and your arm will tire."

"Better run back to your cave," warned Foster, turning to face the girl. "The wing is coming back to the mainland again."

Ellen squealed, terror-stricken, and scurried like a startled rabbit back into her moisture-dank shelter. And Foster turned, grinding, to signal the returning pilot. He hoped that the whiteness of his naked arms and upper torso against the sullen blackness of the cliff would be seen.

And it was! The wing veered upward and circled just off the tiny lake's outer lip until its pilot spotted a level stretch of rock. Foster ran toward it.

The wing's panel slid open and a trimly clad young woman, her auburn hair but a shade lighted than her highly-decorative slacks and tunic, stepped out. A compact rocket pistol was in her hand as she motioned imperiously for him to halt.

"How came you here, Beast," she inquired harshly. "From the ice fields above?"

"I was aboard a spacer exploring Dulva Six," he explained. "Something happened to our ship while I was unconscious and my escape craft reached this planet."

"A mad tale," scoffed the woman, savage lips snarling in disgust. "An escape craft could not blast from Dulva Six to Earth in less than a thousand years."

"Of course not. My only hope was to reach this frozen world. And I am glad to learn that Terran colonists have settled here . . ."

"Fool!" the woman came forward, and now he could see the vicious lines of her face and the laziness of her lips. "You are one of the scientists from another crater come to recapture this. But your wits have failed you. Your lies are too far-fetched."

"You know that this is Earth and not another world. You are not the addle-brained space pilot that you pretend to be with your chatter of escape craft and other galaxies."

"Then this is Earth, and the mutants have doomed our race!" Foster cried out. "I must have been unconscious through all the star-drive home. The valerie blew up near Earth!"

The woman sneered. "Very amusing. But you will amuse us even better at the table." She gestured with the gun. "Into the cabin with the other cattle."

"But . . ." began Foster.

"Move," ordered the woman, menacingly. "Or I'll be forced to drag your carcass aboard."

Foster shrugged his shoulders and moved slowly forward past the woman and into the after compartment of the small craft. He saw a bound man, fat and balding, and a young boy of perhaps eight or nine, also trussed up.

"These others?" he demanded. "Who are they?"

"As though you didn't know," she hissed. "We acquired a taste for flesh in the days before we stumbled on this hideout of your fellow scientists, and found food in plenty again."

"Now it is they, and their children, who till our fields, and grace our tables."

And her weapon's harsh muzzle prodded his back, forcing him into the ship. He sensed that she was swinging the heavy weapon up to bring it crunching down across his skull, and started to twist aside. Better to die here fighting than to meekly surrender to being roped and later butchered, he thought, as his hands clawed for her arms.

The woman screeched and the gun did not explode. He saw the cold gray lump of its metal in her wavering clutch and twisted it away. There was a thud and the screaming cut off abruptly as she collapsed emptily before his startled eyes.

It was only then that Foster saw Ellen bending over the fallen woman with a rock in her hand. She smiled ecstatically.

"She is tender and young," the girl said. Her teeth flashed hungrily.

"And dead," added Foster, sucking in a great draft of air.

He picked up the woman's body and carrying it to the lip of the void, hurled it over. Almost he followed her as Ellen flung herself upon him, pounding with tiny angry fists.

"She was mine!" she sobbed. "I would have shared . . ."

HALF AN HOUR LATER, over the central island of what the fat man called the Devil's Kettle, they learned of other small colonies of men and women who had found refuge on a similar muting peninsula, opposite. It was toward this that the rescued man was piloting them.

"Ninty of us," Tragg, the fat man, was saying. "were all who remained here after the savages from the upper level discovered our retreat and captured it."

"Unfortunately, five of our six wings were in this settlement so our comrades across the Kettle could not rescue us. We were put to work on the mainland, and in the fields on the island, and in the intervening five years thirty of our number have been slaughtered."

Tragg's face hardened.

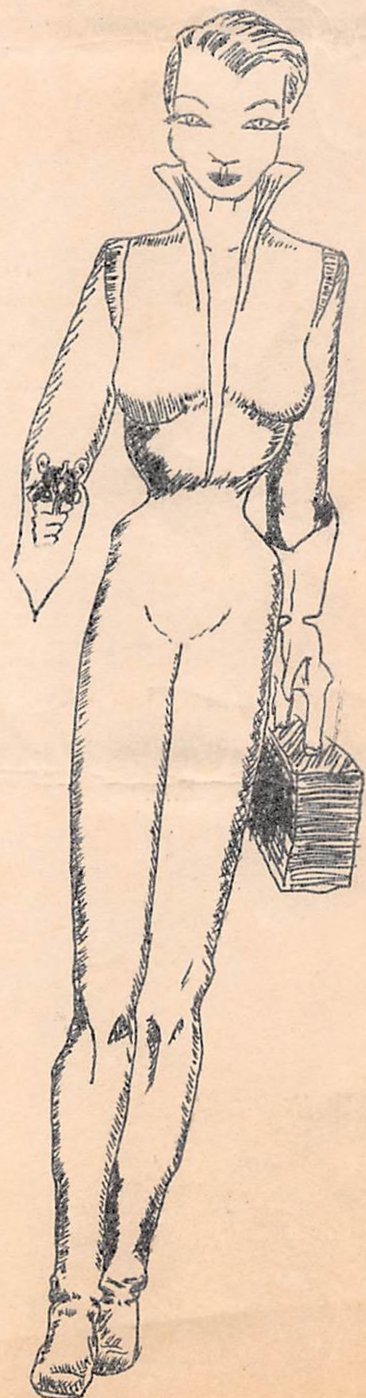
"But now we can turn the tables. They've smashed all the wings but this one, and one other, and the machinery and equipment are little better than junk. Once we've recaptured the settlement we can get on with rebuilding civilization."

Foster agreed. "I suppose Mars, Venus and the Jovian moons were also rendered uninhabitable," he added. "but the men in other galaxies may send star ships to aid."

He paused to frown at Ellen. She was eyeing the plump rosi-ness of Tragg's short arms and neck hungrily. Even yet, despite the food capsules from the emergency kits, and the frogs she'd eaten, she looked half starved. From now on it would be up to him to see that she was stuffed with food of the right sort.

"There it is!" Tragg cried delightedly, pointing. "A dozen new buildings and a dome."

The wing dropped swiftly toward the last hope of Earth . . .



A compact rocket pistol was in her hand . . .

