

*Manool's plan for breaking the mutiny on the Berenice was simplicity itself.  
He utterly destroyed the plants that furnished oxygen for the entire ship.*

# Mutiny in the Void

## By Charles R. Tanner

The tank room of the rocket ship *Berenice*, where the big tanks of water-weed were kept, was so spick and span that a man needed little psychology to realize that its manager was a dapper, finicky, careful little man. The room's lights were bright and efficient, the water in the tanks fresh and clean, and there were no decaying fronds of vegetation among the thousands of stems of water-weed which, floating about in the tank, absorbed the carbon dioxide which was pumped through the water, and gave back a constant stream of tiny bubbles of Oxygen.

For this "farm," as the tank-room was called, was the oxygen-producer for the rocket, and under the expert care of Manool Sarouk, the "farmer," it kept the air as fresh and wholesome as the air of Earth. Manool was proud of his work, and of the way he handled it, just as he was proud of his appearance, and the way he kept that.

But at the moment thoughts of pride and satisfaction were furthest from Manool Sarouk's mind. He had just opened the door of the tank-room and entered, and on his face were written terror and anxiety, and written in unmistakable characters.

For Manool had just been an uncon-scious eavesdropper on a conversation—a conversation between Gilligan, the tall, cadaverous "mate" of the ship, and one of the fuel-wrestlers. Manool didn't know the name of the wrestler, for most of the crew were new men, picked by Gilligan on this, his second trip with the *Berenice*.

But his name was of no moment - it was the gist of the conversation that mattered. It was that which made the dapper little "farmer" tremble with anxiety and, yes— terror. For they had spoken of mutiny - and of mutiny imminent and likely to break out at any minute.

Manool was neat, and Manool was proud, but no one would call him brave. He was frightened now—frightened almost out of his wits, and uncertain as to what he should do. He mechanically reached into the breast of his jacket and drew out a tobaccolette. He stuck it in his mouth and inhaled it, wishing it was a cigarette he was smoking. Ninety-nine "farmers" out of a hundred wasted oxygen by smoking tobacco, but not Manool. The rules said "no cigarettes," so it was "no cigarettes" for him.

He tossed the tobaccolette away before it was half empty and began to pace the floor nervously. He went to the wash-stand and brushed the stain of the tobaccolette from his teeth. He made a test of the air, and smiled a little as he noted that the oxygen content was well above par. He examined the weeds, and removed a sickly looking frond or two. But his mind was not on his work, and he soon resumed his uneasy pacing.

And then there was a knock on the door. His heart flew into his mouth; he glanced around to see if there was any place to flee, and then called out weakly: "Who's there?"

"It's me—Gilligan," came the sharp voice of the mate, and Manool's panic became, if possible, greater.

"What—what do you want?" he stammered.

Gilligan's voice grew even sharper. "What's the matter with you, Manool?" he snapped. "Lemme in. I want to have a talk with you."

Manool was trembling violently, but he moved forward and unlatched the door. The tall abnormally-thin mate strode in, a sort of ingratiating smile hovering over his face.

"Nice little place you got here, Manool," he said with a forced smile. "Too bad I never had a chance to visit you here before."

He strode over to Manool's stool, the only scat in the "farm," and took possession of it. He looked about him, glanced at Manool once or twice and gradually his smile became more natural.

“Manool,” he said, “you’re an officer of sorts, maybe only a warrant officer, but still—you eat with them, so I’ve been considering you as an officer. But—well, I like you, Manool, and—you’ve heard more than you should, I believe, so I’ve come to have a little talk with you.”

He lowered his voice and looked around warily before he continued. Then, “Manool,” he said. “I’m going to make things plain. You heard me talkin’ to Larry, a while ago, and you must be suspicious. Well, your suspicion is right. There’s going to be mutiny aboard this hunk of fireworks and Cap Tarrant is going to lose his job. Know why? ‘Cause I’m one of Huddersfield’s men, and I’ve been working to seize this ship for eight months.”

Manool shuddered.

“Huddersfield, the Cerean?” he asked.

“The very same! Huddersfield has seized an asteroid and intends to start a fleet of rockets. He’s got a couple already and this’ll be his third. When we get enough, things’ll pop, I’ll tell you.”

“Now listen, Manool—you can throw in with us and go in for Huddersfield, or you can run and tell Cap Tarrant—and get your bloody knob knocked off when we take the ship. ‘Cause the men are all with me, Manool, all of ‘em, and there ain’t a chance of Tarrant winning if it comes to battle.”

He stopped, evidently waiting for Manool to speak. The little farmer looked up miserably. “But—what can I do?” he cried, plaintively. “Me, I ain’t no fighter, Gilligan. You don’t want me for a fighter in your crew.”

Gilligan stood up, smiling broadly. Manool’s obvious terror of him seemed to have reassured him considerably. He winked confidently.

“Manool,” he said. “Your business is to keep the air clean, and that’s all you have to do. Except to keep your mouth shut, too. ‘Cause if you peep to the Cap-tain, or to Navigator Rogers, you’ll be the first to die when we cut loose. But—” He winked again and his smile broadened.

“You keep the wind fair and the trap closed, and you won’t be forgotten.”

He gave one final wink and stepped out, closing the door behind him. And he left Manool in a turmoil of uncertainty. The little farmer knew well where his duty lay. If he did the right thing, he’d go at once to Captain Tarrant and inform him of the impending rebellion. But, if he did, Gilligan would surely get him. He knew well that the threat the thin mate had made had been no idle one.

But if he didn’t inform the captain—if he didn’t, he’d be a mutineer, too. And he’d have to take his share, and leave the earth, a fugitive, and probably cast his lot with the infamous Huddersfield. He certainly didn’t want to do that, either.

He strode back and forth in the tank-room, a victim of uncertainty. He didn’t know what to do, he told himself, plain-tively. . . . He still didn’t know, when dinner time came.

Manool’s abstraction at the dinner table was so noticeable that young Captain Tarrant was forced to speak of it.

“Where’s your appetite, Sarouk?” he asked. “You haven’t even finished your soup. Aren’t you feeling well?”

Manool’s face reddened as he answered, but old Doc Slade looked up and eyed Manool keenly.

“You better come in and see me after dinner, Sarouk,” he suggested. “Maybe you got something wrong and I’ll have some work to do. You stop in and see me.”

Manool was about to insist that he had nothing wrong with him, when he caught Doc’s eye, and realized that the old man knew something. And then he realized that here was opportunity knocking. He could go in and see Doc Slade, and Gilligan would never suspect anything. He rose from the table murmuring: “I’ll be in and see you in a few minutes, Doc.” Then hurried back to the farm.

He entered the tank-room and checked everything again, he put on a clean shirt, and brushed his teeth

and combed his straight black hair. Then, after a moment's consideration, he brushed his teeth again. Doc might take a notion to examine him, and he certainly didn't want his teeth to be soiled, if Doc looked at his mouth and throat.

He was about to leave the tank-room when he heard a cry from somewhere down the passage. It was a startled cry, and it was followed by a sharp command that ended in an oath. His heart leaped into his mouth. Not an officer on the ship ever used profanity to the men. Besides, he'd have recognized the voice of any of the four officers. That command had been shouted by one of the men, and the cry that had preceded it had been one of surprise. Had the mutiny started already?

As if in answer to his question, the sharp report of an automatic rang out suddenly through the passageway. Manool swung the door shut and ducked back as suddenly as if the bullet had been fired at him. He was beginning to tremble; he felt a smothering constriction of his throat, and yet, at the same time, an unreasoning thrill of excitement was rising within him. He felt an overpowering desire to see what was going on outside.

For many minutes his caution overcame his curiosity, but at last the continual silence convinced him that, in all probability, the mutiny was over. So, ever so slowly, he stepped out into the corridor and started down. The hail where he had heard the shot proved to be quite empty, and he wondered where everybody was. This was certainly a queer mutiny, nothing like any he had ever read about. He trod more and more cautiously, and it dawned on him that this silence was more fearsome than tumult would have been.

He was passing a store-room just then, and when he was just abreast of the door, it was flung suddenly open and there was one of the fuel-wrestlers, with a loaded automatic leveled at Manool's chest, and a spiteful look in his eyes.

Manool's reaction was almost automatic. He threw up his hands and shouted, "Don't shoot." And from behind the fuel-wrestler, another voice - Gilligan's - said, "Let him alone, it's the farmer." Then it grew sharper as the mate snapped, "Get in here, Manool. What are you doin' wanderin' around in the halls? You want to get shot?"

Manool was almost too scared to speak. "I was looking for you," he answered. "I think the fight is all over, so I look for you."

"It ain't all over, by a dam' sight," Gilligan snarled. "You seen Doc Slade?"

"I ain't seen nobody," Sarouk answered, truthfully. "I just came out of the farm and walked down here. I hear a shot, while ago."

"That was when we took a pop at Slade. I think he must have had some suspicions, the way he acted. Now, look, Manool," the mate went on, "this stuff ain't exactly in your line. You better go back to the farm and lay low till I call you."

Manool was still a little trembly from the scare he'd got when he saw the pistol pointed at his breast. He nodded enthusiastically at Gilligan's suggestion, darted to the door and, running down the corridor, he crept into the tank-room without another word.

He was in the tank-room, alone, for hours, it seemed. It was almost time for supper when there was a knock on the door, and when he hesitatingly opened it, Gilligan came in with a big smile on his face.

"Well, it's all over but the shoutin', Manool," he boasted. "We've got Tarrant and Navigator Rogers cooped up in the dining room. They've got food and water, and they've locked themselves in, but we got a guard posted at the door, and we'll get 'em if they make a break. We got Doc Slade, too—alive. He fought like a tiger, hurt two of the boys before we nailed him, but we took him, alive, and we're holding him, up in the weighin' room. Cookie's stirred up some supper, so come on up and eat. You needn't be afraid," he added as an afterthought. "The fighting's all over."

Manool followed him out of the door and down the passageway. They went up the stairs to the loading room near the central axis of the rocket; Manool feeling again the dizziness that he always felt when he lost weight. He had never really become a spaceman, in spite of all his years in space. He walked a little

uncertainly and giddily into the room, a pace or two behind Gilligan.

The entire crew was there. Doc Slade was there, too. He had a black eye and a long, deep scratch down one side of his face. His hands were tied, and he was seated on a stool with his legs tied to the stool's. Doc's eyes widened when he saw Manool walk in with Gilligan; then a look of scorn came into them and he turned his head away. Manool squirmed uncomfortably under his gaze—he liked Doc Slade, and Doc had always liked him, up to now. He hoped these fellows wouldn't hurt the old Doc.

The table was set and the crew were about to sit down to eat. Manool was seated beside Gilligan, and they untied Doc's hands and sat him down, too, at the opposite end of the table.

The meal was sheer torture to the little farmer. The crew ignored him, Gilligan ignored him and Doc Slade—Doc wouldn't ignore him, and Manool wished he would. Before the meal was over, Manool was in an agony of anxiety. He wondered what would become of Tarrant and Rogers; he wondered what they'd do to Doc Slade; he wondered also what they were going to do to him.

The crew was uproariously jovial. They had broken out a case of gin that one of them had probably smuggled aboard, and they lit cigarettes and split a bottle and were having a glorious time. It grew more glorious after the third bottle, and one of them brought up the suggestion that they divide the cargo among them right then, to "see what they were going to get."

Gilligan frowned and tried to wave the suggestion down, but a half dozen voices snarled angrily at his refusal, and the slim mate was forced to acquiesce with as good grace as possible. A loader was delegated to guard Doc Slade, then the entire remainder of the crew started aft to the "hold."

In those clays, ships usually carried things that were mighty hard to get or make on Mars, and were not too scarce on Earth. In this case, there was a ton of U235, a lot of organic chemicals that still couldn't be synthesized from their elements, and an assortment of odds and ends that were prized by the Martian natives in spite of their cheapness.

Into the bins where this stuff was stored, the shouting pirates who had lately been a well-behaved crew swarmed, shouting and pushing, and laying claim to this and that and the other; and in less than five minutes, three separate fights started. Gilligan stormed, threatened, and at last resorted to violence.

"This stuff'll never be divided fair if you lugs try to settle it by fightin' for it," he roared after he had clipped a couple of them. "What do you think you are, a bunch of pirates? You fools kill each other off, and who brings the ship into port, eh? How long do you think you'd go on livin', if we go short-handed and damage this can on landin'? Huddersfield would kill you off like flies for that. Now calm down and let's get this thing settled."

They stood meekly enough after that, while Gilligan looked the cargo over and assigned this portion to this fellow, that portion to that. He had apportioned a large part of the spoils to them when he came to a dozen or so large corrugated boxes. He read one of the labels and broke out into laughter.

"Look at this, you lugs," he chuckled. "Who's going to get this for his share?"

The others looked and grins began to spread over their faces. The labels said: "Dentogleme Tooth Powd. 1/2 Gr. 4 oz." The grins became laughs, and a dozen eyes turned to Manool. The little farmer felt his face begin to redden; it dawned on him that his habit of dental fastidiousness was not unknown to the crew. Gilligan's next remark made it obvious that this was the truth.

"Manool," he said. "This stuff was probably goin' to Mars to polish the teeth of them shark-jawed natives. But it would have been wasted there, Manool, wasted. But now, Manool, it shall be awarded to you, who'll value it, in appreciation of all you've done for us, durin' the mutiny."

His eyes hardened for a moment as if in anticipation of a complaint; then, seeing nothing in Manool's eyes but plaintive acquiescence, he went on: "Take it, Manool, and get out o' here. Take it down to the farm and gloat over it, farmer. There's enough there to last even you for twenty years."

The crew looked at him, looked at the dazed Manool and burst into spasms of laughter. They poked jibes at him, made obscene puns at his expense, and Manool stood there, taking it all in and getting redder and redder.

He wished futilely that he had had time to do something before the mutiny. He wished that it wasn't too late to do something, now. Then he realized that there was something for him to do now. Gilligan was ordering him again, in no uncertain terms, to get that toothpowder down to his tank-room. He smiled weakly at the ring-leader and picked up one box.

For the next half hour he was busy carrying his "fortune" down to his quarters and it is doubtful if, in all his life, Manool Sarouk had ever been so miserable. He upbraided himself at every step for his cowardice and vacillation. He racked his brain, striving to devise some brilliant plan to circumvent the mutineers and even as he did so, another part of his mind was scoffing at the futility of daring to oppose that group of ruffians. By the time he came back for the last box, he had admitted the absurdity of even trying it.

They had emptied the gin bottles by that time. Some of them were singing, and some were shooting craps, gambling with their share of the cargo. Gilligan and a couple of others were gathered around Doc Slade. They had removed his bonds and had evidently been talking to him.

"You'll take a chance with us or you'll take a chance with them two in the officer's mess," Gilligan was saying, menacingly, as Manool entered. It was evident that he had shared in the gin since Manool had started his work. He was looking ugly and seemed to be feeling the same way.

Doc Slade's lip was curling with contempt before Gilligan had finished his sentence. "There's no choice," the doctor spat. "You give me passage to the mess-room and I'll go, right now. What have I got in common with a pack of space-rats like these? I don't like the smell of you, even."

"Okeh!" Gilligan snarled, with an air of finality that showed that he was ending what had been an attempt to persuade Slade to join them. "I'll give you passage. Git out o' here and git down to the dinin' room."

He flung the door open and gestured out into the passageway. Doc Slade looked at him, with a look in his eyes that Manool couldn't fathom. "Git!" repeated Gilligan, and drew his weapon. "Git out o' here before I forget myself and let you have a dose o' this."

Doc hesitated the briefest second, then he shrugged and stepped out of the door. He started down the passageway swiftly, and Manool noticed that he neither slackened his pace nor looked backward. He was some sixty feet away when Gilligan muttered to the two or three who had crowded to the door, "All right. Let him have it!"

And to Manool's horror, a half dozen shots cracked and echoed in the narrow confines of the hail. Doc staggered, put out a hand to the bulkhead, coughed and slumped to the floor. Gilligan ran forward and put another bullet in him.

Manool didn't: even wait until Gilligan came back into the room. He grabbed up his last box mechanically and ran to the steps. His mind was a chaos of horror; he was choking, his eyes were filling with tears and he was aware of only one thought—to get to the steps before a bullet smacked into his back, too.

He stumbled down the steps and along the corridor, sobbing as he went. They had killed Doc Slade... killed him in cold blood. They'd kill the other officers, too, if they got the chance. There was no good in them, there was no hope in trying to placate them and appeal to their good nature. At any moment, they'd be likely to take a notion to kill him, too; just for the fun of the thing! He hardly knew what he was doing by the time he entered the tank-room and dropped the box of toothpowder onto the others and then slammed the door shut and locked it.

For a while he was a little hysterical. He sobbed; he walked the floor; he beat his temples with his fists, and wondered if he could kill himself. He could see before him, with awful clarity, the form of Doc Slade, lying as he had lain in the passageway, with a gradually spreading pool of blood beneath his head.

He covered his face with his hands and wept anew. He kicked savagely at the boxes that were the price of his neutrality in this little war. He felt that he was the lowest, the most despicable coward in history. He wrung his hands and wept again. And at last, in time, his eyes dried and he took a deep breath.

There was a new look in his eyes. The thought had come to him suddenly, that he held the lives of these madmen in his own hand. Of course, he did! He had been worrying so much about the safety of his own paltry life that this thought had been entirely overlooked. He was the farmer on this ship! What was he

weeping and wailing for, when every one of them de-pended for their air on his continued atten-tion to the tanks?

Why, they were a good twenty million miles from the nearest spaceport. If he wanted to die, if he was willing to give his life, he could destroy those tanks of vegetation, and not a man on this rocket would live to land on a planet again.

He stood up and threw out his chest. He inhaled deeply—and smothered an in-voluntary sob. He went to the wash-bowl and washed his face and eyes and combed his lank, black hair. He absently reached for his toothbrush, then he shuddered. But habit was too great; in spite of the feeling of revulsion that the very thought of toothpowder brought to him, he wound up by carefully brushing his teeth. Then he felt better.

He started to turn away from the wash-bowl and suddenly stopped. He turned back quickly and seized the can of toothpowder standing there. He picked it up, poured some of the powder into his hand and let a drop or two of water fall on it. A sinister grin began to spread over his face—if he handled this thing right, the joke they had made in giving him the toothpowder was going to backfire with a vengeance.

He sat down and began to think.

He sat there for almost half an hour. Once He got up and went over and exam-ined the openings to the ventilator pipes. He removed the screen from one of them, a pipe about two feet in diameter, and looked into the blackness of the pipe's interior. What he saw evidently satisfied him, for he smiled again and went back to resume his pensive pose.

At last, he rose and with the grim smile playing on his face he went to work. He climbed up into the ventilator pipe he had examined, and started to worm his way into its dark maw. His legs kicked futilely for a moment, then he was hunch-ing his way along through the tube.

He worked his way along for a dozen yards or so, then he came to a place where the tube divided in two. He unhesitatingly chose the path to the right—he knew these tubes well enough to traverse them with his eyes shut, even though he had never seen them from the inside before. After a few yards of further crawling, he saw a light ahead and increased his speed. Be-fore long, he was lying in front of a grating and looking out into the officer's mess-room.

He could see Tarrant and Rogers. They were seated disconsolately at the table, speaking little, apparently, for Manool watched them for five minutes before he tried to attract their attention, and in all that time, Tarrant only spoke once. When Manool tapped on the grating, they looked up startled, and reached for their weapons. Rogers was unable to locate the rapping and swung about a little wildly until Tar-rant pointed out the ventilator opening. Then he recognized Manool before Tarrant did.

"It's the farmer," he exclaimed, in surprise. "What are you doing up there, Sarouk?"

Manool beckoned them over to the ventilator.

"Don't talk too loud," he cautioned in a hoarse whisper. "I can't say much. Somebody is guarding outside the door, maybe they hear me. They kill Doc Slade and the chemist. I got a scheme. You take this grating off, while I go back to the farm and get something."

He backed away without waiting for an answer and made his way slowly back to the farm. He picked up one of his boxes of toothpowder and hoisted it up to the ventilator shaft, shoving it back as far as he could. Then he climbed in after it and began his journey back to the mess room, pushing the box ahead of him. It was slow work, but he made it at last, and called softly to Tarrant to come and get the box.

"What's this all about, Manool?" de-manded the captain, but Manool refused to answer.

"Can't talk too much, Captain," he whis-pered. "Got to hurry. If someone tries to come in farm before I get these boxes over here, this whole plan be shot. Don't you talk now, please."

Tarrant nodded his understanding and Manool started back for another box of toothpowder. As he hunched his way along, he heard Tarrant say to Rogers, quite plainly: "Think he knows what he's doing, Ike?"

He smiled bitterly. It seemed impos-sible for anyone to expect anything im-portant could be accomplished by little Manool Sarouk. Well, if things went right, he was certainly going to show them, this time.

In spite of his haste, and in spite of the fact that Rogers helped him after the third trip, it was some little time before Manool dropped down in the tank-room after that last box. He heaved a huge sigh of relief as he put it into the venti-lator shaft, and turned to do the one thing left to do. This was the one job he hated, hut it was the most important job of all. He went to his locker and got out a big bottle and poured liquid from it into every one of the tanks. He turned off a valve under each tank and took a hammer and beat the valve-handle into uselessness. Then, after checking to make sure he hadn't overlooked anything, he climbed into the tube and started pushing that last box of toothpowder ahead of him.

At last he reached the mess-room again and handed down his box. He climbed down, himself, and had no more than landed when Tarrarit was on him with a whispered, "Come on now, Manool, tell us what this is all about."

"Just a couple minutes more, Captain," Manool pleaded. "You think they can get through that door?"

"Not a chance," Rogers spoke up.

"That's fine. Maybe, then, you help me fix that ventilator, too." They put the grill back on the ventilator, and covered it by nailing boards from the table over it.

By in by, we make that airtight," said Manool, and gave his next order. Yes, he was giving orders to the captain and the navigator now, and he was quite conscious that he was doing so.

"You get all the bowls and pans and pots in here and fill 'em with water. No telling when those fellows decide to cut our water lines."

It took them half an hour to do that, and it wasn't until it was done that Manool felt satisfied. Then he began to break open one of the cartons of toothpowder, explaining his plans as he did so, in the same whisper he had used all along.

"Those fellows out there got the whole ship to themselves," he said. "They got lots of food and lots of water and lots of air. They got fuel, too, and somebody who can lay an orbit for contact with Ceres. But I don't think they ever get there."

"There's a whole lot of fellows, too," said Manool, dubiously. I think maybe the air they got won't last 'em."

"Their air!" ejaculated Tarrant. "Manool, you haven't monkeyed with the tanks, have you?"

"I just kill the water-weed, that's all."

"Are you nuts, little man?" asked Tar-rant at last. "How in thunder are we going to breathe, when this air gets stale. You may smother those pirates, hut we're all in the same boat here, you know."

Manool smacked his fist into his hand to emphasize his remark.

"We may be in same boat, but we three, we're in different part of this boat. Maybe them rats outside quit breathing, all right, but not us! Look here."

He seized them both by the shoulder and hauled them across the room, he broke open one of the corrugated boxes as they watched, and pulled out a gaily colored can. He opened the can and dumped the contents into a pan of water, while they looked on.

He stirred the paste in the bottom of the pan for a moment and then let out a cry of triumph.

"Aha! See there! What you think of that, by gum!"

A series of bubbles was rising from the paste, rising and breaking, bring-ing fragments of the toothpowder with them, giving the water a cloudy and dusty quality as they grew and joined each other, faster and faster.

Manool winked.

"Maybe Manool isn't as big fool as these hoodlums think," he said proudly. 'I don't know much, maybe. But, by gum, I know my business. I know about tooth-powders and I know about providing oxy-gen for rocket ships.

"You know what, Captain. Most toothpowders got sodium perborate in 'em. They put it in because that perborate give off pure oxygen when you put it in water, and pure oxygen is pretty good antiseptic. Only this time, we're going to use that oxygen to keep us alive instead of killing germs."

He leaned over and took a sniff of the life-giving gas.

"In a day or two," he said, happily, "the air out in the rest of the rocket is going to get pretty stale. Then they try to get in here. We hold 'em out all right, then after while they come, offering to surrender, begging for a breath of fresh air. Ain't it nice to think that there's only enough for the three of us? If we get soft and let 'em breathe any of our air, nobody will reach port alive. So we have to be hard and let that mob of cutthroats smother to death."

He sat down and leaned back and smiled. Manool Sarouk felt pretty good. He felt satisfied with himself for the first time in a long while.

The End