

# URANIAN JUSTICE

By  
WILBUR S. PEACOCK

*Author of "The Dead Die Twice," "Blueprint for Murder," etc.*

Kurt Birkett Yearned for a Place in the Sun  
Even if He Had to Travel to the Coldest  
Planet to Attain His Purpose!

THE sky was a dirty gray, its dimness brightened but little by the tiny orb that was the setting Sun. The minor moon, Ariel, moved across the horizon in a retrograde motion, but a few minutes ahead of its companion satellite, Titania.

Kurt Birkett scowled to himself, scuffing his feet soundlessly over the frozen terrain. So this was Uranus! Well, he hated the place, although he had been on its surface less than twenty-four hours. He hated this world's frozen surface, its dirty sky and its blinding storms that descended with monotonous regularity in battering waves of force.

And, more than anything else, Birkett hated the man plodding ahead of him. He despised him with a savagery that he had not thought possible for a human being to feel. For it was due to Frank Mason's insistence that he had made this special flight from his comfortable outpost on Jupiter to this bleak planet of eternal winter.

"It'll do you good, Birkett," Mason had said cheerfully, "to live in a space suit for awhile. Since you will be comptroller here before long, and since Uranus is within your interplanetary province, you should become familiar with its environment."

So Birkett had accompanied the famous explorer through space to a world on which nothing organic could survive. And now, here he was, fatigued, cold, stumbling behind Mason, the both of them seeking the outcropping of hykalium.

Birkett swore luridly as his leaden feet stumbled in a rock fault and threw him to the ground. He lay helpless for a moment, shaking with rage. The bulky figure ahead turned suddenly. Then hands yanked at the fallen man's suit and raised him to his feet.



Birkett fired without warning

"Easy, Birkett," Frank Mason's voice crackled in the earphones. "This would be a devil of a place to rip your suit."

"How much farther?" Birkett asked ungraciously, jerking himself free of the helping hands.

"Can't be much more than a mile; another hour should do it."

Frank Mason, still alert and erect despite the clumsiness of his suit, turned back to the original trail, went slogging ahead. Birkett paused momentarily, then went forward, afraid to lose sight of the man ahead.

Birkett scowled, bit his lips. He had made up his mind, and nothing could swerve him from his purpose. Frank Mason, he decided deliberately, had to be murdered. For but a mile ahead lay a fabulous fortune in hykalium. The value of this new element had pyramided in the past few months to an unbelievable height. Hykalium was rare and

valuable because all of the known sources of this atomic catalyst were slowly dwindling. In a few years there would barely be enough left for even scientific purposes.

Kurt Birkett had never liked his appointment to Jupiter, had fought it bitterly without success. He had taken it only because the salary had been good for the three-year contract he had signed. Now that his three years were up, he had his choice of signing again, or of returning to Earth. Foolishly, he had gambled away his pay months before. Now he had no alternative but to sign up again. He shuddered at the prospect of the same weary grind for three more years.

Yet, ahead, lay a fabulous fortune, known to but himself and Mason, ready to be taken by a man daring enough to risk breaking a few laws.

Kurt Birkett grinned suddenly; he was not afraid of breaking a few manmade laws. He still remembered how he had murdered the bookkeeper who had been about to expose the shortages in the books. He laughed silently, as he remembered the clever way in which he had made the investigation prove that the slain man had been the embezzler, had committed suicide.

That murder had not hung heavily on his conscience, and yet it had been for a few thousand dollars. Now, a short distance ahead, lay a deposit of crystalline rock that would make him the richest man in the Solar System.

Birkett's gloved hand eagerly caressed the frosted butt of the gun at his side, ready for instant action the moment that it was needed. He reviewed his plans as he walked along, considering them with a calmness that surprised himself.

He would kill Mason, then return to Jupiter with the story that the explorer had died from a fall. When his time was up, he would return to Earth. There he would organize a group of men as crooked as himself to help form a smuggling ring to dispose of the catalyst.

Within a few years, at the most, he would have more wealth than he could spend in a lifetime. He chuckled harshly at the thought, his eyes hot and feverish behind the cellu-visi-plate. He would have to slave away for another three years. But what a price he would collect for his toil!

"Did you say something?" Mason asked.

Birkett's head shook in negation, although he knew the other could not see the action.

"No, I just coughed."

"Oxygen okay?" Mason's voice grew a bit worried. "You should have at least seven hours of it left."

**B**IRKETT flicked his eyes to the helmet gauge. "It's okay," he said. "I only hope it lasts."

"It will," Mason said reassuringly. "We've been out but four hours; we'll have more than enough to find the outcropping and return to the ship."

"If we can find the ship in this storm!" Birkett said pessimistically. "How the devil would we ever find it if we had no compass?"

Frank Mason's voice rang in the earphones, the laughter strangely youthful for a man who had faced death so many times on alien planets.

"The ship's due west of us," he said easily. "A few hours of steady walking and we could see the perma-flare." Then his voice scaled in sudden excitement. "Birkett, here it is! We've found it! There's enough hykalium for centuries to come."

Birkett stumbled forward eagerly, his eyes straining to see the discovery. His breath rasped in his helmet as he plowed through the snow, and hot blood pounded at his temples.

"Is that all it is?" he asked disappointedly, seeing nothing but a small mountain of crystalline rock.

"That's it." Mason's voice was strangely soft. "That one hill means that pleasure crafts and expeditions will still be able to travel in space for a dozen centuries."

Kurt Birkett knew then that his murder plan had to be carried out. He knew instinctively that Mason would never consent to keeping the discovery a secret, nor to going into a partnership to control the price of the hykalium.

His hand sought the butt of his gun, then stopped when he saw that the other was scratching a crude map on a sheet of visi-plate. He waited, knowing that the map was necessary if he was to find the deposit again. He was grimly thankful that Mason had thought to make a map without being prompted.

And then, just as Mason finished the map and began rolling it into a tube, Kurt Birkett lifted the muzzle of his squat gun. His face impassive, he pressed the firing stud.

Mason caught the movement out of one corner of his eye. He whirled with panther-like speed, throwing himself flat, his right hand darting for his bolstered gun.

But he had moved too slowly. The blasting concussion of the explosive bullet pressed him flat to the ground, snuffed him into unconsciousness.

Birkett gasped at the speed with which the job had taken place, then lurched forward. He ripped the map from a slack hand, then aimed the gun for a finishing shot.

As he was about to fire, he hesitated. Instead, he holstered the gun, a thin grin on his sly face. Then he leaned over, bled the oxygen tank on the prostrate man until the pressure gauge indicated that but three hours of life-giving gas was left. This was perfect. If anyone found the body, it would look like an accident.

Satisfied that the man would not be able to make the four-hour return trip to the ship, Birkett fumbled for the wrist compass on Mason's hand. As Birkett glanced at the mechanism his face went utterly white. The terrific blast of the explosion had wrecked the delicate instrument.

Birkett staggered back, his eyes wild and terrified. Then, slowly, the fear left his face. He didn't have to worry. He knew how he could make the ship. It was easy. All he had to do was use some knowledge that was common property of civilized people.

Smiling satisfiedly, he swung on one heel, started swiftly through the snow.

**F**RANK MASON stumbled through a rocky terrain that tripped him again and again. He lurched heavily, his face blue with near suffocation. For three hours he had used failing strength to reach the ship, moving with a speed that was not hampered by Kurt Birkett's stumbling presence.

He fell heavily near the ship, heard the final gasp as his tank went empty. Holding his breath, then breathing shallowly, he fought to his feet again, stumbled against the ship's frosted side. He fumbled at the airlock, finally made his numbed hands work the right combination.

The veteran explorer fell through the door, swung the portal shut, then literally ripped open the

tiny door that led into the air-filled interior. His fingers were all thumbs as he tugged at his visi-plate. Then the tiny port flipped open, and he drew sweet air into lungs that were a-fire.

Mason lay there for minutes, feeling life creeping back into his oxygen-starved body, sleepiness deadening every thought. He heard the first blast of the storm outside, felt the ship rock a bit from the titanic blasts of snow-filled air. He knew that it would be an impossibility to find Birkett until the storm let up. Rolling tiredly to his side, he drifted into slumber.

Mason woke just as the storm faded over the horizon, stumbled to his feet, every movement a torture. He slipped from his suit, went forward to the controls. Lifting the ship, he headed toward the hykalium deposit.

The explorer flashed past it in a few seconds, hovered high in the air, searching for his murderous shipmate. For two minutes he searched without luck, then finally sighted the black spot on the white ground. He whipped the ship toward it, landed with frantic speed.

Kurt Birkett was dead, his face black with suffocation, the visi-plate in the front of his helmet open in one last frantic effort to find breathable air. Snow covered his body with a light film, showing that he had stumbled for hours through the storm. Rolled into a tiny cylinder and thrust through his gun belt was the crude map.

Frank Mason stood silently for a moment over the stiffening body of the man with whom he had hoped to enrich the civilized worlds.

"Poor devil," he muttered to himself. "Birkett thought he would make a fortune. He tried to murder me, thinking he could escape in the ship. He knew that the ship lay due west of us, and, finding that my compass was broken, set out in the direction of the setting Sun. What he didn't realize was that the Sun on Uranus rises in the west and sets in the east! He was going in the wrong direction all time."