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1944

# PLANET STORIES

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—THE UNIVERSE OF  
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## The EYES of THAR

By HENRY KUTNER

PARKHURST





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# PLANET STORIES



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# THE SOUL EATERS

By WILLIAM CONOVER

**Firebrand Dennis Brooke had one final chance to redeem himself by capturing Koerber whose ships were the scourge of the Void. But his luck had run its course, and now he was marooned on a rogue planet—fighting to save himself from a menace weapons could not kill.**

*Illustration by INGELS*



“AND SO, my dear,” Dennis detected a faint irony in the phrase, “I’m afraid I can offer no competition to the beauties of five planets—or is it six? With regret I bow myself out, and knowing me as you do, you’ll understand the futility of trying to convince me again. Anyway, there will be no temptation, for I’m sailing on a new assignment I’ve accepted. I did love you . . . Good-by.”

Dennis Brooke had lost count of the times he’d read Marla’s last letter, but

every time he came to these final, poignant lines, they never failed to conjure a vision of her tawny loveliness, slender as the palms of Venus, and of the blue ecstasy of her eyes, wide with a perpetual wonder—limpid as a child’s.

The barbaric rhythms of the *Congahua*, were a background of annoyance in Dennis’ mind; he frowned slightly at the maneuvers of the Mercurian dancer who writhed among the guests of the notorious pleasure palace, began to leave no doubt



*The spheres rolled down in a deadly wave.*



as to her intentions. The girl was beautiful, in a sultry, almost incandescent sort of way, but her open promise left him cold. He wanted solitude, somewhere to coordinate his thoughts in silence and salvage something out of the wreck of his heart, not to speak of his career. But Venus, in the throes of a gigantic boom upon the discovery of radio-active fields, could offer only one solitude—the fatal one of her swamps and virgin forests.

Dennis Brooke was thirty, the time when youth no longer seems unending. When the minor adventures of the heart begin to pall. If the loss of Marla left an aching void that all the women of five planets could not fill, the loss of Space, was quite as deadly. For he had been grounded. True Koerber's escape from the I.S.P. net, had not quite been his fault; but had he not been enjoying the joys of a voluptuous Jovian Chamber, in Venus' fabulous Interplanetary Palace, he would have been ready for duty to complete the last link in the net of I.S.P., cruisers that almost surrounded the space pirate.

A night in the Jovian Chamber, was to be emperor for one night. Every dream of a man's desire was marvelously induced through the skilful use of hypnotics; the rarest viands and most delectable drinks appeared as if by magic; the unearthly peace of an Olympus descended on a man's soul, and beauty . . . beauty such as men dreamed of was a warm reality under the ineffable illumination of the Chamber.

It cost a young fortune. But to pleasure mad, boom-ridden Venus, a fortune was a bagatelle. Only it had cost Dennis Brooke far more than a sheaf of credits—it had cost him the severe rebuff of the I.S.P., and most of his heart in Marla.

Dennis sighed, he tilted his red, curly head and drank deeply of the insidious *Verbena*, fragrant as a mint garden, in the tall frosty glass of Martian *Bacca-glas*, and as he did so, his brilliant hazel eyes found themselves gazing into the unwinking, violet stare of a young Martian at the next table. There was a smouldering hatred in those eyes, and something else . . . envy, perhaps, or was it jealousy? Dennis couldn't tell. But his senses became instantly alert. Danger brought a faint vibration which his superbly trained faculties could instantly denote.

His steady, bronzed hand lowered the drink, and his eyes narrowed slightly. Absorbed in trying to puzzle the sudden enmity of this Martian stranger, he was unaware of the Mercurian Dancer. The latter had edged closer, whirling in prismatic flashes from the myriad semi-precious stones that studded her brief gauze skirt. And now, in a final bid for the spacer's favor she flung herself in his lap and tilted back invitingly.

Some of the guests laughed, others stared in plain envy at the handsome, red-haired spacer, but from the table across, came the tinkling sound of a fragile glass being crushed in a powerful hand, and a muffled Martian curse. Without warning, the Martian was on his feet with the speed of an Hellacorium, the table went crashing to one side as he leaped with deadly intent on the sprawled figure of Dennis Brooke. A high-pitched scream brought instant silence as a Terran girl cried out. Then the Martian's hand reached out hungrily. But Dennis was not there.

**L**EAPING to one side, impervious to the fall of the dancer, he avoided the murderous rush of the Martian youth, then he wheeled swiftly and planted a sledgehammer blow in that most vulnerable spot of all Martians, the spot just below their narrow, wasp-like waist, and as the Martian half-doubled over, he lefted him with a short jab to the chin that staggered and all but dropped him.

The Martian's violet eyes were black with fury now. He staggered back and sucked in air, his face contorted with excruciating pain. But he was not through. His powerful right shot like a blast straight for Dennis' chest, striking like a piston just below the heart. Dennis took it, flat-footed, without flinching; then he let his right ride over with all the force at his command. It caught the Martian on the jaw and spun him like a top, the pale, imperious face went crimson as he slowly sagged to his knees and rolled to the impeccable mosaics of the floor.

Dennis, breathing heavily, stood over him until the international police arrived, and then he had the surprise of his life. Upon search, the police found a tiny, but fatal silvery tube holstered under his left arm-pit—an atomic-disintegrator, forbid-



den throughout the interplanetary League. Only major criminals and space pirates still without the law were known to possess them.

"Looks like your brawl has turned out to be a piece of fool's luck, Brooke!" The Police Lieutenant favored Dennis with a wry smile. "If I'm not mistaken this chap's a member of Bren Koerber's pirate crew. Who else could afford to risk his neck at the International, and have in his possession a disintegrator? Pity we have no complete records on that devil's crew! Anyway, we'll radio the I.S.P., perhaps they have details on this dandy!" He eyed admiringly the priceless Martian embroideries on the unconscious Martian's tunic, the costly border of red, ocelandian fur, and the magnificent black *acerine* on his finger.

Dennis Brooke shrugged his shoulders, shoulders that would have put to shame the Athenian statues of another age. A faint, bitter smile curved his generous mouth. "I'm grounded, Gillian, it'd take the capture of Koerber himself to set me right with the I.S.P. again—you don't know Bertram! To him an infraction of rules is a major crime. Damn Venus!" He reached for his glass of *Verbena* but the table had turned over during the struggle, and the glass was a shattered mass of gleaming *Bacca-glas* shards. He laughed shortly as he became conscious of the venomous stare of the Mercurian Dancer, of the excited voices of the guests and the emphatic disapproval of the Venusian proprietor who was shocked at having a brawl in his ultra-expensive, ultra-exclusive Palace.

"Better come to Headquarters with me, Dennis," the lieutenant said gently. "We'll say you captured him, and if he's Koerber's, the credit's yours. A trip to Terra's what you need, Venus for you is a hoo-doo!"

**T**HE STERN, white haired I.S.P. Commander behind the immense Aluminil desk, frowned slightly as Dennis Brooke entered. He eyed the six foot four frame of the Captain before him with a mixture of feelings, as if uncertain how to begin. Finally, he sighed as if, having come to a decision, he were forcing himself to speak:

"Sit down, Dennis. I've sent for you, despite your grounding, for two reasons. The first one you already know—your capture of one of Koerber's henchmen—has given us a line as to his present orbit of piracy, and the means of a check on his activities. But that's not really why I've brought you here." He frowned again as if what he had to say were difficult indeed.

"Marla Starland, your fiancée, accepted an assignment we offered her—a delicate piece of work here on Terra that only a very beautiful, and very clever young lady could perform. And," he paused, grimacing, "somewhere between Venus and Terra, the interplanetary spacer bringing her and several other passengers, began to send distress signals. Finally, we couldn't contact the ship any more. It is three days overdue. All passengers, a cargo of radium from Venus worth untold millions, the spacer itself—seem to have vanished."

Dennis Brooke's space-tanned features had gone pale. His large hazel eyes, fringed with auburn lashes, too long for a man, were bright slits that smouldered. He stood silent, his hands clenched at his sides, while something cold and sharp seemed to dig at his heart with cruel precision.

"Marla!" He breathed at last. The thought of Marla in the power of Koerber sent a wave of anguish that seared through him like an atomic-blast.

"Commander," Dennis said, and his rich baritone voice had depths of emotion so great that they startled Commander Bertram himself—and that grizzled veteran of the I.S.P., had at one time or another known every change of torture that could possibly be wrung on a human soul. "Commander, give me one . . . *one* chance at that spawn of unthinkable begetting! Let me try, and I promise you . . ." in his torture, Dennis was unconsciously banging a knotted fist on the chaste, satiny surface of the priceless desk, "I promise you that I will either bring you Koerber, or forfeit my life!"

Commander Bertram nodded his head. "I brought you here for that purpose, son. We have reached a point in our war with Koerber, where the last stakes must be played . . . and the last stake is death!"

He reached over and flipped up the activator on a small telecast set on his desk;



instantly the viso-screen lighted up. "You'll now see a visual record of all we know about the passenger spacer that left Venus with passengers and cargo, as far as we could contact the vessel in space. This, Dennis," the Commander emphasized his words, "is your chance to redeem yourself!" He fell silent, while the viso-screen began to show a crowded space port on Venus, and a gigantic passenger spacer up-tilted in its cradle.

THEY watched the parabola it made in its trajectory as it flashed into space and then fell into orbit three beyond the planetary attraction of Venus. On the three-dimensional viso-screen it was uncannily real.

A flight that had taken many hours to accomplish, was shortened on the viso-screen to a matter of minutes. They saw the great, proud interplanetary transport speeding majestically through the starry void, and suddenly, they saw her swerve in a great arc; again she swerved as if avoiding something deadly in space, and point upwards gaining altitude. It was zig-zagging now, desperately maneuvering in an erratic course, and as if by magic, a tiny spot appeared on the transport's side.

Tiny on the viso-screen, the fatal spots must have been huge in actuality. To the Commander of the I.S.P., and to Captain Brooke, it was an old story. Atom-blasts were pitting the spacer's hull with deadly Genton shells. The great transport trembled under the impact of the barrage, and suddenly, the screen went blank.

Commander Bertram turned slowly to face the young I.S.P. captain, whose features were a mask devoid of all expression now, save for the pallor and the burning fire in his eyes.

"And that's the sixth one in a month. Sometimes the survivors reach Terra in emergency spacers, or are picked up in space by other transports . . . and sometimes son . . . well, as you know, sometimes they're never seen again."

"When do I leave, Commander!" Dennis Brooke's voice was like a javelin of ice.

"Right now, if you wish. We have a new cruiser armored in beryloid with double hull—a new design against Genton shells, but it's the speed of the thing that you'll want to know about. It just about

surpasses anything ever invented. Get the figures and data from the coordination room, son; it's serviced and fueled and the crew's aboard." He extended his hand. "You're the best spacer we have—aside from your recklessness—and on your success depends far more than the capture of an outlaw." Bertram smiled thinly. "Happy landing!"

## II

THEIR nerves were ragged. Days and days of fruitless search for a phantom ship that seemed to have vanished from space, and an equally elusive pirate whose whereabouts were hidden in the depths of fathomless space.

To all but Captain Brooke, this was a new adventure, their first assignment to duty in a search that went beyond the realm of the inner planets, where men spent sleepless nights in eternal vigilance against stray asteroids and outlaw crews of ruthless vandal ships. Even their cruiser was a new experience, the long, tapering fighter lacked the luxurious offices and appointments of the regular I.S.P. Patrol spacers. It placed a maximum on speed, and all available space was hoarded for fuel. The lightning fast tiger of the space-lanes, was a thing of beauty, but of grim, sleek beauty instinct with power, not the comfortable luxury that they knew.

Day after day they went through their drills, donning space suits, manning battle stations; aiming deadly atom-cannon at empty space, and eternally scanning the vast empty reaches by means of the telecast.

And suddenly, out of the void, as they had all but given up the search as a wild goose chase, a speck was limned in the lighted surface of the viso-screen in the control room. Instantly the I.S.P. cruiser came to life. In a burst of magnificent speed, the cruiser literally devoured the space leagues, until the spacer became a flashing streak. On the viso-screen, the speck grew larger, took on contours, growing and becoming slowly the drifting shell of what had been a transport.

Presently they were within reaching distance, and Captain Brooke commanded through the teleradio from the control room:

"Prepare to board!"



Every member of the crew wanted to be among the boarding party, for all but George Randall, the junior member of the crew had served his apprenticeship among the inner planets, Mars, Venus and Terra. He felt nauseated at the very thought of going out there in that vast abyss of space. His young, beardless face, with the candid blue eyes went pale when the order was given. But presently, Captain Brooke named those who were to go beside himself:

"You, Tom and Scotty, take one emergency plane, and Dallas!"

"Yes, Captain!" Dallas Bernan, the immense third lieutenant boomed in his basso-profundo voice.

"You and I'll take a second emergency!" There was a pause in the voice of the Captain from the control room, then: "Test space suits. Text oxygen helmets! Atomoblasts only, ready in five minutes!"

George Randall breathed a sigh of relief. He watched them bridge the space to the drifting wreck, then saw them enter what had once been a proud interplanetary liner, now soon to be but drifting dust, and he turned away with a look of shame.

Inside the liner, Captain Dennis Brooke had finished making a detailed survey.

"No doubt about it," he spoke through the radio in his helmet. "Cargo missing. No survivors. No indication that the repulsion fields were out of order. And finally, those Genton shells could only have been fired by Koerber!" He tried to maintain a calm exterior, but inwardly he seethed in a cold fury more deadly than any he had ever experienced. Somehow he had expected to find at least one compartment unharmed, where life might have endured, but now, all hope was gone. Only a great resolve to deal with Koerber once and for all remained to him.

Dennis tried not to think of Marla, too great an ache was involved in thinking of her and all he had lost. When he finally spoke, his voice was harsh, laconic:

"Prepare to return!"

Scotty Byrnes, the cruiser's nurse, who could take his motors through a major battle, or hell and high water and back again, for that matter, shifted the Venusian weed that made a perpetual bulge on his cheek and gazed curiously at Captain Brooke. They all knew the story in various versions,

and with special additions. But they were spacemen, implicit in their loyalty, and with Dennis Brooke they could and did feel safe.

Tom Jeffery, the tall, angular and red-faced Navigator, whose slow, easygoing movements belied the feral persistence of a tiger, and the swiftness of a striking cobra in a fight, led the small procession of men toward the emergency planes. Behind him came Dallas Bernan, third lieutenant, looming like a young asteroid in his space suit, followed by Scotty, and finally Captain Brooke himself. All left in silence, as if the tragedy that had occurred aboard the wrecked liner, had touched them intimately.

**A**BOARD the I.S.P. Cruiser, a surprise awaited them. It was young George Randall, whose excited face met them as soon as they had entered the airlocks and removed the space suits.

"Captain Brooke . . . Captain, recordings are showing on the new 'Jet Analyzers' must be the trail of some spacer. Can't be far!" He was fairly dancing in his excitement, as if the marvelous work of the new invention that detected the disturbance of atomic jets at great distance were his own achievement.

Dennis Brooke smiled. His own heart was hammering, and inwardly he prayed that it were Koerber. It had to be! No interplanetary passenger spacer could possibly be out here at the intersection of angles Kp 39 degrees, 12 minutes, Fp 67 degrees of Ceres elliptic plane. None but a pirate crew with swift battle cruisers could dare! This was the dangerous asteroid belt, where even planetoids drifted in eccentric uncharted orbits.

Dennis, Tom Jeffery and Scotty Byrne raced to the control room, followed by the ponderous Dallas to whom hurry in any form was anathema. There could be no doubt now! The "Jet Analyzer" recorded powerful disturbance, atomic—could be nothing else.

Instantly Captain Brooke was at the inter-communication speaker:

"Crew, battle stations! Engine room, full speed!"

Scotty Byrnes was already dashing to the engine room, where his beloved motors purred with an ascending hum. Aboard the I.S.P. Cruiser each member of the



crew raced to his assigned task without delay. Action impended, and after days and nights of inertia, it was a blessed relief. Smiles appeared on haggard faces, and the banter of men suddenly galvanized by a powerful incentive was bandied back and forth. All but George Randall. Now that action was imminent. Something gripped his throat until he could hardly stand the tight collar of his I.S.P. uniform. A growing nausea gripped his bowels, and although he strove to keep calm, his hands trembled beyond control.

In the compact, super-armored control room, Captain Brooke watched the telecast's viso-screen, with hungry eyes that were golden with anticipation. It seemed to him as if an eternity passed before at last, a black speck danced on the illuminated screen, until it finally reached the center of the viso-screen and remained there. It grew by leaps and bounds as the terrific speed of the cruiser minimized the distance long before the quarry was aware of pursuit.

But at last, when the enemy cruiser showed on the viso-screen, unmistakably for what it was—a pirate craft, it showed by its sudden maneuver that it had detected the I.S.P. cruiser. For it had described a parabola in space and headed for the dangerous asteroid belt. As if navigated by a masterly hand that knew each and every orbit of the asteroids, it plunged directly into the asteroid drift, hoping to lose the I.S.P. cruiser with such a maneuver. Ordinarily, it would have succeeded, no I.S.P. patrol ship would have dared to venture into such a trap without specific orders. But to Dennis Brooke, directing the chase from the control room, even certain death was welcome, if only he could take Koerber with him.

Weaving through the deadly belt for several hours, Dennis saw his quarry slow down. Instantly he seized the chance and ordered a salvo from starboard. Koerber's powerful spacer reeled, dived and came up spewing Genton-shells. The battle was on at last.

From the banked atomic-cannon of the I.S.P. Cruiser, a deadly curtain of atomic fire blazed at the pirate craft. A ragged rent back toward midship showed on Koerber's Cruiser which trembled as if it had been mortally wounded. Then Den-

nis maneuvered his cruiser into a power dive as a rain of Genton-shells swept the space lane above him, but as he came up, a lone shell struck. At such close range, super-armor was ripped, second armor penetrated and the magnificent vessel shook under the detonating impact.

It was then that Dennis Brooke saw the immense dark shadow looming immediately behind Koerber's ship. He saw the pirate cruiser zoom desperately in an effort to break the gravity trap of the looming mass, but too late. It struggled like a fly caught in a spider-web to no avail. It was then that Koerber played his last card. Sensing he was doomed, he tried to draw the I.S.P. Cruiser down with him. A powerful magnetic beam lashed out to spear the I.S.P. Cruiser.

WITH a wrenching turn that almost threw them out of control, Dennis maneuvered to avoid the beam. Again Koerber's beam lashed out, as he sank lower into the looming mass, and again Dennis anticipating the maneuver avoided it.

"George Randall!" He shouted desperately into the speaker. "Cut all jets in the rocket room! Hurry, man!" He banked again and then zoomed out of the increasing gravity trap.

"Randall! I've got to use the magnetic repulsion plates . . . Cut all the jets!" But there was no response. Randall's screen remained blank. Then Koerber's lashing magnetic beam touched and the I.S.P. ship was caught, forced to follow the pirate ship's plunge like the weight at the end of a whiplash. Koerber's gunners sent one parting shot, an atomic-blast that shook the trapped cruiser like a leaf.

Beneath them, growing larger by the second, a small world rushed up to meet them. The readings in the Planetograph seemed to have gone crazy. It showed diameter 1200 miles; composition mineral and radio-active. Gravity seven-eighths of Terra. It couldn't be! Unless perhaps this unknown planetoid was the legendary core of the world that at one time was supposed to have existed between Jupiter and Mars. Only that could possibly explain the incredible gravity.

And then began another type of battle. Hearing the Captain's orders to Randall,



and noting that no result had been obtained, Scotty Byrnes himself cut the jets. The Magnetic Repulsion Plates went into action, too late to save them from being drawn, but at least they could prevent a crash. Far in the distance they could see Koerber's ship preceding them in a free fall, then the Planetoid was rushing up to engulf them.

### III

THE atmosphere was somewhat tenuous, but it was breathable, provided a man didn't exert himself. To the silent crew of the I.S.P. Cruiser, the strange world to which Koerber's magnetic Beam had drawn them, was anything but reassuring. Towering crags jutted raggedly against the sky, and the iridescent soil of the narrow valley that walled in the cruiser, had a poisonous, deadly look. As far as their eyes could reach, the desolate, denuded vista stretched to the horizon.

"Pretty much of a mess!" Dennis Brooke's face was impassive as he turned to Scotty Byrnes. "What's your opinion? Think we can patch her up, or are we stuck here indefinitely?"

Scotty eyed the damage. The atom-blast had penetrated the hull into the forward fuel chambers and the armor had blossomed out like flower petals. The crash-landing had not helped either.

"Well, there's a few beryloid plates in the storage locker, Captain, but" he scratched his head ruminatively and shifted his precious cud.

"But what? Speak up man!" It was Tom Jeffery, his nerves on edge, his ordinarily gentle voice like a lash.

"But, you may as well know it," Scotty replied quietly. "That parting shot of Koerber's severed our main rocket feed. I had to use the emergency tank to make it down here!"

For a long moment the four men looked at each other in silence. Dennis Brooke's face was still impassive but for the flaming hazel eyes. Tom tugged at the torn sleeve of his I.S.P. uniform, while Scotty gazed mournfully at the damaged ship. Dallas Bernan looked at the long, ragged line of cliffs.

"I think we got Koerber, though," he said at last. "While Tom was doing a job

of navigation, I had one last glimpse of him coming down fast and out of control somewhere behind those crags over there!"

"To hell with Koerber!" Tom Jeffery exploded. "You mean we're stuck in this hellish rock-pile?"

"Easy, Tom!" Captain Brooke's tones were like ice. On his pale, impassive face, his eyes were like flaming topaz. "Where's Randall?"

"Probably hiding his head under a bunk!" Dallas laughed with scorn. His contemptuous remark voiced the feelings of the entire crew. A man who failed to be at his battle-station in time of emergency, had no place in the I.S.P.

"Considering the gravity of this planetoid," Dennis Brooke said thoughtfully, "it's going to take some blast to get us off!"

"Maybe we can locate a deposit of anerium or uranium or something for our atom-busters to chew on!" Scotty said hopefully. He was an eternal optimist.

"Better break out those repair plates," Dennis said to Scotty. "Tom, you get the welders ready. I've got a few entries to make in the log book, and then we'll decide on a party to explore the terrain and try to find out what happened to Koerber's ship. I must know," he said in a low voice, but with such passion that the others were startled.

A figure appeared in the slanting doorway of the ship in time to hear the last words. It was George Randall, adjusting a bandaged forehead bumped during the crash landing.

"Captain . . . I . . . I wanted . . ." he paused unable to continue.

"You wanted what?" Captain Brooke's voice was terse. "Perhaps you wanted to explain why you weren't at your battle station?"

"Sir, I wanted to know if . . . if I might help Scotty with the welding job . . ." That wasn't at all what he'd intended to say. But somehow the words had stuck in his throat and his face flushed deep scarlet. His candid blue eyes were suspiciously brilliant, and the white bandage with its crimson stains made an appealing, boyish figure. It softened the anger in Brooke's heart. Thinking it over calmly, Dennis realized this was the youngster's first trip into the outer orbits, and better men than he had cracked in those vast reaches of



space. But there had been an instant when he'd found Randall cowering in the rocket-room, in the grip of paralyzing hysteria, when he could cheerfully have wrung his neck!

"Certainly, Randall," he replied in a much more kindly tone. "We'll need all hands now."

"Thank you, sir!" Randall seemed to hesitate for a moment, opened his mouth to speak further, but feeling the other's calculating gaze upon him, he whirled and re-entered the ship.

"But for him we wouldn't be here!" Dallas exclaimed. "Aagh!" He shook his head in disgust until the several folds of flesh under his chin shook like gelatin. "Cowards are hell!" He spat.

"Easy, Dallas, Randall's a kid, give 'im a chance." Dennis observed.

"You Captain . . . you're defending 'im? Why you had a greater stake in this than we, and he's spoiled it for you!"

"Yep," Dennis nodded. "But I'm still keeping my senses clear. No feuds on my ship. Get it!" The last two words cut like a scimitar.

Dallas nodded and lowered his eyes. Scotty shifted his cud and spat a thin stream of juice over the iridescent ground. One by one they re-entered the cruiser.

**A**BSORBEDLY Randall added finishing flourishes to the plate of beryloid he had just finished welding. With the heavy atomic welder in his hands, he paused to inspect the job. Inwardly he wished that Scotty and Dallas would hurry with that final plate. He could just barely hear them pounding it into shape, within the cruiser. Unconsciously he shivered.

Outside the cruiser, it was cold, and breathing was laborious, for despite the gravity, the atmosphere was thin, diffused. Besides, this shadowy world of dark crags and palely creeping sunlight had an uncanny feel, as if it were evil. For the hundredth time he twisted around and surveyed the rocky terrain behind him. Determinedly he squared his shoulders and juted out his chin. It was bad enough to have muffed a chance to add glory to the I.S.P., not to speak of having the rest of the crew think him demented. Still the feeling of being *watched* persisted. Randall cursed his imagination, and over-

wrought nerves that made him feel what palpably didn't exist. He closed his young eyes for a second and strove to steady his nerves.

He breathed deeply of the tenuous atmosphere and exhaled slowly; then he opened his eyes, feeling more calm and turned to make one final survey, and stood rooted to the ground as if petrified.

From a dark crevice in the jagged wall behind the I.S.P. Spacer, something seemed to glide effortlessly into the open. About twenty feet from Randall it paused and remained stationary, hovering above the rocky surface. It was perfectly spherical, fully three feet in diameter, and had George Randall not been hysterical with dread, he would have seen that it was exquisitely beautiful, a softly shining, transparent globe that pulsed rhythmically with lambent fires. A wavering, lavender corona, like an aura, surrounded it as it began to spin slowly.

From nerveless hands the atomic welder dropped to the ground, as a wave of surging panic engulfed Randall. With an eerie, half-strangled scream he clawed for the atom-blast at his hip. He had a brief impression that the globe was sentiently alive, and that something that felt like tendrils of fire probed his brain. His hair stood on end as the icy fear deepened to the verge of madness.

"Scotty! Dallas!" He shouted, and then realized he couldn't be heard above the pounding within the cruiser. He aimed at the globe and squeezed the trigger. The tremendous energy released by the atom-blast flung the globe back, by blasting the surrounding air in furious waves, but regaining its equilibrium the globe began to zoom forward again, *undamaged!*

Randall waited no longer, he raced for the open hatch of the cruiser with the speed of horror. He scrambled madly, almost dived into the opening and had the presence of mind to pull the lever that slammed the door shut behind him. He lay there panting, completely unnerved by the experience.

Dishevelled and horror-stricken was the way Scotty and Dallas found him, when on hearing the hatch clang shut, they rushed in to investigate.

"What happened, an attack? Koerber's men?" Scotty queried.



"Speak up, Randall!" Dallas shook him briefly. "What was it? You look as if you'd seen a ghost!"

"There's something out there . . . I don't know what it is, but it's alive. It almost got me!" He shuddered.

"Something alive on this barren world? Unless it was one of Koerber's men, you've been seeing ghosts again, kid!" Scotty said not unkindly. He was well aware of spacemen's mirage, the affliction that sometimes drove newcomers mad.

"It was real," Randall persisted. "And it was alive . . . a glowing globe of energy that hung just above me, a few feet away. I blasted at it with my gun, and it just spun, then came forward."

HE ROSE from the floor and moved over to the starboard port to look outside. Scotty and Dallas stood beside him. They gazed curiously in every direction, as far as they could see.

"Don't see a thing," Dallas said stolidly. "Come on, son! I'll fix you a sedative," he said contemptuously.

"Wait a minute Dallas," Scotty interrupted. "Randall's right. Take a look at that big pile of rocks over there . . . to the left, Dallas!"

"By the red-tailed Picaroons on Jupiter's satellites!" Dallas swore swiftly. "I've seen a lot of queer sights, but nothing like this!" he exclaimed. Suddenly he turned to Randall. "How do you know it's alive? For all we know it's just a globe of radio-active energy native to this hell-spot."

Randall colored, hesitated and finally blurted out. "I . . . I just felt it was alive. I sensed it trying to contact my mind . . . Oh, I know it sounds crazy, I know you'll laugh, but the thing was trying to probe my brain, Dallas!"

Scotty suddenly thought of Captain Brooke and Tom Jeffery who had gone on an exploratory trip. "I wonder about the Captain and Tom," he said in alarm. "If there's one of these whirling demons on this rock there's sure to be others." He raced to the communications set and turned it on. But it was silent.

Dallas gazed at Randall for a second with a faint, scornful smile. "Alive, eh? We'll see." He patted the atom-blast at his hip.

"Never saw nothin' dangerous yet that

this couldn't put a hole through!" He exclaimed inelegantly.

"Hold on, Dallas!" The more prudent Scotty tried to dissuade him. "If that thing's radio-active, it may be deadly! We're not afraid of it, man . . . but we don't know what it is."

"You boys stay and play the radio!" Dallas turned lightly on his feet for all his tremendous bulk and soon the airlock had hissed open and he was gone.

Both Scotty and Randall watched him half-fearful, half in admiration as he strode away from the cruiser. The luminous, iridescent sphere hovering over the rocks, whirled faster and faster as Dallas moved away from the ship. Rapidly the whirling accelerated until it was a pulsing vortex of exquisite hues of living light. Then, it began to move slowly forward toward the walking man.

In the macabre landscape of the planetoid, the rotund Dallas was not unlike a sphere himself, as gun in hand he unhesitatingly went forward to meet the globe. Calmly he aimed the atom-blast and suddenly there was a flash from the muzzle of the gun. But the flood of vicious atomic energy failed to harm the globe, on the contrary, it seemed to flame in a cataract of colors, flaming into living light. Then the fluorescent flare died down to normal again and the sphere stopped, motionless as if it were appraising Dallas.

In unfeigned wonder, the blimp-like Dallas Bernan stared at the globe. "A full charge from the blaster, and the damn thing takes it like a drink of milk!" he murmured audibly. Reaching over he picked up a good sized rock and threw it at the sphere. But the rock bounced back as if it had hit an impenetrable wall of energy. The globe was unharmed, it merely hung there quiescent now, as if observing the strange creature from another planet that had suddenly appeared.

Another rock followed the first, then another and another, until rocks were flying in every direction as they rebounded from the globe. And Dallas began to laugh! To his matter-of-fact mind, the sphere was merely a bunch of radio-active gas that repelled matter of certain types like the stones he had thrown, and was drawn by organic matter. A bunch of gas! He roared. And the globe was retreating,



floating backwards effortlessly, whirling faster and faster, until as Dallas flung a final rock it darted upward and swiftly disappeared down the great valley. As Dallas turned to go back to the cruiser, a flicker of movement caught his eye. Instantly he aimed his atom-blast, but as quickly lowered, and a joyous expression came into his vast face.

Clambering down the tumbled rocks and boulders just ahead of the spacer, Captain Brooke and Tom Jeffery were hurrying toward him, the latter carrying the insulated leadite specimen box.

"Hiya, Captain! We just laid a ghost. See our pretty company?" Dallas roared with laughter.

"Yes, we saw it," Captain Brooke replied. "What was it? Looked like a transparent globe of some sort. Radioactive?"

"Naw! Just a bunch of gas!" Dallas explained.

"Well, we have another kind of company . . . about twenty miles from here," Dennis said grimly. "Get into the ship, we're holding a conference, Dallas."

SEATED in the small dining-room of the cruiser, the entire crew listened to the Captain's report on their trip, while Scotty brewed coffee skillfully and cocked his ears to the narrative. Tom laid the leadite specimen box on the table without a word, then sat back.

"I'll cut corners on this," he began. "Because we have a lot to do, and a very short time to do it in. Approximately twenty miles westwards, there's a cavern that runs through the crags around us. Jeffery and I started to explore it, but fortunately stopped just in time. It happens that Koerber and his thugs have landed on the other side of the crags. This cave is filled with some sort of radioactive mineral, unfortunately, the main deposits are at the other end of the cavern system, and Koerber and his gang are already in possession! He must have crashed there. Pity the situation is not reversed, we'd have ample fuel then!"

"But, Captain," Randall spoke impulsively, "why can't we get some of the mineral from this end of the cavern and blast off this awful place?"

Dallas gave the youngster a look of withering disgust from across the table.

"No good," Tom Jeffery answered for the Captain without looking at Randall. "The stuff at this end's mostly rubble; we had to dig the better part of an hour to find a piece rich enough to use." He pointed to the leadite box.

"The plan is simplicity itself," Captain Brooke continued. "We'll use this specimen for fuel to zoom over the crags and attack Koerber . . . we've got to take possession of the other end of the cave. Without sufficient fuel, we can't fight Koerber to a finish, and I intend to go into that black cruiser of his if I have to crack it open like a Venusian palm-nut!"

Dallas and Scotty's eyes glowed. "Any time you say, Captain!" the latter said eagerly. "Cruiser's hull's finished but for a few minor touches. Just give the word!"

#### IV

CAPTAIN BROOKE tightened his safety belt thoughtfully, then his glance travelled slowly to where Lieutenant Jeffery sat, fingers poised over the gleaming bank of keys.

"I suppose we really should test this specimen first," the captain observed. "However, if we did, I doubt if we'd have enough left for fuel to smash Koerber." He flipped a tiny switch in the panel before him. The silver screen lighted, and Scotty's features appeared.

"Ready 'n waiting on the firing line Cap'n!"

"Switch over to relays and strap in, Scotty, I'll give you thirty seconds," Dennis grinned, then turned to Jeffery:

"Ready Lieutenant?"

Jeffery took one more look into the V-screen, made a last second check of his objective—the high peak about twenty miles down the valley. As soon as the peak was reached, the cruiser would be under full manual control and he would dart the swift sky-tiger from the heights down on Koerber's spacer, in a terrific power dive. He nodded satisfied, "Yes, sir, ready!"

"Take off!" The command whipped out and Jeffery's fingers flashed over the rows of keys with automatic precision. For the fraction of a second there was a muffled, rumbling thunder. Then, both Dennis Brooke and Jeffery were slammed back



against their air-cushions as the astounding crescendo of acceleration hit them.

Twisting his head slowly, Captain Dennis looked at his navigator in astonishment. Tom Jeffery had always been the acme of dependability, his precision in plotting had practically become a legend in the I.S.P.

"Cruiser's running wild!" Jeffery gasped painfully. "The key bank must . . . be out . . . of order. I'd never . . . never use that much speed on take-off!"

"Slack off . . ." Dennis gritted. He saw Jeffery struggle to get his long, supple hands back on the keys. Blood throbbed and pounded in surging waves at his temples, and he knew he'd black out in a matter of seconds if his Navigator didn't reach those keys.

Concentrating all his remaining energy, Jeffery reached and pushed one hand forward, but it was like pushing against an invisible wall. His hand refused to move any further, and then he felt the impenetrable blackness welling up inside his brain. Nervelessly the Navigator's hand dropped, but two fingers scraped over the key-bank and the flashing cruiser changed its course. The ship angled upward sharply and gradually reduced its speed. Like two punch-drunk mortals, Dennis and Jeffery shook their heads, doggedly trying to clear the clinging black webs from their brains.

They were not unnerved, for to these two, danger was too familiar a face, it was a constant shadow at their heels, the eternal companion at their table—without it, life would have seemed flat, without zest.

"Worse than a shot of Martian *Absytron*! Whew!" Jeffery exclaimed, startled out of his usually laconic state. "That mineral's terrific!"

"I was just thinking the same thing," Captain Brooke agreed quietly. "Which makes it doubly important that we settle scores with Koerber and leave this planetoid. If the reaction of this mineral's true, we've found a new type of fuel, far more powerful than anything known to us at present."

"Imagine if that space-rat gets hold of it," Jeffery concurred in awed tones. "He could rule the space-lanes, commit any crime and outpace any ship in the universe!"

"Besides," Dennis said ruminatively, this mineral'd make Terra independent of Ve-

nus for her supply of radioactives. It would usher in a new era, Jeffery!"

Suddenly it seemed to Dennis that there was even more at stake than the smashing of a dangerous outlaw, than the recovery of his former state in the I.S.P., or the avenging of Marla, if she were dead—the destiny of Terra was at stake too. As if one of those cross-roads of Life, at which an individual is sometimes poised by fate, had opened before his gaze, and history awaited being written in the invisible pages of space. He had come prepared to die to fulfill a mission—but now matters had changed. The need was not to die, but to live, that an unsuspecting world might rise to new heights of achievement on the incredibly radioactive marvel of this unknown planetoid. With a swift movement he threw on the panel switch, and his voice boomed out:

"All hands attention! Koerber has seen us, no doubt. But whether or not he's forewarned, we attack as scheduled. Stand-by!"

The I.S.P. Cruiser swept back up the long valley, until it was almost opposite the Pirate's camp. Only the tremendous mountain range separated them. Glancing at the banks of keys, the instruments and dials under the V-Screen, Dennis issued orders:

"Scotty, give it everything you have!" He grinned as Scotty gave back one of his inimitable replies.

"Dallas!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Take the stern turret, and start firing when we pull out—angle thirty-eight, precision!" He again threw a quick glance at the panel.

"Randall! Take forward position, secondary turret. Hold fire till they open up, or until I give you the command. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," Randall's voice was tense.

It was then Captain Dennis turned to his Navigator. "I'll take the main forward turret myself, Jeffery! Now, use a thirty-five degree dive, pull out at five-hundred feet and use MA-24 to pull out and regain altitude." He grinned fleetingly at the startled Jeffery.

"But . . . but you're going to man the forward turret—get the gunner, Cap'n . . . I . . ." But Dennis silenced him with a swift gesture.

"Taking no chances, I want to be sure



that spawn of Barrabas's smeared, if I have to do it myself!"

THE LONG, gleaming cruiser was like the spear of the Angel Gabriel, unerring, fatal, as the skillful fingers of its navigator in the control room swept over the keys and the ship obediently canted downward. Suddenly it took the plunge in a supernal power-dive that sent it hurtling straight at the Pirate's camp below. All around the cruiser a rain of Genton-shells exploded in buffeting succession, as the cruiser quivered and strained holding the dizzying dive.

From the main forward turret, a stream of fire scorched the surroundings below, starting great fires on the stacked supplies which had been removed from Koerber's ship to facilitate repairs. The atom-blast raised clouds of iridescent mineral as it peeled the ground like a gigantic knife. But the Genton-Shells prevented close aim, as the explosions buffeted the cruiser off her course. Captain Dennis finally came into the control room.

"They saw us, all right," he growled angrily. "I wasn't able to come closer than a hundred feet of Koerber's ship with the gun!"

"They've almost got us boxed in, sir. I can't hold her on much longer."

"All right then, Jeffery, pull out . . . right bank . . . that should throw them off long enough for us to break away. Give me a few seconds to adjust my sights, I'm going back to the turret!"

The great cruiser had reached its objective and swept like a stupendous bird of death over the Pirate camp spewing a rain of death. Two pirates caught behind mounds of supplies and provisions were blasted together with the boxes that protected them. The stern turret of the black Pirate cruiser was a melting, incandescent mass as Captain Brooke's atom-blast found its mark. Suddenly the meteor-like vessel canted to the right and zoomed upward at the same time, then with vertiginous speed flashed beyond the range of the Pirate's full fire-power, leaving Koerber cursing in impotent fury. The sound of wracking concussions died away; the unearthly ascending whine of the atom-blasts ceased, and the cruiser flashed back to base.

"At least we'll have a choice this time

where to set the ship down," Lieutenant Jeffery said wryly, as he watched the changed scene on the V-screen before him.

Watching also, Dennis Brooke suddenly leaned forward with great interest, but abruptly the emergency thermo-bulb flashed on and off and a shrill buzzer sounded. Dennis threw the switch quickly.

"We'll have to set her down, Cap'n!" Scotty announced. "She's reached the danger mark."

"Hell!" Jeffery exclaimed succinctly.

"Set her down!" Dennis ordered, but the ship was already headed groundwards.

The air lock on the cruiser opened and the crew jumped to the ground. It was the same bizarre landscape, harsh, Dantesque, extreme.

"Since we've reached a temporary impasse," the Captain explained to them, "we may at least examine something I happened to see just prior to landing. I have a vague idea concerning this small world; it is just possible I may be right."

"What did you see, sir?" Randall, forever impulsive and emotional, asked, curiously apprehensive.

"You probably won't like the idea so much, Lieutenant," Captain Brooke said quietly, shifting the weight of his atom-blast on his hip. He smiled thinly, "We're going to investigate some of those play-mates of yours—the spheres!"

Randall's face tightened with a peculiar expression. He started to speak, then noting Dallas' sardonic smile, he stopped.

"Just before we landed," the Captain continued, "I saw a large pit filled with the globes up in the plateau just ahead. I want to try an experiment. From what I saw happened with you Dallas, when you tried to blast that globe and then threw rocks at it and it went away, and yet, it pursued Randall . . . well, I have a theory that I want to test. If it works, we may yet turn the tables on Koerber."

WITH perfect confidence, Captain Dennis turned and began to stride toward the plateau in the near distance. Without hesitation Dallas strode behind him, followed by Scotty and Jeffery, and a few other lesser members of the crew. Only Randall hesitated as if an awful premonition paralyzed his steps. He seemed to make an heroic effort, and hesitantly at



first, then with greater confidence he began to follow the leaders.

At last they were standing at the rim of the vast pit; looking down, Dennis realized it must be all of a mile in width. It seemed filled with clusters of the globes which vibrated gently at the bottom.

"Millions of the damned things!" Dallas exclaimed.

The pit sloped down to a point at the center of the bottom, and there was the immense cluster of globes that Dennis had seen. From small ones, the size of thermobulbs, to gigantic spheres fully six feet in diameter, it was a pulsating, shimmering mass of changing opalescences, a seething cauldron of prismatic hues, dormant now, but ready to flame into living light.

Randall, the last to arrive, approached the edge and gazed down. The ethereal, ghostly seeming spheres with their pulsating auras sent an icy shiver of dread along his taut nerves. He shuddered and turned to the others. "Let's go," he said hoarsely. "Those demons might come floating up here!" There was a hysterical quality to his voice that did not pass unnoticed to Captain Dennis, who was observing him closely. "Let's go!" Randall cried again, his face contorted.

Suddenly there was a stream of movement below; from the central mass of globes, several detached themselves and floated silently upwards in swirls of living light.

Cold, unreasoning fear surged into Randall's mind. In his hysteria, the spheres were coming after him! His thin face with the wide, fear-stricken blue eyes was ashen while his lips twitched to form words that failed to come. At last he managed to scream: "Run! They're coming after us." And Randall was racing pell-mell back to the spacer.

Captain Dennis stood his ground, Dallas beside him. "Come here, you fool!" Dennis cried exasperated. But it was too late. With flashing speed two of the spheres outraced Randall and now hovered over him. They were whirling into a vortex of incredible light, lovely beyond description, and beneath them, convulsed with horror, Randall raced for his life.

"Action!" Dennis shouted. Instantly several atom-blasts spewed their deadly charge into the two pursuing globes. They drank

in the awful energy charge and glowed supernally vivid, still unharmed, then, swooping downwards they charged Randall, and the boy was fighting them, flailing his arms wildly, haphazardly trying to fend them off. The other members of the party had now held their fire, for Randall was enmeshed in the luminous globes. And suddenly the globes seemed to become part of the boy's body, enveloping it in their translucent, fatal embrace.

Before their eyes, they saw the boyish form shrivel and fall crumpled to the ground as if all the energy had been absorbed in that unearthly embrace of living light. In an instant it was over.

## V

L AZILY, the two spheres floated upward, their fire deepening into swirls of colors, swirling slowly over the prostrate figure as if exulting.

Unutterable horror showed in Captain Brooke's eyes; then flaming anger shook him. "The dirty . . ." Dennis ground out the words from set, taut lips. Furiously he began blasting at the globes. The spheres rocked and twisted in the tortured air currents, then gradually they rose and floated up the valley.

Dennis kneeled beside the still form of Randall; slid his hand under the boy's jacket. He rose slowly and faced the rest of the awed crew, his eyes topaz slits of consuming fury.

"Now we know how dangerous, how deadly those entities are; for make no mistake, they are entities. A strange, unearthly form of life that can suck a man's life-energy. Randall had good reason to be afraid, poor kid! Those globes react to the most powerful of the emotions, and fear being perhaps one of the strongest, tmeringly draws them. I feel somehow responsible for this boy's death. Still, he has not died in vain, for in his sacrifice, he has given us a clue to Koerber's ultimate defeat." He paused gazing somberly at the still form at his feet: "Remember, he died a hero, for whatever success we may have, we shall owe to him!"

Rocks iridescent and vari-hued were piled high into a cairn, making Randall's last resting place, in the depths of the space he had feared so.



The remaining members of the crew walked back slowly to the waiting ship. A dark silence hung over the group as they filed to their respective sleeping quarters. All but Captain Dennis, Dallas, Jeffery and Scotty, who went on to their council room. Quietly they took their places at the small table. Jeffery sat with his long hands on his lap, silent, while Scotty methodically tamped down the Venusian tobacco with which he had filled his blackened pipe. Dallas said nothing. His vast bulk overflowed the seat and his tremendous chest heaved with emotions alien to his nature. All of them seemed to be waiting for Captain Dennis Brooke's words. The latter sat down last, absorbed in thought. When he spoke, his voice was quiet, sombre almost.

"I told you," he began without preamble, "that I had a vague theory about those spheres. Well, I know now. Randall proved it this afternoon. There can be no doubt that those globes are radio-active—the way they react to our atomo-guns leads me to believe that they subsist on energy—radiant energy from the mineral and radio-actives of this planetoid. Their atomic scale must be such that their component atoms make up the two missing elements in our atomic scale! *This is the first time that man has ever encountered these two elements.* And of course, this is the first time these spheres have ever encountered humans—organic life—on an atomic scale so far removed from their own. Naturally they're curious. They tried to investigate and what they encountered from Randall was *fear! Perhaps the second strongest emotion.* Our fear must send out intangible vibrations that impinge harshly upon their own vibrations and lead them to attack. What fear arouses in them, we shall probably never know. The fact is that our human emotion of *fear* in conflict with their vibratory rate renders them fatal, and even seems to draw them with a strange magnetic attraction!"

For a moment every one of the four was silent, as the explanation cleared so much of the mystery before them. Then Captain Dennis walked over to the locker where the space-suits were racked. He began slipping into one of the bulky suits.

"I'm going outside again. If this spacer's insulation against the spheres, there's no reason why a space-suit should not be also.

Two of you cover me from the stern turret, and two—including a crew member, from the forward turret, you can at least delay their attack by blasting air currents, in case *they do attack!*" He dogged the last clamp into place and moved heavily through the doorway.

THE MEN watching from the gun turrets saw Dennis approach the vast pit which seemed to be the abode of the sphere. The face-plate of his helmet was open. For minutes he stood motionless on the rim of the pit. They knew he was concentrating, duplicating the emotion of fear. Then with a catch in their throats they observed groups of the spheres rise majestically from the depths and swoop toward the waiting Dennis.

With a swift gesture Captain Brooke snapped the face-plate closed. The spheres came to a complete stop about twenty feet from the waiting captain. The globes pulsed gently, as if waiting . . . waiting.

Again Dennis opened the face-plate wide, then snapped it shut. In the brief interval the spheres had darted into action, sweeping closer.

Turning at last, Captain Dennis strode back to the ship, and slowly the flaming globes sank back into the pit out of sight.

"It works," Scotty yelled delightedly, as the other men ran to their airlock to greet their Captain.

Once again at the table, Dennis began: "Now we can have a definite plan. Here's the strategy, two of us will use space-suits and rocket belts to lure as many of the spheres as possible to a point near Koerber's camp, and *one of us must enter Koerber's domain with a ready made story!* That man, the one to enter Koerber's camp, will be *the bait for the spheres.* He will concentrate on maintaining the powerful emotion of fear in his mind, as strongly as he's able. Dennis paused, his hazel eyes brilliant with anticipation, surveying the men around him.

"All of us know that the chosen man may not come through this alive—Koerber may not believe his story . . . the spheres may succeed in getting him. However, if he's clever and quick. . . ." Captain Dennis shrugged his great shoulders. It was then Jeffery interrupted him:



"We'll draw lots for that, won't we, Captain?" His voice was harsh.

A faint nod from Dennis accepted the question as a fact. The Captain walked over to a cabinet and picked up something. Returning to the table he continued:

"The fourth man will have to stay here and broadcast." He turned a small box over on the table and several objects the size of small coins, spilled out. "These midget speakers may and may not work—anyway, propaganda at a psychological moment has intense effect, and is worth trying out. The man who goes into Koerber's camp will take some of these and get rid of them in strategic places, and, wherever he can. Remember, the job of broadcasting is just as important as any other in this set up. Keep hammering at them. They won't be able to locate the speakers until it is too late. Keep pounding into their heads that this *new weapon of the I. S. P. is invincible!* Tell them it is radio-controlled and invulnerable as far as present arms are concerned. Keep working on them . . . don't let up for a minute!"

Jeffery had been methodically tearing strips of paper and now he handed them to Dennis.

"Three strips of paper, Captain . . . and four men!"

Dennis searched the grim, tense faces before him, then handed the strips to Scotty who picked up a book and started putting the strips between the pages. The other members of the council watched his back curiously, until the crash of an overturned chair snapped their heads around. They looked squarely into the muzzle of an atom-blast gun. Their jaws went slack with astonishment.

"I am the commander of this cruiser," Captain Brooke's voice, flat and opaque had an unequivocal finality. "Walk over to the wall, stand five feet from the base, lean forward and press your hands against the wall!"

With the three men completely off balance, Dennis methodically disarmed them. He placed all their weapons on the table, and then proceeded to encase himself in one of the bulky space-suits, keeping a careful eye on the fuming Dallas. As he dressed he continued to talk.

"I know that nothing short of this could

convince you to let me be the man to enter Koerber's camp. But it's got to be this way. I swore to enter that black cruiser if I had to take it apart, and by Venus' thinking spiders, I'll go through with it! If Marla's there, she has to be rescued from that cut-throat gang—besides, I think I can make up a much more plausible story, being as I was the one in disgrace with the I.S.P., not you!" He was dressed now, and stood for a moment gazing at their reddened faces. "I'm leaving now, I'll dog this door when I leave. There's an atomic welder in the locker and you can get out in three-quarters of an hour. The rest is up to you men." He was gone as the metal door clanged tightly shut.

**T**RUDGING along the iridescent stretch of desolate ground, the thought uppermost in Dennis' mind was Marla. He was torn between the fear of what that brutal, conscienceless pirate might have done to her, and the fear she might have survived. Try as he might to reconstruct the emotion of fear, he failed time after time. Only the dull, ceaseless fury at Koerber remained in his mind, and his heart, a fury that smouldered in the depths of his being.

Slowly he approached the camp where Koerber's men tried to repair the damage his raid had made. Dennis kept his hands slightly in the air, and his feet kept kicking a scuff of glittering dust that could be easily noticed.

Without warning, an atomo-ray blasted bits of a rocky cliff to Captain Brooke's right and an invisible voice boomed out:

"Hold it, copper!" There was a noticeable awe in that voice and it made Dennis smile. The scum remembered, it seemed!

Dennis stopped abruptly. "I'll talk to Koerber," he said coldly.

"Hold it right where you are, Captain Koerber's coming outside," the same voice shouted.

Cautiously Dennis let another of the midget speakers fall to the ground behind him.

The circular air-lock opened and a ladder descended automatically. Down the steps came a short, heavy-set man. His aquiline features would have been handsome because of their symmetry, and the pale



olive skin tanned by the vast spaces, but for the perpetual sneer that twisted rather full lips. Koerber's wide set eyes, were dark, brilliant, and just now had a sort of incredulous amusement, as if the spectacle of Captain Dennis Brooke come to parley with him were something quite too fantastic to believe.

"Well . . . well! This is a land of miracles!" He flashed a sardonic smile, displaying white, even teeth.

"Considering my reputation for . . . er . . . shall we say dishonor?" He smiled again, "You are risking a great deal by coming here, aren't you, Captain?"

Captain Brooke shrugged his vast shoulders, and a thin smile of contempt curved his lips. "It occurs to me, Koerber, that at my age men are neither rash nor fools . . . unless the stakes are high. And," he paused deliberately, conscious of the instant interest his words had aroused, "and it happens that the stakes are beyond . . . far beyond all that you and I, and even the I.S.P., are worth. Man, our feet are now *on the base of a great empire!*"

Interest, cupidity and astonishment mingled in the expression of Captain Koerber's face. Finally he guffawed.

"Captain, they say that too many nights in the Jovian Chamber turns a man's mind, I am beginning to believe it!" Then his face darkened:

"Let's finish it quick, Dennis, what're you selling?"

"A partnership in an empire, in exchange for Marla!" Dennis Brooke said quietly but with deadly emphasis, ignoring the pointed barb.

Koerber still gazed at the space-suited figure incredulously. With an imperious motion of his powerful hand, he motioned Captain Brooke up the ladder, then followed at a distance, his hand on the atom-blaster. He had not noticed Dennis drop another tiny speaker on the ground behind.

**I**NSIDE the black cruiser, Dennis was herded by two gunmen into a spacious cabin. It was furnished in the splendor of priceless loot from the ships of several planets. He felt his atom-blast lifted from its holster and the indignity of exploratory fingers seeking hidden arms. He walked past them to see Koerber seated in what

had evidently been a Martian imperial chair, a throne-like affair of priceless hardwoods, incrustated with rare metals and jewels, and bearing a canopy of soft, ocelandian furs, with jewelled brooches at the corners. He sat silent, the faint satirical smile still on his lips, as if for once in his life the very depths of his involved and merciless soul were filled with joy, as indeed was the case. "Speak your piece!" he said insolently, and motioned for the guards to cover the exit.

"I shall be brief," Dennis shrugged his shoulders. "Marla means more to me than anything else. What can she be to you than just another passing conquest? There's no satisfaction in possession without love, Koerber—and *there are other things that you would prefer!*"

"For instance!" The words came like a whiplash.

"Wealth beyond even your imagination, and power . . . power as you have never even conceived could ever fall into your hands, man!"

"How do you know Marla's alive" The sardonic grin became sadistic in its enjoyment at the fleeting shadow of pain that crossed Dennis' face.

"Because," Dennis spoke slowly, quietly, "she's too valuable for you to miss the chance to ransom her. You know the I.S.P., never lets its agents down—you knew she'd accepted an assignment, didn't you?"

"Of course, I have scouts in every planet, and means of communication even you don't know anything about—like that scout you knocked out on Venus," he finished venomously.

"Well?" Dennis said laconically.

"You'll have to explain better. Where's the wealth and all this power you're talking about to come from?"

Dennis knew he was playing his last card. If the man had even a shred of humanity, of intelligent selfishness, the way was open, if Koerber allowed his undying hatred of the I.S.P. to dominate him, he'd have to fight for his life.

"All right, I'll give it to you. This planetoid is full of a new radio-active metal of such terrific power that used even in its raw state it can supply power for speeds beyond anything known to us at present. The reason you saw our ship



before we attacked was that we used a small specimen of the mineral and it flung us into space with such terrific acceleration that it almost sent us beyond the planetoid's gravity. If my navigator's hand had not fallen on the keys and changed the course, we would have been wrecked. There are untold billions of credits in radio-active mineral strewn on the surface. Now, if you can't imagine what that means . . . what's the use of my talking."

"It'll make us invulnerable. A few tons of this new fuel will purchase a fleet of spacers of the first order, such as this one you have, Koerber; and with a fleet powered by the mineral we can conquer any planet. Power . . ." Dennis laughed. "Man, we'd lord space!"

As Dennis spoke, the expression of Machiavellian greed and cunning in Koerber's face heightened, mingled by triumph. At last his laughter, peal after peal of cold, remorseless laughter thundered in the luxurious cabin.

"You fool, you utter fool! *You* have told me this and expect me to bargain with *you*! So you would share with me supreme power over the known universe. . . . One reason why I've lived so long is that I never share with anyone, and I never trust anyone, copper!" He flung the final insult in Dennis' face, and laughed to see Dennis' eyes blaze with murderous fury.

"Throw him in the cell!" Koerber said imperiously. Instantly the two gunmen went into action, prodding Dennis with drawn blasters. They drove him down a corridor to a metal cell and heaved him into it, then left him lying on the metal floor.

## VI

**I**N THE semi-darkness of the armored cell, the wicket through which the guard could watch the prisoner was a square of light. Only, there was no guard. Only an atomic-welder could have pierced that tough shell—unarmed, within the pirate cruiser, surrounded by armed guards at every exit, Dennis hadn't the ghost of a chance. He sat up on the cold metal floor, and strove to point his mind to the task ahead. And the last midget speaker slipped from his pocket to roll across the floor, coming to a stop at a corner of the

wall. Dennis could not suppress a smile.

Then he heard a voice he had thought never to hear again. A wave of feeling engulfed him.

"Dennis . . . Dennis, my dear!" Framed in the wicket, the lovely features of Marla, smiling despite the brimming eyes, smiling at him in encouragement. His heart leapt upwards as if it would leave his body, as he rose in a single bound and was at the wicket, kissing hungrily the exquisite lips. He could not speak, for seconds, that Marla was alive was that his heart could wish. For a moment he was weak with the tremendous reaction. "You're safe . . . safe . . . not hurt . . . Marla," he was incoherently repeating.

"Quick," Marla cautioned. "Take this!" She slipped a deadly atom-blast, the smaller variety once carried by women into his hand. "They never found it on me—being a woman I have prerogatives. I have been held for ransom until now, and here on this deserted world, having no means of escape I was allowed comparative freedom within the ship. But I heard what you told Koerber, Dennis. Now that he knows untold wealth is within reach of his hand, he may have another fate in store for me. For the past few days he has been changing . . . becoming amorous. I know he's trying to win me, Dennis . . . as only a woman can know!"

"Take this blaster back . . . and use it!" Dennis said fiercely.

"No need," she smiled, her eyes luminous. "I have a better way. I'll not be harmed, Dennis." She kissed him as if all her heart were in that kiss, despite the vertical bars that divided them, then she was gone, leaving behind the faint fragrance that she always wore, like a scent in the garden ways, or an echo in the wind.

One last card remained to him. One last venture wherein his life would hang from so slender a thread, and yet.

He began to scream and shout with a passion that raised reverberating echoes in the enclosing metal cell. Almost immediately the metal door opened with a bang, and the powerful figure of Koerber flanked by guards with drawn atom-blasts was silhouetted in the light.

"Have you gone space-crazy, you rat?" Koerber growled through clenched teeth. "What's the racket for?"



"You double-crosser," Dennis spat like an animal at bay, "if I have to be caged like this, after telling you about my discovery, at least you could let me have some air. You've got the air rectifiers shut off in here, and it's worse than in the caves! Want me to choke?"

"Haw!" One of the guards guffawed. "That's real good, boss . . . saves us the trouble of shooting 'im!"

"Shut up!" Koerber rumbled. "Double-crosser, eh? What made you think I'd cut you in on the discovery? But you've given me an idea! Branche . . . Jennings! Truss him up and carry him out to the cave. The radioactive minerals'll take care of him better'n anything else." His sadistic nature gloated on the thought of Dennis' gradual disintegration as the powerful radioactive vibrations bombarded his being.

Koerber's smile was like a feline caress, but his eyes were feral in the ecstasy of his triple triumph. He had Marla, the wealth and power of a new universe before him, and, his greatest enemy condemned to a horrible death.

Thoroughly trussed, they carried Dennis to the entrance to the cave system where the radioactive minerals were in greatest abundance. Then they threw him carelessly on the rough, rocky ground.

"I can watch you from here," Koerber said silkily, "as you slowly rot away. We'll be working on the spacer for at least four more hours before we blast off, time enough for the effects of the radiations to begin to show, eh Dennis?"

There was no doubt in Captain Brooke's mind what would happen to Marla, and to the I.S.P. cruiser when Koerber was ready to leave. The monstrous egotism of the man demanded a series of triumphs, for he already saw himself as a supreme ruler. He watched the guards walk back to the cruiser, where most of the crew were engaged in final repairs, and he was glad, fiercely glad, so he could concentrate. All the fear he felt for Marla, all the horror at the murder of his comrades and the destruction of his cruiser, and the vast, awful vision of a universe ruled by a sadistic madman, utterly evil, began to flood into his mind as he willed himself to emotionally see these things realized.

Suddenly he was aware that through

auto-suggestion, he was beginning to feel fear, *real fear!* He thought of the luminous spheres . . . there was something monstrous about them . . . the way they sucked the life-energy from poor Randall. He continued to elaborate and build up a crescendo of horror. A blast of thunder from Koerber's ship shook the cave.

THE distant sun was moving rapidly toward the horizon's rim, and the swift settling twilight enhanced the spumes coming from the jets of the black, pirate spacer. As the rumble of the warming rockets died to a murmur, Dennis saw two guards leave the airlock of the pirate cruiser. They were Jennings and Branche. They must be almost ready to leave, he thought. The guards came to where he lay and roughly jerked him to his feet then dragged him further inside the cave, where the deadly radioactives would really get to work on his body. Then they dropped him unceremoniously as they turned with a start.

Like black magic, a stentorian voice had begun speaking, filling the melancholy dusk of the eerie planetoid, as the thundering tones seemed to come from everywhere. Ear-drums throbbing with the vibration, the guards jerked Dennis back to the cave entrance, the binding cords that tied Dennis becoming dangerously ragged with the dragging over the rough ground he had endured twice.

"Bren Koerber! Attention! This is the I.S.P." The voice rolled and echoed. "You're completely surrounded. Resistance will be futile! You have just one minute to get your men together in front of your ship. Throw your side-arms in a pile on the ground!"

Koerber appeared at the lock of the pirate spacer then he scrambled down with surprising agility, followed by three of his men.

"Who in hell is playing jokes!" The pirate roared. "Come on!" He yelled at the two guards now at the cave's entrance. "You . . . Branche . . . Jennings! Who's getting funny? Somebody's going to get their heads blasted off for this!"

But instantly on the heels of Koerber's tirade, came Scotty's voice, magnified a hundred times:

"Your time's almost up, Koerber! Fif-



teen seconds more and *the newest, most deadly weapon of the I.S.P.* will be released against you!"

Even though he was still concentrating on the spheres and the emotion of fear, Dennis felt a sudden exaltation. But he brushed it aside and continued to recreate the terrible fear that had begun to invade his being under his relentless auto-hypnosis. Subconsciously he could hear Scotty's sonorous voice describing the horrible, irresistible weapon that was to be used. Scotty was doing a magnificent job of laying it on, with variations!

Koerber gazed around in stupefaction, then spying the prone figure at the mouth of the cave, he cursed at Dennis and then began to race across to the trussed up figure of his enemy, but he was halted by a hoarse shout from one of his guards:

"Boss, look! *There is something coming!*" The guard yelled excitedly.

Still lying on the ground, where the guards had dropped him, Dennis could barely see the top of the cliff behind him. Over the edge, high above the plain, swept cluster after cluster of the glowing, gloriously shimmering spheres. A myriad rain of lavender, greens, pulsing reds and flamboyant blues, iridescent, flaming with inward fires and spinning ever faster the spectral globes swept downwards in the deepening twilight with dazzling speed.

"Get the gun working, you scum!" Koerber cursed, pointing to the portable atomo-ray still remaining outside the spacer. Two men jumped at his order and the livid ray blasted skyward. Blasting fiercely for a few seconds, the two outlaws hesitated. Astonishment then fear crossed their stubbled faces. The deadly ray was merely expanding the globes, which flared into incandescent light and, kept right on coming down!

Huge chunks out of the side of the cliff behind the zooming spheres crashed to the plain. And still the glittering flood of glowing globes kept flowing on. His men must have done a wonderful job of luring the deadly spheres, Dennis thought with a part of his mind.

"Needle guns!" Koerber screamed, rushing over to the two men who stopped firing. "Use your hand guns, men! Someone get atomite capsules, we'll blast whatever these things are out of space!"

Picking up the heavy atomo-ray, Koerber cradled it in his powerful arms, sweeping the deadly projector in wide arcs through the approaching, luminous mass. Suddenly, Koerber shouted again. One of the men near the stern of the ship had dropped his weapon and was running, horror-stricken, across the broken ground.

"Come back here, you rat!" Koerber shrieked, swinging the big atomo-ray around. But he had no need to fire, a glowing globe fully six feet in diameter, already was pursuing the doomed, fear-maddened creature with vertiginous speed. Koerber saw it suddenly descend and envelop the running figure, and in seconds the outlaw was a shrunken mass that dropped to the ground like a squeezed fruit.

Koerber's eyes were blazing as he whirled around and screamed at his men: "Fight . . . fight you lousy rats!" Uncontrollable passion twisted his features in a fiendish snarl at the thought of losing the supreme power and unimaginable wealth he had thought to be within his grasp. His voice rose piercingly above the concussions of the atomite capsules that at his command had been brought into action.

But unknown to him, stealthily, a growing fear was creeping into his brain as all his efforts and the deadly fire of atom-blasts, atomo-ray and atomite capsules failed to even destroy a single globe. The unearthly, macabre appearance of the luminous globes was already playing havoc with the men's minds, and one by one the outlaws fled shrieking into the darkness, to be consumed by the glowing spheres.

**I**N THE impenetrable blackness of the cave, Dennis Brooke had stopped building the emotion of fear. With part of his mind he sought to dispel the stubborn auto-hypnosis, and slowly, he was able to regain a measure of normalcy. The thought of Marla helped, as with the growing destruction of Koerber's men, he deliberately forced himself to see her safe, in his arms. And slowly he came back out of the abyss of fear into which he had purposely pushed his courageous mind. It took patience, infinite patience and time, but time was growing short. He rubbed the frayed bonds that bound his arms back of him, against the jagged outcroppings of radio-



active rock, until he burst them with herculean strength, then it took a matter of seconds to free his legs. Painfully he stood up, and let the blood course with exquisite torture through his semi-paralyzed limbs. Then he sought the tiny atom-blast Marla had given him to conceal.

The space in front of the black spacer was milling with men battling spheres, a vortex of flaring illumination that hungrily enveloped the maddened crew. Now and then, another man sank to the ground a lifeless hulk. Suddenly one of the spheres came floating into the cave, curious, attracted by the remnants of the fear vibrations and approached Dennis. The Captain saw it enter and illuminate the impenetrable darkness, he laughed. A few moments ago it would have meant his life, but now he contemptuously bent down and picking a glittering specimen of radioactive mineral flung it unerringly at the gently spinning globe. As if the sphere weren't even there, the I. S. P. Captain strode out of the cave. It was then he saw his own crew, space-suited, exultant, spewing green death from their atom-blasts at the milling remnants of what had been the scourge of the space-lanes. Far to one side he spied Koerber, now a demoniac figure still firing the few remaining charges left in the atomo-ray. Saw him finally drop the useless weapon and turn to fend off the swooping spheres. In a few bounds Dennis was beside him.

At the sight of Dennis, the scowling face went black with fury. He sprang forward with both arms jabbing like pistons. Dennis swerved and again planted a terrific left to Koerber's solar-plexus, it almost doubled the pirate over, but Koerber was not through. He knew death was very close, but he meant to take with him the one man he blamed for his defeat. He came in with a fury that swept all before him, impervious of the rain of blows that Dennis aimed at his face, and unleashing a right to Dennis' jaw, he put every ounce of remaining power behind it. But the I. S. P. Captain moved slightly, letting the blow whiz past his face, then flat-footed, he let his right ride with the power of a sledge-hammer. Koerber's face lost contour, a gout of dark, welling blood flooded over it and he sank to the ground.

Suddenly Dennis' own men saw him, and came running to where he stood planted over what remained of Koerber, pirate of the space lanes. His chest heaving, clothes torn, he heard them as if in a dream, as they shouted in joy at the complete victory they had achieved. It was only when cool hands touched his face, and a remembered fragrance was in his nostrils, that he came out of his daze. A voice was whispering the simple words, "my dear . . . my very dear!" Slowly he gathered Marla in his arms and kissed her tenderly, while around him, the hovering spheres sensed another emotion, greater even than fear—but of another kind—that greatest of all emotions, Love.

**C**APTAIN DENNIS chewed the end of his stylus. After a moment he began to write again in the large metallic book:

*B-XA-321*

*2400 SCT*

*The plan outlined in the previous entry was carried out. Operation successful. Bren Koerber is being brought back a prisoner. All members of his crew are dead. Koerber's cruiser is being towed to Ceres Base. Full report on radioactive mineral discovery has been radioed I. S. P. Headquarters, Terra. No luminous spheres captured. Suggest scientific expedition be sent.*

*Casualties suffered: One. Junior Lieutenant George Randall killed in performance of duty by one of the spheres. Recommend heroism be recognized by posthumous honors. Suggest Antares Cross."*

Dennis Brooke, paused for a moment, uncertain whether or not to enter in the official log book the one burning desire that dominated his thoughts, at last he smiled and with a flourish he added:

*Leave of absence for two months requested. Reason: Marriage. Miss Marla Starland has consented to honor me by becoming my wife.*

Distantly he heard the muffled roar of the warming rockets. The great cruiser was ready to leave the fateful Planetoid. He sighed in vast contentment as he unplugged the stylus and gently closed the book.



# Men Without A World

By JOSEPH FARRELL

**The Centaurians were making one last effort to conquer Earth, and their tools were wise-cracking, space-jaunting O'Dea and Hawthorne—two guys to whom freedom was more than a word.**

Illustration by KIEMLE

THE FRANTIC flares of the rockets lit up a murderous landscape as barrel-chested Paul Hawthorne wrestled with the controls. He fought to keep the ship from falling too swiftly, anxious eyes searching for a level spot to set down the partly-crippled vessel.

Behind him, Lance O'Dea clung to a chart table and growled.

"Put it down!" O'Dea ordered. "You're the Einstein who got us to this desert planet of Centauri; now get us landed safely!"

Hawthorne risked a second to turn his grimy face to the animated bean pole behind him. Like himself, O'Dea was unshaven and wrapped in the shapeless coveralls of spacemen. Hawthorne scowled and pushed his hairy arms back into the controls.

"If you think you can do any better," he grunted, "take over yourself!"

"No, thanks." O'Dea bent over to look through the port. The jagged terrain was closer, and a horrified shudder ran down his bony frame. "No, I'll let you answer to Saint Peter for the death of us both!"

His expression as he glared at Hawthorne was distasteful, but the makings of a grin played on the corners of his lips, and a thinly-hid concern was in his eyes.

"This is the end," he said. In one hand he clutched a photograph of a dark-haired girl. "The end, Mercedes! To think you'll be a widow before you're even a wife, all because that ape of a Hawthorne lost all our fuel in Centauri's asteroid belt—"

"Shut up!" the pilot demanded. One of his hands flipped a wad of something green back in O'Dea's direction. "Here's the ten *platins* I owe you. And get ready—this is it!"

A roughly level spot swept up at them

—an uneven mesa that ended abruptly a few hundred feet ahead. Hawthorne dropped the vessel in a cushion of rocket blasts that were starting to cough for lack of fuel.

The ship bellied along the mesa, dipped into a pocket. O'Dea crashed into the stocky pilot as the ship turned end over end, then both struck the control board, smashing fifty thousand *platins* worth of instruments as they bounced around. The ship hesitated for a second at the edge of the mesa, balanced neatly, and decided to stay there.

INSIDE the ship, the lights were gone. For a few seconds there was a crashing of furniture, then silence.

"Lance!" Hawthorne's voice trembled slightly. "Are you killed? I h-hope—"

But the catch in his throat indicated he meant differently. From the darkness came O'Dea's answering drawl:

"No, you ape—I was just hoping the same about you. How about some light?"

Hawthorne fumbled around, found a battery-operated light that had survived the crash. He hobbled to where O'Dea was half buried in a heap of furniture and extricated him. The two of them rubbed their sore spots and looked glumly about.

"Centauri Six," Hawthorne mused. "You have the book *l'arnin'*. What's this planet like?"

O'Dea pressed fingers to his temples. "Not inhabited by Centaurs," he said. "Which is one small break. At least we won't have those monsters—"

"I asked about the planet."  
"If any Centaurs show up," said O'Dea shortly, "it'll make no difference about the planet. The Space Guide gives it the name Avignon. Hardly known by humans, of course—like the rest of this system. It



has no water and no air. We'll die of thirst or suffocation here, but at least the Centaurs won't get us."

Hawthorne looked up from the aneroid set beside the airlock.

"As usual," he said, "you're wrong. We have an atmospheric pressure of ten pounds. And what's more, the instruments show it's a real atmosphere—like Earth's!"

"There's no such planet! Your instruments must be damaged!"

"No." Hawthorne shook his head. "These instruments don't lie. And they say we have an atmosphere. It may be thicker in the valleys!"

"Then," O'Dea insisted, "the Space Guide must be wrong, because my memory distinctly tells me—"

"Be damned to your memory! I brought this ship down, and I felt the atmosphere. What's more, all the planets inside the asteroid belt, except this one, are inhabited by Centaurs—and we're certainly inside the asteroid belt."

"You should know." O'Dea glared at him. "After letting that asteroid smash through our fuel tanks—"

"You make me tired," Hawthorne yawned. "We're getting on each other's nerves. Better get some sleep and cool off."

He cleared a place on the floor and relaxed. While O'Dea watched, fists knotted, the burly pilot started to snore.

O'Dea grinned suddenly and turned away. He stared thoughtfully out the port. It was dark. A feeble, distant sun was falling below a rugged horizon; and in the sky above he picked out ruddy Proxima.

But there should be a "real" sun due to rise soon. Nice thing about Centauri—there were enough suns to suit anybody.

His eyes fell on the wad of bills Hawthorne had thrown at him. He retrieved it happily, also finding the photograph. He gazed fondly at the deep dark eyes and rich lips of the girl, kissed the picture happily.

"Good night, Mercedes," he said. "We'll show him in the morning."

**B**RILLIANT sunlight flooded the cabin when they awoke. At this distance, the sun seemed somewhat smaller than Sol as seen from Earth, but it was bril-

liant and warm. They ate a fast concentrated breakfast and studied the airlock. Hawthorne voiced his verdict:

"We can repair it in a few hours. Get the tools out."

O'Dea was looking at the gravity indicator.

"Gravity is .92," he announced. "That's the correct figure for Avignon—no question about it. But I can't understand that atmosphere! It doesn't belong!"

He took the torch Hawthorne shoved at him and they went to work on the airlock. When they had unjammed the inner door, they found that the outer had somehow escaped injury.

They walked into the lock, an almost vertical climb with the ship tilted as it was, and closed the inner door behind them. O'Dea shoved open the outer and pushed his nose over the edge of the ship. His eyes bulged.

"Gulp," he said, pointing.

Hawthorne's head appeared beside O'Dea's, and the two stared at the cañon floor a thousand feet below. Their space ship was partly hanging over the edge of the mesa.

"And I slept last night!" O'Dea marveled.

He swiveled his head in the other direction.

"Gulp!" he said again.

Three Centaurs, dominant beings of the Alpha Centauri system, faced them with drawn guns. The grinning creatures were vaguely manlike—they walked on two legs and breathed oxygen. At that point the resemblance ceased, for they also breathed methane or ammonia or practically nothing at all. They also had big eyes, a dozen arms, and more fingers than a moron could count without risking a headache.

O'Dea closed his eyes and moaned.

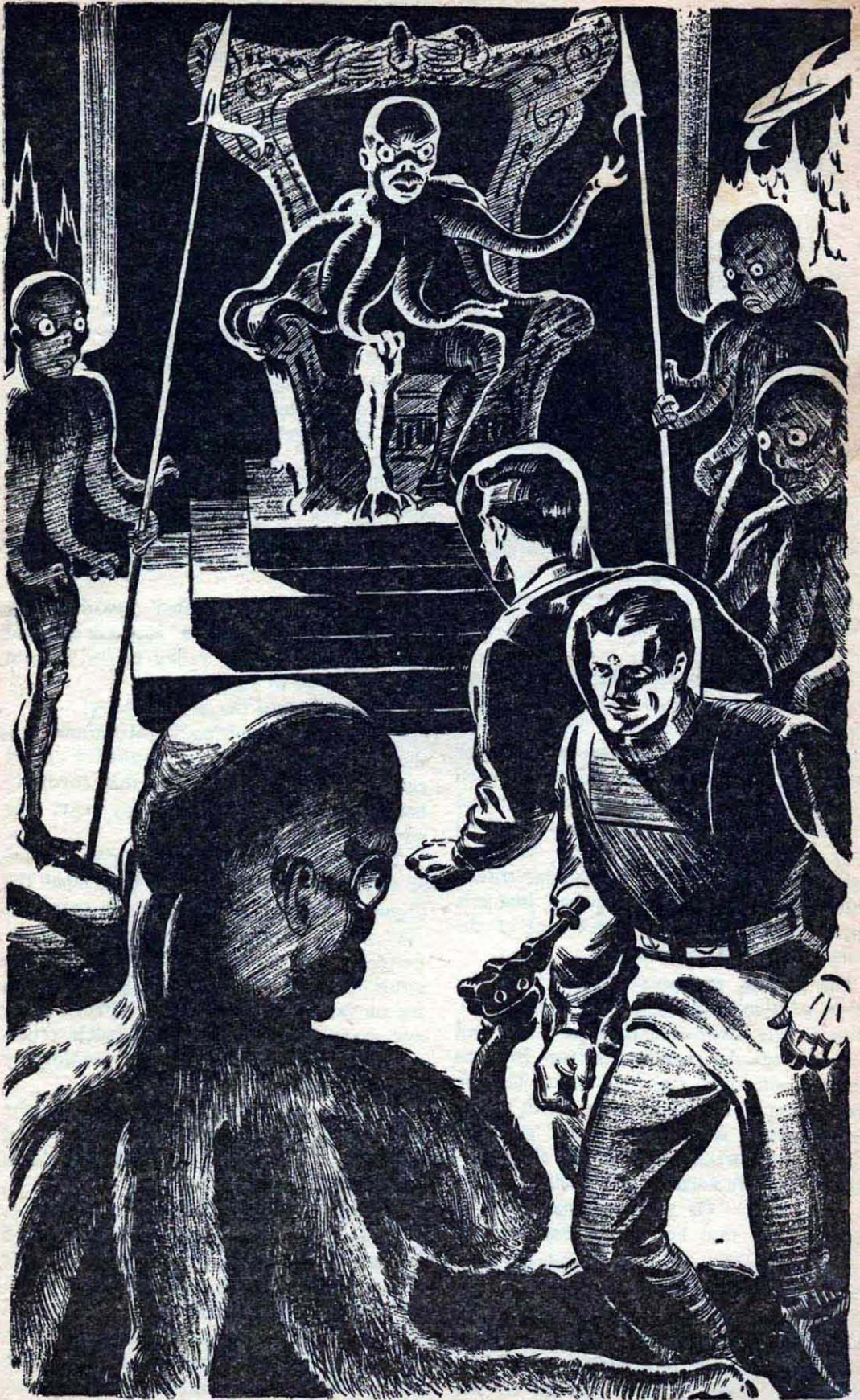
"This is it, Mercedes," he said softly.

"Shut up!" Hawthorne muttered. "Maybe they're an independent tribe—" He twisted his homely face into a grin and spoke in South Martian Vlandian, the *lingua franca* of space:

"*Somu amiki . . . 'neura barc s' arì?*—"

"Oh how lovely!" said the largest Centaur, in English. "Such a delightful ship and what wonderful specimens of *homo sapiens* we are find! This auspicious oc-





*O'Dea whirled—to face a lifted shock gun.*



currence will aid our plans in the utmost manner!"

The creature assumed an expression that passed for a friendly smile among the Centaurs. This consisted of displaying all his teeth and snapping them together as he spoke.

"I am called Morguma," he announced. "In Bridgeport, Connecticut, I learn the English before comes the war—so sorry, the trouble!" He smirked apologetically. "It is with the most pleased pleasure I acquaint myself with you!"

O'Dea heard Hawthorne's voice, low in his ear. "Now we're in for it! He's no independent tribesman!"

The lanky spaceman shrank back from the Centaur, eyeing the gleaming molars suspiciously. He was remembering that the human race was at war with these beings, though there had been practically no fighting for ten years, since the time the Centaurs in the solar system were exchanged for human hostages held by the enemy.

While man was learning the rules of space flight, these creatures had been building their first spaceships. Strange contest! Though neither human nor Centaur suspected the existence of the other, each progressed about as rapidly, as if linked by cosmic telepathy. Each race colonized its own system and gradually built up speeds great enough for interstellar travel. Indeed, the first human ship had just left for Centauri when the first vessel of the Centaurs landed on Mars.

For a time, it seemed that a beneficial union of two races had been established. Then it was discovered that the aliens had moral standards so different from humans that life with them was impossible. Though small groups of them visiting Earth or the planets were well-behaved and gracious guests, they were likely when they outnumbered their hosts to turn their thoughts to vivisection. Or to casual massacre, if they decided that humans annoyed them.

So outraged humanity had declared war, driven the visitors from the system. But at that point the war virtually ended. It was impossible for either Earth or Centauri to send a serious invasion fleet into the other's home system because of the tremendous distance! In either case, the

defenders would have an advantage that could not be overcome!

LANCE O'DEA felt perspiration trickling down his face. He studied the happy aliens.

Morguma waved his weapon. "You will please to come out, our beloved brothers of Earth! It will create difficulty to remove your ship to a more auspicious location if you do not remove yourselves from it first!"

The two men descended from the lock. Above them a Centaur ship hovered, darted out pale green seizure beams. In the grip of the beams, the Earth ship slid back from the mesa edge to more secure ground.

Behind Morguma, more Centaurs were coming up, their features masked with broad happy grins. The Centaur leader stepped aside, motioned the men to precede him.

Flanked by the armed guards, they marched across the mesa, reached a broad trail that led into a valley below. O'Dea stopped short in surprise.

He stared into the broad valley.

"Is it not inspiring?" Morguma enthused, behind him. "Our beautiful rocket center that we created on this formerly barren world! Oh it makes my heart sing with joy!"

The two men, eyes wide, looked down at the teeming Centaur life that filled the immense valley. Great factories sprawled for miles, apparently engaged in manufacturing and servicing space ships. Thousands of craft were berthed in neat rows for as far as they could see. From small one passenger jobs to deadly battle cruisers they were taking off and landing by the hundreds.

"There aren't that many ships in the universe," O'Dea mumbled, dazed. "And millions of Centaurs! Of all the places we could have landed—"

He felt a polite prodding in his spine.

"Please to walk, our charming brothers of Earth!" came Morguma's voice. "It is with pleasure I will explain to you when we reach our destination."

Their destination was a sprawling building set in the noise center of the rocket base. They were marched into a room where a gigantic Centaur sat shouting or-



ders to lesser ones. Among the Centaurs, size was synonymous with rank. In this civilization so alien to human thought, the largest creature was king, though he should be only an idiot mentally!

O'Dea listened, bored, while Morguma explained in his native language to his chief. The leader stared in surprise at the two humans, then his mood suddenly became ecstatic. He spoke swiftly to Morguma, who turned to the men.

"Oh you fortunate people! It is your remarkable luck to be the first humans to inhabit this planet we create for our brothers of the solar system!"

"What's this all about?" Hawthorne growled.

MORGUMA waved several arms and translated the remarks of his chief:

"We were so devastated to have a misunderstanding with your wonderful people! We are so sorry not to associate with you that we are preparing this planet for human beings to inhabit!"

O'Dea and Hawthorne stared at each other.

"Like you people of Earth." Morguma went on, "we too have an asteroid belt in our system. And in our asteroids are included many delightful pieces of frozen oxygen, nitrogen, water and other ravishingly beautiful elements that gladden the heart of a human. We are bringing these life-giving substances to this planet, Avignon!"

"I told you!" said O'Dea. "My memory didn't fail me! Paul, maybe these two-legged crocodiles aren't so bad after all—creating a planet for us—"

"When this pleasant operation is concluded," said Morguma, "we will bring humans to this planet. They will have children, whom we shall take from their parents and educate in the proper manner—"

"What!" Hawthorne's fists knotted. He moved a step in Morguma's direction, stopped when he faced a line of drawn guns. Morguma continued:

"Oh it will be such rapturous delight to instruct these little innocents in such tasks as espionage work on Earth and killing of those misguided humans who continue to fight us—"

Morguma's eyes rolled piously—and,

chuckled. He displayed his teeth in a friendly smile.

"And you two—oh you favorite sons of fortune! We shall allow you to help us in this gesture of interstellar good will! In your ship you may aid in securing the necessary elements from our asteroid belt!"

"In our ship—" O'Dea looked hopeful. "Oh, sure, we'll be glad to help. We'll go out right after it's patched up and loaded with fuel—"

"Of course," gurgled Morguma, "I should be overjoyed to enjoy your charming company; therefore I shall accompany you. Also, it is not necessary to give you more than enough fuel to reach the asteroid belt and come back here!"

"I knew there was a catch," O'Dea grumbled. "What do we do now, Paul?"

"You can do anything you please," Hawthorne snapped. "I've had enough!"

The heavy framed spaceman hurled himself at the grinning Centaur. A fraction of a second later O'Dea followed suit. Before they could cross the few feet that separated Morguma from them, the shock guns of the guards barked. The two men sprawled forward unconscious at the feet of the still grinning alien.

"Oh how sad!" Morguma cried. "How unfortunate! We must revive these beautiful persons! I am sure they will see our point of view!"

## II

O'DEA and Hawthorne watched their repaired vessel roll out of the Centaur repair shop. The smashed plates had been neatly straightened; the vessel gleamed from nose to tail.

An enthusiastic Centaur foreman accompanied the ship.

"Oh my intimate friends!" he sprayed in Hawthorne's face. "I too *parlez-vous* the English! For men I have the great love! It will give me tremendous enjoyment to help to populate this planet with human beings!"

"You go to Hell," Hawthorne growled. He shivered in Avignon's thin atmosphere and pulled the rough blanket Morguma had supplied tighter around him. He and O'Dea looked like a pair of Indian chiefs.

"Undertake to observe" said the foreman. Seizure beams!"



He shouted something in his own language to his workers inside the ship. The pale green beams lanced out. The foreman's fangs protruded several inches.

"And the interior is so dainty!" the creature warbled. "Chenille curtains over the ports! Pastel wallflower paper! Furnishings of a luxuriance that would be of pleasure even to the dictator himself!"

Hawthorne spat disgustedly. "Pastel wallpaper! Chenille curtains! Who ever heard of curtains in a space ship, much less chenille!"

His homely face twisted in pain. "Chenille!" he groaned again.

"You have no soul," grinned O'Dea. "As long as these baboons are willing to supply us with the finer things of life, you might at least appreciate it."

"You know what I think of you," growled Hawthorne. "Chenille curtains—ugh!"

He spat disgustedly.

Morguma appeared and waved them to the open lock. He preceded them, and when they had mounted to the lock, he shoved them back gently with his huge paws until they faced a barrage of Centaur camera fiends. The three of them, Morguma in the middle with a giant smirking grin, stood framed in the lock while shutters clicked.

"I wish you wouldn't breathe in my face," O'Dea said. "You smell like something that forgot to die off in the Mesozoic era."

Morguma giggled. "All Centauri loves you! Your beautiful faces will be in all our newspapers now!"

They went into the control room. Hawthorne stared unbelievably at the transformation. Flowers were spread profusely. Embroidered antimacassars graced the dainty chairs. And the curtains over the ports were indeed of chenille. The pilot groaned dismally.

But O'Dea's eyes lighted when he saw the huge portrait over the control board.

"Mercedes!" he shouted.

"Oh how happy I am to see you pleased!" exclaimed Morguma. "We found this divine female human being's picture and enlarged it as you see. She is an entrancing thing!"

"You talk the truth," O'Dea agreed.

"But that won't change the fact that I don't like you. What happens now?"

Morguma looked mildly apologetic. "Now we must perform labor! The great task for which this ship has been fitted!"

The Centaur seated himself at the rear of the control room, produced an instrument that looked like a whip. It looked like a whip because it was one. He flicked it experimentally.

"Oh how devastated I would be," he told them, "if I should be forced to use this! You will take off and fly to our asteroid belt, following the intelligent directions I shall give you. We will find a substantial piece of some agreeable material and bring it back to Avignon."

The two men looked at each other and then at the whip. The alien snapped it lightly a few times as if nervous. They turned to the control board.

A FEW HOURS later they were in Alpha Centauri's asteroid belt, dodging debris. For a while they were nervous. It was here, in this field of small flying particles that was worse even than their Solar System's, that a baseball-sized rock had eluded their detectors and knifed through their vessel, passing through all three fuel chambers in its line of flight and taking a long stream of rocket fuel for its wake.

But the Centaurs evidently had perfected asteroid navigation; and when they saw several pieces of matter that were about to strike them deflected, they stopped worrying.

O'Dea manned a board lined with instruments the Centaurs had installed. They were simple to operate. He merely moved a telescope lens until a piece of cosmic scrap was in the cross hair, then he read a dial. The telescope was synchronized with a Centaur version of a spectroscope, and its reading was given in figures on the dial.

He felt the Centaur looking over his shoulder, checking up on him, so he had to do his work properly. Not that it made much difference. Whether he and Hawthorne played the game was of little importance as far as the Centaur's plans went, except that the creatures liked the symbolism created by having two humans work on the project.



"Morguma," he said. "Those space-ships on Avignon can't all be engaged in this work. There are types there that can be of no use."

"Oh you are so intelligent to reason that!" Morguma marveled. "This pretty planet of Avignon is the reservation we have set aside for all space work. All of our ships are built there and all are based there!"

O'Dea tracked down a likely looking asteroid.

"How come?" he asked.

"We Centaurs are a delicate sensitive people! We love the beautiful things of life, and dislike such noisy greasy articles as space ships. So a few years ago it was decided to remove all the dirty factories from our home planets. Now the only craft that disturb the peace of our people on the main planets of Centauri are the rockets that transport materials and workers to and from Avignon!"

"There's something wrong there." O'Dea centered his instrument on the asteroid. "You seem to be happy enough. And the other workers on Avignon—they didn't seem to be disgusted by the dirt and noise."

"Oh, I am ecstatic!" Morguma raved. "It is my aptitude! Rocket fuel is my life blood! There are those among us who have a love for this noisy distasteful life of space!"

"Sounds logical," O'Dea murmured. "Some humans enjoy doing the dirty work that nauseates the average person . . . unpleasant, but necessary. As for that remark about rocket fuel's being your life bloom, Morguma, I happen to know it's true!"

He chuckled at the look of discomfiture that spread over Morguma's features. The *quintol* that was a part of rocket fuel was the equivalent of alcohol to the metabolism of the Centaurs. Several times he had seen Morguma take a quick pull from a small bottle he kept in his leathery garment—the Centaur version of a hip flask.

Morguma changed the subject as O'Dea's throaty chuckle continued. He pointed to the grayish speck in the telescope.

"Oh a remarkable find! A lump of solid carbon dioxide, and of such a size!

Oh how fortunate we are to have such fortunate fortune!"

Their vessel closed in on the chunk of almost pure carbon dioxide, a piece larger than the ship. Under the Centaur's directions, O'Dea fed out the seizure beams. He watched the rough mass become gradually rigid, fixed in space relative to them.

That seizure beam would interest Earth's scientists. But Earth was trillions of miles away.

Morguma clapped his paws together in foolish delight. "Oh how goody! We must hasten back to Avignon! On the way, we will analyze this precious find!"

AS THEY blasted back toward Centauri's sixth planet, O'Dea learned from Morguma how the analysis was made by instrument. The figures they reported would be turned into a central office, along with the results of other ships engaged in the same task. In that way, the Centaurs checked the composition of the atmosphere they were creating for the planet, knew what elements were most necessary at any given moment.

They swooped low over the planet, on the side opposite the space base. Other Centaurs were bringing laden ships down, loosing their cargoes like sticks of bombs. A great plateau was speckled with white, and below, the ocean bed was filling with water.

Hawthorne joined the procession of Centaur ships. When they neared the surface, he barked at O'Dea to loosen their load. The seizure beams disappeared and the icy chunk splashed over several acres of ground.

"A successful mission!" Morguma giggled. "Now we return to our lovely base to rest!"

O'Dea and Hawthorne glowered.

The next day was similar to the first, and the one after it, and all the rest until they had turned in a dozen days of work as slaves in the asteroid belt. O'Dea became proficient in operating his instruments; and Hawthorne brushed up on precision bombing until he could have planted his loads on a dime, if anybody had provided the dime.

They found out that the Centaurs didn't believe in resting on the Sabbath. Working hours were roughly from sunup to sun-



down—about an eight hour stretch, since Avignon's day was shorter than Earth's.

At dawn, a skipping troop of young Centaurs invaded their chambers. The students were learning English, diplomatic French, South Martian Portuguese, and a score of other languages of which Hawthorne and O'Dea knew nothing.

Then Morguma came and led them to a huge boiler factory that was fitted as a dining room, where they toyed with Centaur food and ate vita-horm capsules salvaged from their ship.

After that, it was out to the asteroid belt for another load of frozen atmosphere.

"Oh, Hell," said O'Dea. They were going back to their quarters after another day's work. "If it wasn't for that picture of Mercedes, I'd throw in my buttons. I'm dying to see a human being again!"

Hawthorne's homely face turned suspiciously to him. "I'm here, ain't I?"

O'Dea raised an eyebrow and turned away. A fleet of powerful Centaur dreadnaughts was landing. They had just performed the fabulous task of transporting a huge frozen lake to Avignon—a miracle of coordination.

O'Dea filled his lungs with air. He removed the blanket from his shoulders, let his chest rise and fall evenly.

"Almost as good as Earth," he said. "This air is wonderful now, but it's wasted. Only two humans to breathe it—hey!"

He stared at the spindly mountain that rose to a dizzy peak at the far end of the valley. A thin stream of smoke rose from it.

"I never noticed that before. Morguma—is that a volcano?"

Morguma, who had paused to watch them enjoy the air, looked toward the steaming mountain top and uncovered his fangs in a friendly smile.

"Entirely without harm, my charming friends of Earth! Our great scientists have performed in full an investigation. There is absolutely no danger from that volcano!"

O'Dea peered suspiciously at the distant cone. "If that thing ever goes off, this valley will be buried!"

"Oh fear not that this luscious land will be demolished, my beautiful comrades!

Not a hair of your lovely heads will be harmed!"

Hawthorne growled. O'Dea made a fist of his right hand, rubbed it thoughtfully. But he shrugged, looking at the Centaur's twelve arms. They continued into the noisy dining room.

As they entered, Hawthorne stopped short and glared. Suddenly shaking with anger, he waved his fist at Morguma.

"This is the limit! You can kill me, but I don't have to stand for—this!"

**H**IS GESTURE swept the huge room. On every chair was hung bouquets of riotously colored Centaurian flowers. The walls were padded with garlands, and huge vases were in the center of each table. From the ceiling, more streamers of blossoms dipped low.

O'Dea's lips twitched, trying to hold back a grin. He watched the solid, plain features of the husky pilot become dark with fury.

"Wait Paul," he said quickly, "until we find out what it's all about." He turned to Morguma. "What happens here, my reptilian *amigo*?"

"A holiday! Tomorrow is the birthday of his supreme magnificence, *The Centaur*! On the anniversary of his coming into the world as the son of a humble fish cleaner, we honor this great person by desisting from all labor!"

"Oh—the big shot's birthday." O'Dea held a hand on Hawthorne's arm as the pilot started to cool off. He stared at the huge portrait of a giant, moronic Centaur leering unintelligently down at them.

"A few little glands controlling a whole solar system," he mused. "I'm glad that rhino never leaves his palace."

He turned his eyes from the dictator's portrait, took Hawthorne's arm and guided him away. The two men walked to their customary places. When they found their chairs, Hawthorne stopped and growled again. He stared distastefully at the decorations on their chairs.

They were flowers—flowers from Earth. And they were pansies.

Hawthorne pushed them disgustedly from the arms of his chair and settled down in glum resignation.

Morguma took his place at O'Dea's left. O'Dea glanced at Hawthorne on his right



and chuckled. He turned to the Centaur.

"Terrestrial flowers? How come?"

"I ecstasize to see your pleasure," Morguma drooled. "One of our brave captains took a ship to your delightful world, succeeded in plucking fragrant specimens of fauna and flora to populate this world. There are now animals and vegetation from Earth thriving happily on this globe!"

"So . . . any humans?"

A tear trickled down Morguma's leathery cheek. "Oh it was so sad! The humans resisted—poor misguided creatures! They all lost their valuable lives and we will have to return for more!"

O'Dea put down the Centaurian mushroom he had been preparing to taste. The grin disappeared from his face as he shoved back his chair and faced Morguma. There was a deadly something in his eyes that seemed out of place in the usually carefree features.

"Another of your nonchalant slaughters." His voice was a low monotone. "Morguma, you'll pay for that—you and your grinning murder pals—"

His hand closed around the steaming cup of Centaurian coffee and he flung the liquid into the Centaur's face.

### III

AN HOUR later he sat on his bed and rubbed his aching jaw. He peered through a puffed eye at Hawthorne beside him. The pilot's blunt face was all grin.

"So I'm the primitive savage!" Hawthorne doubled in laughter. "You're the one who acted intelligent like a guinea pig tonight!"

"Laugh, you ape!" O'Dea groaned and moved his jaw tenderly. "Not broken, I guess. But Morguma sure packs *quintol* in those cornerstones he uses for fists. All twelve of them!"

"*Quintol*—that's it." Hawthorne pulled a bottle from under his shirt. He looked patronizingly at O'Dea. "There's enough *quintol* here to get four Centaurs blind drunk!"

"Well, start slopping it up, slop!"

"This bottle," said Hawthorne patiently, "is our dictator's birthday present to our friend Morguma. The Centaurs will appreciate such a gesture of friendship!"

O'Dea stared through unbelieving black eyes at him. "Why, you—rat!—"

"Tomorrow," Hawthorne went on, "is a holiday. Nobody works except us. That's as a token of interstellar good will. We work and the Centaurs rest—except our good friend Morguma, who will be along to keep an eye on us. Morguma deserves a little fun, too."

O'Dea crawled out of his bunk and advanced with hard fists. He was promptly shoved back by the grinning Hawthorne.

"Don't you see?" Hawthorne demanded. "We get Morguma so pie-eyed he won't know what's going on. Then—"

He drew a stubby forefinger across his throat and made a croaking noise. O'Dea pried his puffed eyelids apart and beamed in pleased understanding. His lips parted slowly in a grin that would have done credit to a Centaur.

"Oh, I am ecstatic!" he said.

MORGUMA was ecstatic when he received his present. Tears of happiness gushed down his cheeks as O'Dea presented the vacuum bottle with a flowery oration. He seemed to have forgotten the incident of the previous night, and took no notice of O'Dea's bruised features.

The happy creature crushed O'Dea to his bosom with several bear-like arms.

"Oh my dear bosom friends! My heart would swell with song if I were able to sing! Oh you fortunate humans, to be able to sing!"

O'Dea broke loose from the embrace and rubbed his ribs. He looked cheerfully at Hawthorne.

"As soon as he's *non compos mentis*," he whispered, "we'll slug the lug, and—"

"Shut up," Hawthorne growled softly. "You'll queer everything."

The pilot took his place at the control board and they pushed out to the asteroid belt. Morguma settled himself in his usual chair at the rear of the control room and tantalized himself by smelling the *quintol*.

"Oh how wonderful!" he enthused. "Aged in the bottle, too! How I love humans!"

O'Dea glanced impatiently from the corner of his eye. The Centaur was in no hurry to consume the *quintol*. They were approaching the asteroid belt before he had put much inside him.



The two men stalled by chasing down worthless rocks until half the liquor was inside the Centaur. Morguma's six eyes gradually became glassier and glassier. He started to sway a little in his chair.

"Gonna get the mosh wonnerful piesh of d'lightful oshy—oshygen you ever shaw!" he announced. "There'sh shtupendous piesh. Oh I am rap—rapshurous!"

"It's only a piece of pumice!" O'Dea insisted.

"Itsh oshygen! Lovely beaut'ful delectub—delect'ble oshygen!" Morguma staggered toward them. "Put sheizure beam on lovely oshygen!"

The seizures clamped on the stone as O'Dea shrugged and threw out the beams. Morguma took another long nip and let his eyes swim into focus on the dials. He looked hurt.

"Not oshygen? Not lovely oshygen? Oh I am eshcruchied!"

The creature sobbed and took another drink. He staggered back and fell into his chair, where he fell into a weeping spree, his head buried in his hands.

O'Dea glanced swiftly. His elbow dug into Hawthorne's ribs.

Hawthorne nodded. They quietly picked up the wrenches they had kept nearby, started toward Morguma.

One on each side, they moved cautiously. Silently they moved forward until they came within striking distance.

Hawthorne waved O'Dea back, gesturing to his own powerful right arm. O'Dea nodded, poised his weapon for the follow up swing. Hawthorne raised the wrench.

And then Morguma's whip flicked out.

**H**AWTHORNE'S eyes remained fastened to his empty hand as the wrench clattered into a corner. Again the snap of Centaur leather, and O'Dea's weapon joined the other. The two men stood foolishly, like a pair of boys caught stealing apples. Morguma spoke:

"Oh you bad bad people! Go back to control board; let poor Morguma alone. Oh I am deshicated to think you would do thish to poor old frien' Morguma!"

They slunk back to their posts. O'Dea raised his helpless eyes to the portrait above the controls.

"What can I do, Mercedes?" he whis-

pered. "The guy is stiffer than King Tut and still you can't beat him!"

They avoided each other's eyes. Each knew what the other was thinking. Defeat meant that the Centaur had won. There would be no warning to Earth.

Avignon would become a planet of slave humans, blindly following the skillful teachings of the Centaurs. They would infiltrate Earth, tear down from within. . . . Generations would be required, but the Centaurs had time. They thought in long term strategy.

Hawthorne was staring unbelievably through the telescope. His trembling fingers closed on O'Dea's arm.

"Let go, you ape—"

O'Dea stopped, impelled by the smoldering hope in the eyes that warned him to silence. He glanced swiftly to be sure that Morguma was still hunched stupidly in his chair, then followed Hawthorne's gaze. He gasped at what they saw.

In their line of vision was a mass that looked like twisted wire, coiled up in a planless tangle. O'Dea leaned forward, stared without belief.

"Our fuel," he breathed. "If we can get hold of that—"

Hawthorne waved him frantically, silently, to the seizure beams. O'Dea tiptoed to the levers, waited with one eye on Morguma, while Hawthorne crept up on the precious fuel.

O'Dea eyed the dials, hands shaking on the control bars. There was no mistake! It was indeed their fuel, forced out of the hole in their tanks by internal pressure. Pressed out into space in a priceless ribbon, it had frozen into this amorphous mass!

O'Dea's heart was heavy in his ears. His suddenly feverish eyes darted to the apparently-sleeping Morguma, then to the smiling portrait of Mercedes.

Hawthorne nodded imperatively. The ship jolted slightly as the seizure beams went on. The fuel was clamped rigid before them. Morguma stirred and studied them with glazed eyes. His thick voice croaked:

"Whazzhat? Oshygen? Lovely precious oshygen?"

"That's right, Morguma. Oshygen—I mean oxygen." O'Dea brought the chunk closer, trying hard to look natural. "It



looks so lovely I'd like to take a chunk on board and sniff it right now!"

"Oh whassa lovely ideas!" Morguma, still clutching his whip and his bottle, navigated by dead-drunk reckoning to the vision plate in the control room's belly. He peered stupidly at the coiled fuel. O'Dea feared that the sound of his breathing would sober the Centaur. He held the breath in his pounding lungs.

"s funny oshygen!" Morguma mumbled. "Mosh funniest oshygen I ever seen!" He brightened. "Mush be a rare ishotype! Oh mush be lov'liesh oshygen in whole galaxy!"

He closed all but one eye and tried to read the dials. Furtively, O'Dea turned the telescope into the asteroid belt, and the instruments swayed as badly as Morguma himself. The Centaur shuddered and turned away.

"Broken! All the metersh mush be drunk! Can't eshamine lovely oshygen!"

He started sobbing.

"Oh, come now, old man," said O'Dea, sympathetically. "We can bring a piece of it inside the ship and look at it first hand—"

"Wunnerful ideas! Wunnerful!"

Morguma slapped O'Dea's back affectionately. O'Dea picked himself off the floor and staggered in a great circle to the control board.

A thin seizure beam stabbed at a corner of the fuel, broke off a generous chunk. Under O'Dea's trained fingers, it moved toward the ship, through the belly lock.

Then it was in the cabin.

#### IV

**H**AWTHORNE had been doctoring the thermostats. In the heated room the highly volatile *quintol*-base fuel started swiftly to vaporize. O'Dea felt his head beginning to reel as the acrid fumes filled his lungs. His eyes burned.

But the effect on the Centaur was greater. He became rigid and turned even more glassy-eyed. He swayed and for a tense second seemed about to fall over. Then his eyes focussed with a desperate effort, almost sobered by fear.

"*Quintol!*" He raised the whip. "Not oshygen!"

He lost his footing as Hawthorne banked the ship. Ordinarily this would have been no strain on his Centaur sense of balance. But the *quintol* was too much for him. He crashed to the floor. When he picked himself up, he stood for a few seconds, stiff as rigor mortis, then he pitched down again on his face.

O'Dea unwrapped himself from a chenille curtain. He rubbed his head and stared at the prostrate Centaur.

"What a skinful! He looks almost as bad as you, Paul! Must be something he ate. Let's dump him through the lock and hurry back to Earth."

"Get into a space suit and stow the fuel away," growled Hawthorne. "I'll chain this critter up and we'll take him home with us. But first, we'll leave a souvenir to those Centaurs on Avignon!"

The fuel stowed in the tanks, O'Dea climbed back into the ship and pulled at his space suit fastenings. He looked happily at the well-manacled Centaur, still in a drunken stupor.

"The air is better now," he observed. "Let's get on our way back to Earth and—hey! What're you up to?"

Hawthorne was ripping the flowery seat covers and soft curtains from their fastenings, piling them near the airlock. When they were all gathered, he shoved them out and watched happily through the vision plate as they floated away from the ship.

O'Dea grinned. "You're cooking with *quintol*, at that. The boys would never let us forget it if we came home furnished like that!"

Hawthorne grunted and pulled at Morguma's manacles. He went back to the telescope, studied space ahead for a while. Then he nodded, satisfied.

"That one should do," he mused.

"Should do what?" O'Dea wondered.

"That big rock ahead should be a good farewell gift to the Centaurs. We'll fly over their camp, and—"

A knowing smile was on Hawthorne's lips as he nosed up on a tiny asteroid. When they came close enough, the asteroid proved to be bigger than the ship.

Gradually, they trapped it in the seizure beams. Hawthorne fought grimly against inertia. The asteroid began to pull ahead of its orbit, and finally it was under full control of their engines.



SPACE was clear all the way back to Avignon. No Centaur ships were off the ground—there was nothing to challenge them. Hawthorne blasted straight for the valley of Centaur ships.

The motors strained, overheated, with the huge asteroid they lugged. When they entered the atmosphere, the vessel dropped almost like a dead weight.

O'Dea looked worried.

"That big factory, Paul. That's the best objective, and you're way off from it. Bear right—"

"Small game!" Hawthorne leered, a superior smile on his lips. "Just do what I said—keep your fingers one inch above the release key and push down fast when I give the word!"

O'Dea stared into the valley below. They were falling fast and the huge chunk of rock almost cut off the vision. But they were moving forward as well as down, and the long lines of Centaur ships and factories were being left far behind. O'Dea shook his head, fingered with one hand some of his bruises.

Then his eyes widened. Dead ahead and coming up fast to meet them, was a mountain. From a pit in its narrow tip rose a trickle of smoke.

"Get ready!" Hawthorne shouted.

O'Dea could almost see into the crater. He held his sweating palm ready.

"Now!"

Before Hawthorne finished barking the command, O'Dea's hand shot down, releasing the seizure beams. The ship catapulted skyward as the weight was suddenly dropped. The pilot fought the pounding rockets. When it was under control, Hawthorne circled back over the valley.

They stared at the mass of earth that tumbled down the mountain side in a gathering avalanche. Their asteroid plunged bouncing into the valley below, shaking the entire volcano each time it hit. New avalanches started in its wake.

Then the volcano exploded.

A thousand feet of rocky cone disappeared in a fiery murderous cloud. Flaming lava and flying rock filled the air for miles. Hawthorne worked frantically for altitude as molten crimson streamers of hell streaked skyward.

In Avignon's stratosphere, they looked

down through the glaring lava that hid the valley.

An anguished voice broke in:

"Oh I cannot believe it of you!"

And Morguma started to cry.

O'Dea pulled the pilot's chair to one side, reached into an opening in the floor beneath it. He drew forth two bundles of clothing. The two men stripped off their greasy coveralls, put on the clean clothes.

Morguma stared unbelievably at the crisp olive green uniforms of Earth's space force. The grimy faces of Hawthorne and O'Dea grinned happily from under the jaunty caps. On the shoulders of each were the twin platinum bars of space captains.

"Spies! Oh you unnatural men, to bite the very hand that fed you—"

"—and cracked the whip," O'Dea finished sharply. "If you want to be technical, we were in uniform all the time—those coveralls are regulation work clothes. And all is fair in love and war, you know. We came to Centauri on a reconnaissance job, and ran into some luck."

He sighed happily, turned his eyes to the portrait above the control board.

Hawthorne chuckled. He was reading a thin tape that ran through his fingers.

"I have the ethertype machine running," he said. "News from Earth. And look at the very first item!"

He passed it over. O'Dea's grin disappeared as he read. He growled at the tape, flung it from him.

"So she married a rocket hand while my back was turned! Well—"

He frowned for a moment. Then his shoulders rose and fell in a carefree shrug.

"I go bigger for blondes, anyway. First thing I'm going to do after we report is head for Lidice, Venus, and go on the biggest tear in the history of the space guard. That'll be—"

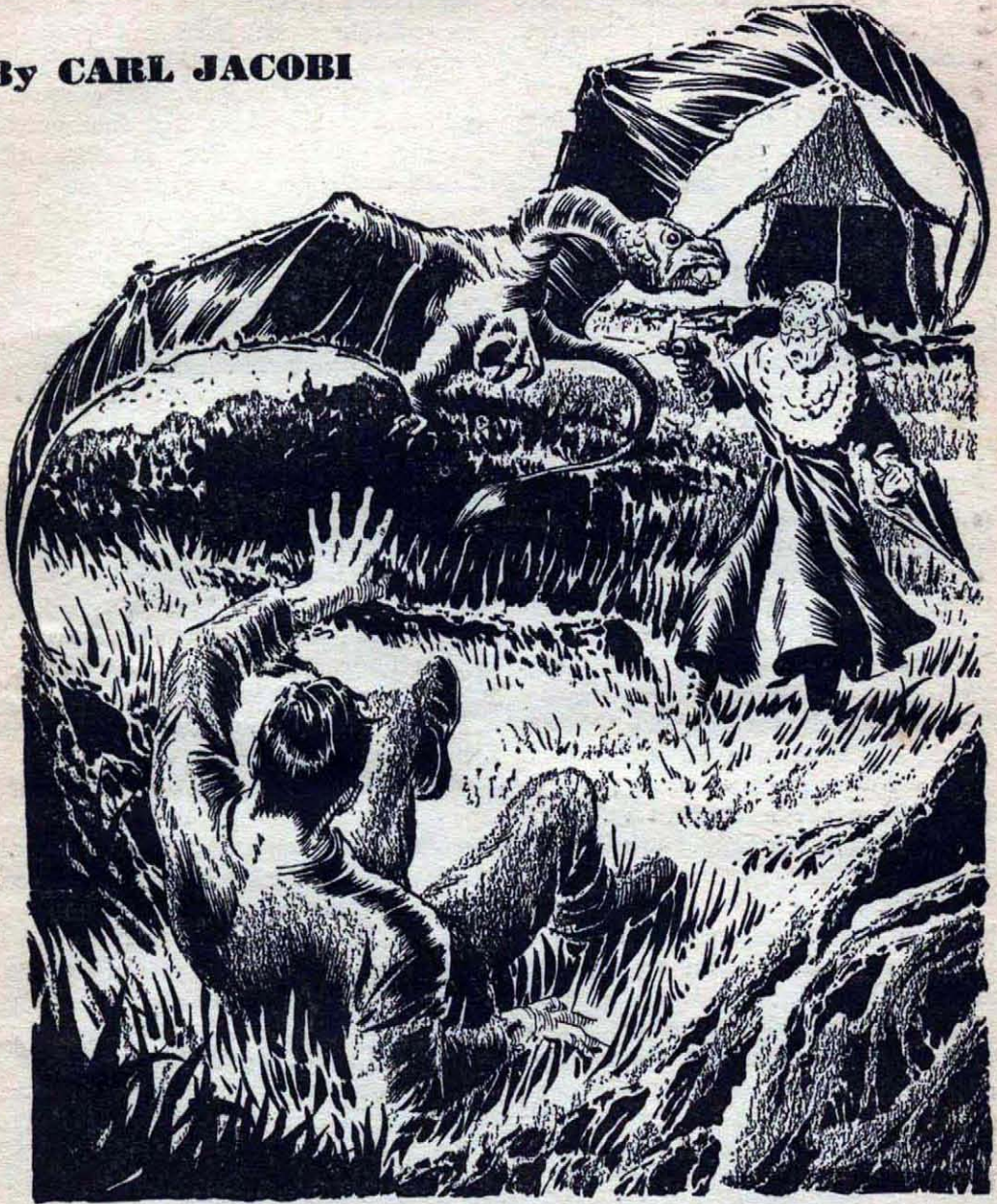
There was a faintly disturbed look in Paul Hawthorne's eyes. But he soothed his conscience with the thought that O'Dea would be just as well off without Mercedes. So he saw no reason to tell Captain Lance O'Dea that he had typed out the story on the ethertype himself. Because all is fair in love as well as in war.

And Captain Paul Hawthorne was in love with Mercedes, too.



# Doctor Universe

By CARL JACOBI



*Grannie Annie fired with deliberate speed.*

**Grannie Annie, who wrote science fiction under the *nom de plume* of Annabella C. Flowers, had stumbled onto a murderous plot more hair-raising than any she had ever concocted. And the danger from the villain of the piece didn't worry her—I was the guy he was shooting at.**

*Illustration by INGELS*

**I** WAS killing an hour in the billiard room of the *Spacemen's Club* in Swamp City when the Venusian bell-boy came and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Beg pardon, thir," he said with his racial lisp, "thereth thome one to thee you in the main lounge." His eyes rolled as he added, "A lady!"



A woman here. . . ! The *Spacemen's* was a sanctuary, a rest club where in-coming pilots and crewmen could relax before leaving for another voyage. The rule that no females could pass its portals was strictly enforced.

I followed the bellhop down the long corridor that led to the main lounge. At the threshold I jerked to a halt and stared incredulously.

Grannie Annie!

There she stood before a frantically gesticulating desk clerk, leaning on her faded green umbrella. A little wisp of a woman clad in a voluminous black dress with one of those doily-like caps on her head, tied by a ribbon under her chin. Her high-topped button shoes were planted firmly on the varpla carpet and her wrinkled face was set in calm defiance.

I barged across the lounge and seized her hand. "Grannie Annie! I haven't seen you in two years."

"Hi, Billy-boy," she greeted calmly. "Will you please tell this fish-face to shut up."

The desk clerk went white. "Mithter Trenwith, if thith lady ith a friend of yourth, you'll have to take her away. It' th abtholutely againth the ruleth. . . ."

"Okay, okay," I grinned. "Look, we'll go into the grille. There's no one there at this hour."

In the grille an equally astonished waiter served us—me a lime rickey and Grannie Annie her usual whisky sour—I waited until she had tossed the drink off at a gulp before I set off a chain of questions:

"What the devil are you doing on Venus? Don't you know women aren't allowed in the *Spacemen's*? What happened to the book you were writing?"

"Hold it, Billy-boy." Laughingly she threw up both hands. "Sure, I knew this place had some antiquated laws. Pure fiddle-faddle, that's what they are. Anyway, I've been thrown out of better places."

She hadn't changed. To her publishers and her readers she might be Annabella C. Flowers, author of a long list of science fiction novels. But to me she was still Grannie Annie, as old-fashioned as last year's hat, as modern as an atomic motor. She had probably written more drivel in the name of science fiction than anyone alive.

But the public loved it. They ate up her stories, and they clamored for more. Her annual income totaled into six figures, and her publishers sat back and massaged their digits, watching their earnings mount.

One thing you had to admit about her books. They may have been dime novels, but they weren't synthetic. If Annabella C. Flowers wrote a novel, and the locale was the desert of Mars, she packed her carpet bag and hopped a liner for Crater-ville. If she cooked up a feud between two expeditions on Callisto, she went to Callisto.

She was the most completely delightful crackpot I had ever known.

"What happened to *Guns for Gany-mede*?" I asked. "That was the title of your last, wasn't it?"

GRANNIE spilled a few shreds of Martian tobacco onto a paper and deftly rolled herself a cigarette.

"It wasn't *Guns*, it was *Pistols*; and it wasn't *Ganymede*, it was *Pluto*."

I grinned. "All complete, I'll bet, with threats against the universe and beautiful Earth heroines dragged in by the hair."

"What else is there in science fiction?" she demanded. "You can't have your hero fall in love with a bug-eyed monster."

Up on the wall a clock chimed the hour. The old woman jerked to her feet.

"I almost forgot, Billy-boy. I'm due at the *Satellite* Theater in ten minutes. Come on, you're going with me."

Before I realized it, I was following her through the lounge and out to the jetty front. Grannie Annie hailed a hydrocar. Five minutes later we drew up before the big doors of the *Satellite*.

They don't go in for style in Swamp City. A theater to the grizzled colonials on this side of the planet meant a shack on stilts over the muck, *silcon* wood seats and dingy atobide lamps. But the place was packed with miners, freight-crew-men—all the tide and wash of humanity that made Swamp City the frontier post it is.

In front was a big sign. It read:

ONE NIGHT ONLY  
DOCTOR UNIVERSE AND HIS  
NINE GENIUSES  
THE QUESTION PROGRAM OF  
THE SYSTEM



As we strode down the aisle a mangy-looking Venusian began to pound a tin-pan piano in the pit. Grannie Annie pushed me into a seat in the front row.

"Sit here," she said. "I'm sorry about all this rush, but I'm one of the players in this shindig. As soon as the show is over, we'll go somewhere and talk." She minced lightly down the aisle, climbed the stage steps and disappeared in the wings.

"That damned fossilized dynamo," I muttered. "She'll be the death of me yet."

The piano struck a chord in G, and the curtain went rattling up. On the stage four Earthmen, two Martians, two Venusians, and one Mercurian sat on an up-raised dais. That is to say, eight of them sat. The Mercurian, a huge lump of granite-like flesh, sprawled there, palpably uncomfortable. On the right were nine visi sets, each with its new improved pantascope panel and switchboard. Before each set stood an Earthman operator.

**A** TALL MAN, clad in a claw-hammer coat, came out from the wings and advanced to the footlights.

"People of Swamp City," he said, bowing, "permit me to introduce myself. I am Doctor Universe, and these are my nine experts."

There was a roar of applause from the *Satellite* audience. When it had subsided, the man continued:

"As most of you are familiar with our program, it will be unnecessary to give any advance explanation. I will only say that on this stage are nine visi sets, each tuned to one of the nine planets. At transmitting sets all over these planets listeners will appear and voice questions. These questions, my nine experts will endeavor to answer. For every question missed, the sender will receive a check for one thousand *planetoles*.

"One thing more. As usual we have with us a guest star who will match her wits with the experts. May I present that renowned writer of science fiction, Annabella C. Flowers."

From the left wing Grannie Annie appeared. She bowed and took her place on the dais.

The Doctor's program began. The operator of the Earth visi twisted his dials

and nodded. Blue light flickered on the pantascope panel to coalesce slowly into the face of a red-haired man. Sharp and clear his voice echoed through the theater:

"Who was the first Earthman to enter the sunward side of Mercury?"

Doctor Universe nodded and turned to Grannie Annie who had raised her hand. She said quietly:

"Charles Zanner in the year 2012. In a specially constructed tracto-car."

And so it went. Questions from Mars, from Earth, from Saturn flowed in the visi sets. Isolated miners on Jupiter, dancers in swank Plutonian cafes strove to stump the experts. With Doctor Universe offering bantering side play, the experts gave their answers. When they failed, or when the Truthicator flashed a red light, he announced the name of the winner.

It grew a little tiresome after a while and I wondered why Grannie had brought me here. And then I began to notice things.

The audience in the *Satellite* seemed to have lost much of its original fervor. They applauded as before but they did so only at the signal of Doctor Universe. The spell created by the man was complete.

Pompous and erect, he strode back and forth across the stage like a general surveying his army. His black eyes gleamed, and his thin lips were turned in a smile of satisfaction.

When the last question had been answered I joined the exit-moving crowd. It was outside under the street marquee that a strange incident occurred.

A yellow-faced Kagor from the upper Martian desert country shuffled by, dragging his cumbersome third leg behind him. Kagors, of course, had an unpleasant history of persecution since the early colonization days of the Red Planet. But the thing that happened there was a throw back to an earlier era.

Someone shouted, "Yah, yellow-face! Down with all Kagors!" As one man the crowd took up the cry and surged forward. The helpless Kagor was seized and flung to the pavement. A knife appeared from nowhere, snipped the Martian's single lock of hair. A booted foot bludgeoned into his mouth.

Moments later an official hydrocar roared up and a dozen I.P. men rushed out and



scattered the crowd. But a few stragglers lingered to shout derisive epithets.

Grannie Annie came out from behind the box office then. She took my arm and led me around a corner and through a doorway under a sign that read THE JET. Inside was a deep room with booths along one wall. The place was all but deserted.

In a booth well toward the rear the old lady surveyed me with sober eyes.

"Billy-boy, did you see the way that crowd acted?"

I nodded. "As disgraceful an exhibition as I've ever seen. The I. P. men ought to clamp down."

"The I.P. men aren't strong enough."

She said it quietly, but there was a glitter in her eyes and a harsh line about her usually smiling lips.

"What do you mean?"

FOR a moment the old lady sat there in silence; then she leaned back, closed her eyes, and I knew there was a story coming.

"My last book, *Death In The Atom*, hit the stands last January," she began. "When it was finished I had planned to take a six months' vacation, but those fool publishers of mine insisted I do a sequel. Well, I'd used Mars and Pluto and Ganymede as settings for novels, so for this one I decided on Venus. I went to Venus City, and I spent six weeks in-country. I got some swell background material, and I met Ezra Karn. . . ."

"Who?" I interrupted.

"An old prospector who lives out in the deep marsh on the outskirts of Varsoom country. To make a long story short, I got him talking about his adventures, and he told me plenty."

The old woman paused. "Did you ever hear of the Green Flames?" she asked abruptly.

I shook my head. "Some new kind of . . ."

"It's not a new kind of anything. The Green Flame is a radio-active rock once found on Mercury. The *Alpha* rays of this rock are similar to radium in that they consist of streams of material particles projected at high speed. But the character of the *Gamma* rays has never been completely analyzed. Like those set up

by radium, they are electromagnetic pulsations, but they are also a strange combination of *Beta* or cathode rays with negatively charged electrons.

"When any form of life is exposed to these *Gamma* rays from the Green Flame rock, they produce in the creature's brain a certain lassitude and lack of energy. As the period of exposure increases, this condition develops into a sense of impotence and a desire for leadership or guidance. Occasionally, as with the weak-willed, there is a spirit of intolerance. The Green Flames might be said to be an inorganic opiate, a thousand times more subtle and more powerful than any known drug."

I was sitting up now, hanging on to the woman's every word.

"Now in 2710, as you'd know if you studied your history, the three planets of Earth, Venus, and Mars were under governmental bondage. The cruel dictatorship of Vennox I was short-lived, but it lasted long enough to endanger all civilized life.

"The archives tell us that one of the first acts of the overthrowing government was to cast out all Green Flames, two of which Vennox had ordered must be kept in each household. The effect on the people was immediate. Representative government, individual enterprise, freedom followed."

Grannie Annie lit a cigarette and flipped the match to the floor.

"To go back to my first trip to Venus. As I said, I met Ezra Karn, an old prospector there in the marsh. Karn told me that on one of his travels into the Varsoom district he had come upon the wreckage of an old space ship. The hold of that space ship was packed with Green Flames!"

If Grannie expected me to show surprise at that, she was disappointed. I said, "So what?"

"So everything, Billy-boy. Do you realize what such a thing would mean if it were true? Green Flames were supposedly destroyed on all planets after the Vennox regime crashed. If a quantity of the rock were in existence, and it fell into the wrong hands, there'd be trouble.

"Of course, I regarded Karn's story as a wild dream, but it made corking good story material. I wrote it into a novel, and a week after it was completed, the manuscript was stolen from my study back on Earth."



"I see," I said as she lapsed into silence. "And now you've come to the conclusion that the details of your story were true and that someone is attempting to put your plot into action."

Grannie nodded. "Yes," she said. "That's exactly what I think."

I got my pipe out of my pocket, tamped Martian tobacco into the bowl and laughed heartily. "The same old Flowers," I said. "Tell me, who's your thief . . . Doctor Universe?"

She regarded me evenly. "What makes you say that?"

I shrugged.

"The way the theater crowd acted. It all ties in."

The old woman shook her head. "No, this is a lot bigger than a simple quiz program. The theater crowd was but a cross-section of what is happening all over the System. There have been riots on Earth and Mars, police officials murdered on Pluto and a demand that government by representation be abolished on Jupiter. The time is ripe for a military dictator to step in.

"And you can lay it all to the Green Flames. It seems incredible that a single shipload of the ore could effect such a wide ranged area, but in my opinion someone has found a means of making that quantity a thousand times more potent and is transmitting it *en masse*."

If it had been anyone but Grannie Annie there before me, I would have called her a fool. And then all at once I got an odd feeling of approaching danger.

"Let's get out of here," I said, getting up.

*Zinnng-whack!*

"All right!"

On the mirror behind the bar a small circle with radiating cracks appeared. On the booth wall a scant inch above Grannie's head the fresco seemed to melt away suddenly.

A heat ray!

Grannie Annie leaped to her feet, grasped my arm and raced for the door. Outside a driverless hydrocar stood with idling motors. The old woman threw herself into the control seat, yanked me in after her and threw over the starting stud.

An instant later we were plunging through the dark night.

SIX DAYS after leaving Swamp City we reached Level Five, the last outpost of firm ground. Ahead lay the inner marsh, stretching as far as the eye could reach. Low islands projected at intervals from the thick water. Mold balls, two feet across, drifted down from the slate-gray sky like puffs of cotton.

We had traveled this far by *ganet*, the tough little two headed pack animal of the Venus hinterland. Any form of plane or rocket would have had its motor instantly destroyed, of course, by the magnetic force belt that encircled the planet's equator. Now our drivers changed to boatmen, and we loaded our supplies into three clumsy *jagua* canoes.

It was around the camp fire that night that Grannie took me into her confidence for the first time since we had left Swamp City.

"We're heading directly for Varsoom country," she said. "If we find Ezra Karn so much the better. If we don't, we follow his directions to the lost space ship. Our job is to find that ore and destroy it. You see, I'm positive the Green Flames have never been removed from the ship."

Sleep had never bothered me, yet that night I lay awake for hours tossing restlessly. The thousand sounds of the blue marsh droned steadily. And the news broadcast I had heard over the portable visi just before retiring still lingered in my mind. To a casual observer that broadcast would have meant little, a slight rebellion here, an isolated crime there. But viewed from the perspective Grannie had given me, everything dovetailed. The situation on Jupiter was swiftly coming to a head. Not only had the people on that planet demanded that representative government be abolished, but a forum was now being held to find a leader who might take complete dictatorial control.

Outside a whisper-worm hissed softly. I got up and strode out of my tent. For some time I stood there, lost in thought. Could I believe Grannie's incredible story? Or was this another of her fantastic plots which she had skilfully blended into a novel?

Abruptly I stiffened. The familiar drone of the marsh was gone. In its place a ringing silence blanketed everything.



And then out in the gloom a darker shadow appeared, moving in undulating sweeps toward the center of the camp. Fascinated, I watched it advance and retreat, saw two hyalescent eyes swim out of the murk. It charged, and with but a split second to act, I threw myself flat. There was a rush of mighty wings as the thing swept over me. Sharp talons raked my clothing. Again it came, and again I rolled swiftly, missing the thing by the narrowest of margins.

From the tent opposite a gaunt figure clad in a familiar dress appeared. Grannie gave a single warning:

"Stand still!"

The thing in the darkness turned like a cam on a rod and drove at us again. This time the old woman's heat gun clicked, and a tracery of purple flame shot outward. A horrible soul-chilling scream rent the air. A moment later something huge and heavy scabbled across the ground and shot aloft.

I stood frozen as the diminuendo of its wild cries echoed back to me.

"In heaven's name, what was it?"

"Hunter-bird," Grannie said calmly. "A form of avian life found here in the swamp. Harmless in its wild state, but when captured, it can be trained to pursue a quarry until it kills. It has a single unit brain and follows with a relentless purpose."

"Then that would mean . . . ?"

"That it was sent by our enemy, the same enemy that shot at us in the cafe in Swamp City. Exactly." Grannie Annie halted at the door of her tent and faced me with earnest eyes. "Billy-boy, our every move is being watched. From now on it's the survival of the fittest."

**T**HE FOLLOWING day was our seventh in the swamp. The water here resembled a vast mosaic, striped and cross-striped with long winding ribbons of yellowish substance that floated a few inches below the surface. The mold balls coming into contact with the evonium water of the swamp had undergone a chemical change and evolved into a cohesive multi-celled marine life that lived and died within a space of hours. The Venusians paddled with extreme care. Had one of them dipped his hand into one of those

yellow streaks, he would have been devoured in a matter of seconds.

At high noon by my Earth watch I sighted a low white structure on one of the distant islands. Moments later we made a landing at a rude jetty, and Grannie Annie was introducing me to Ezra Karn.

He was not as old a man as I had expected, but he was ragged and unkempt with iron gray hair falling almost to his shoulders. He was dressed in *varpa* cloth, the Venus equivalent of buckskin, and on his head was an enormous flop-brimmed hat.

"Glad to meet you," he said, shaking my hand. "Any friend of Miss Flowers is a friend of mine." He ushered us down the catwalk into his hut.

The place was a two room affair, small but comfortable. The latest type of visi set in one corner showed that Karn was not isolated from civilization entirely.

Grannie Annie came to the point abruptly. When she had explained the object of our trip, the prospector became thoughtful.

"Green Flames, eh?" he repeated slowly. "Well yes, I suppose I could find that space ship again. That is, if I wanted to."

"What do you mean?" Grannie paused in the act of rolling herself a cigarette. "You know where it is, don't you?"

"Ye-s," Karn nodded. "But like I told you before, that ship lies in Varsoom country, and that isn't exactly a summer vacation spot."

"What are the Varsoom?" I asked. "A native tribe?"

Karn shook his head. "They're a form of life that's never been seen by Earthmen. Strictly speaking, they're no more than a form of energy."

"Dangerous?"

"Yes and no. Only man I ever heard of who escaped their country outside of myself was the explorer, Darthier, three years ago. I got away because I was alone, and they didn't notice me, and Darthier escaped because he made 'em laugh."

"Laugh?" A scowl crossed Grannie's face.

"That's right," Karn said. "The Varsoom have a strange nervous reaction that's manifested by laughing. But just what



it is that makes them laugh, I don't know."

Food supplies and fresh drinking water were replenished at the hut. Several mold guns were borrowed from the prospector's supply to arm the Venusians. And then as we were about to leave, Karn suddenly turned.

"The Doctor Universe program," he said. "I ain't missed one in months. You gotta wait 'til I hear it."

Grannie frowned in annoyance, but the prospector was adamant. He flipped a stud, twisted a dial and a moment later was leaning back in a chair, listening with avid interest.

It was the same show I had witnessed back in Swamp City. Once again I heard questions filter in from the far outposts of the System. Once again I saw the commanding figure of the quiz master as he strode back and forth across the stage. And as I sat there, looking into the visi screen, a curious numbing drowsiness seemed to steal over me and lead my thoughts far away.

**H**ALF an hour later we headed into the unknown. The Venusian boatmen were ill-at-ease now and jabbered among themselves constantly. We camped that night on a miserable little island where insects swarmed about us in hordes. The next day an indefinable wave of weariness and despondency beset our entire party. I caught myself musing over the futility of the venture. Only the pleadings of Grannie Annie kept me from turning back. On the morrow I realized the truth in her warning, that all of us had been exposed to the insidious radiations.

After that I lost track of time. Day after day of incessant rain . . . of steaming swamp. . . . But at length we reached firm ground and began our advance on foot.

It was Karn who first sighted the ship. Striding in the lead, he suddenly halted at the top of a hill and leveled his arm before him. There it lay, a huge cigar-shaped vessel of blackened *arelium* steel, half buried in the swamp soil.

"What's that thing on top?" Karn demanded, puzzled.

A rectangular metal envelope had been constructed over the stern quarters of the ship. Above this structure were three tall

masts. And suspended between them was a network of copper wire studded with white insulators.

Grannie gazed a long moment through binoculars. "Billy-boy, take three Venusians and head across the knoll," she ordered. "Ezra and I will circle in from the west. Fire a gun if you strike trouble."

But we found no trouble. The scene before us lay steeped in silence. Moments later our two parties converged at the base of the great ship.

A metal ladder extended from the envelope down the side of the vessel. Midway we could see a circular hatch-like door.

"Up we go, Billy-boy." Heat gun in readiness, Grannie Annie began to climb slowly.

The silence remained absolute. We reached the door and pulled it open. There was no sign of life.

"Somebody's gone to a lot of trouble here," Ezra Karn observed.

Somebody had. Before us stretched a narrow corridor, flanked on the left side by a wall of impenetrable stepo glass. The corridor was bare of furnishings. But beyond the glass, revealed to us in mocking clarity, was a high panel, studded with dials and gauges. Even as we looked, we could see liquid pulse in glass tubes, indicator needles swing slowly to and fro.

Grannie nodded. "Some kind of a broadcasting unit. The Green Flames in the lower hold are probably exposed to a *tholpane* plate and their radiations stepped up by an electro-phosicalic process."

Karn raised the butt of his pistol and brought it crashing against the glass wall. His arm jumped in recoil, but the glass remained intact.

"You'll never do it that way," Grannie said. "Nothing short of an atomic blast will shatter that wall. It explains why there are no guards here. The mechanism is entirely self-operating. Let's see if the Green Flames are more accessible."

In the lower hold disappointment again confronted us. Visible in the feeble shafts of daylight that filtered through cracks in the vessel's hull were tiers of rectangular ingots of green iridescent ore. Suspended by insulators from the ceiling over them was a thick metal plate.



But between was a barrier. A wall of impenetrable stepto glass.

Grannie stamped her foot. "It's maddening," she said. "Here we are at the crux of the whole matter, and we're powerless to make a single move."

**O**UTSIDE the day was beginning to wane. The Venusians, apparently unawed by the presence of the space ship, had already started a fire and erected the tents. We left the vessel to find a spell of brooding desolation heavy over the improvised camp. And the evening meal this time was a gloomy affair. When it was finished, Ezra Karn lit his pipe and switched on the portable visi set. A moment later the silence of the march was broken by the opening fanfare of the Doctor Universe program.

"Great stuff," Karn commented. "I sent in a couple of questions once, but I never did win nothin'. This Doctor Universe is a great guy. Ought to make him king or somethin'."

For a moment none of us made reply. Then suddenly Grannie Annie leaped to her feet.

"Say that again!" she cried.

The old prospector looked startled. "Why, I only said they ought to make this Doctor Universe the big boss and . . ."

"That's it!" Grannie paced ten yards off into the gathering darkness and returned quickly. "Billy-boy, you were right. The man behind this is Doctor Universe. It was he who stole my manuscript and devised a method to amplify the radiations of the Green Flames in the freighter's hold. He lit on a sure-fire plan to broadcast those radiations in such a way that millions of persons would be exposed to them simultaneously. Don't you see?"

I didn't see, but Grannie hurried on.

"What better way to expose civilized life to the Green Flames radiations than when the people are in a state of relaxation. The Doctor Universe quiz program. The whole System tuned in on them, but they were only a blind to cover up the transmission of the radiations from the ore. Their power must have been amplified a thousandfold, and their wave-length must lie somewhere between light and the supersonic scale in that transition band which so far has defied exploration . . ."

"But with what motive?" I demanded. "Why should . . .?"

"Power!" the old woman answered. "The old thirst for dictatorial control of the masses. By presenting himself as an intellectual genius, Doctor Universe utilized a bizarre method to intrench himself in the minds of the people. Oh, don't you see, Billy-boy? The Green Flames' radiations spell doom to freedom, individual liberty."

I sat there stupidly, wondering if this all were some wild dream.

And then, as I looked across at Grannie Annie, the vague light over the tents seemed to shift a little, as if one layer of the atmosphere had dropped away to be replaced by another.

There it was again, a definite movement in the air. Somehow I got the impression I was looking around that space rather than through it. And simultaneously Ezra Karn uttered a howl of pain. An instant later the old prospector was rolling over and over, threshing his arms wildly.

An invisible sledge hammer descended on my shoulder. The blow was followed by another and another. Heavy unseen hands held me down. Opposite me Grannie Annie and the Venusians were suffering similar punishment, the latter screaming in pain and bewilderment.

"It's the Varsoom!" Ezra Karn yelled. "We've got to make 'em laugh. Our only escape is to make 'em laugh!"

He struggled to his feet and began leaping wildly around the camp fire. Abruptly his foot caught on a log protruding from the fire; he tripped and fell headlong into a mass of hot coals and ashes. Like a jumping jack he was on his feet again, clawing dirt and soot from his eyes.

Out of the empty space about us there came a sudden hush. The unseen blows ceased in mid-career. And then the silence was rent by wild laughter. Peal after peal of mirthful yells pounded against our ears. For many moments it continued; then it died away, and everything was peaceful once more.

Grannie Annie picked herself up slowly. "That was close," she said. "I wouldn't want to go through that again."

Ezra Karn nursed an ugly welt under one eye. "Those Varsoom got a funny sense of humor," he growled.



**I**NSIDE the freighter's narrow corridor Grannie faced me with eyes filled with excitement.

"Billy-boy," she said, "we've got two problems now. We've got to stop Doctor Universe, and we've got to find a way of getting out of here. Right now we're nicely bottled up."

As if in answer to her words the visi set revealed the face of the quiz master on the screen. He was saying:

*"Remember tomorrow at this same hour I will have a message of unparalleled importance for the people of the nine planets. Tomorrow night I urge you, I command you, to tune in."*

With a whistling intake of breath the old woman turned to one of the Venusians.

"Bring all our equipment in here," she ordered. "Hurry!"

She untied the ribbon under her chin and took off her cap. She rolled up her sleeves, and as the Venusians came marching into the space ship with bundles of equipment, she fell to work.

Silently Ezra Karn and I watched her. First she completely dismantled the visi set, put it together again with an entirely altered hookup. Next she unrolled a coil of flexible copper mesh which we had brought along as a protective electrical screening against the marsh insects. She fastened rubberite suction cups to this mesh at intervals of every twelve inches or more, carried it down to the freighter's hold and fastened it securely against the stepto glass wall.

Trailing a three-ply conduit up from the hold to the corridor she selected an induction coil, several Micro-Wellman tubes and a quantity of wire from a box of spare parts. Dexterously her fingers moved in and out, fashioning a complicated and curious piece of apparatus.

At length she finished.

"It's pretty hay-wire," she said, "but I think it will work. Now I'll tell you what I'm going to do. When Doctor Universe broadcasts tomorrow night, he's going to announce that he has set himself up as supreme dictator. He'll have the Green Flame radiations coming from this ship under full power. I'm going to insert into his broadcast—the laughing of the Varsoom!"

"You're going to what?"

"Broadcast the mass laughter from those invisible creatures out there. Visualize it, Billy-boy! At the dramatic moment when Doctor Universe makes his plea for System-wide power, he will be accompanied by wild peals of laughter. The whole broadcast will be turned into a burlesque."

"How you going to make 'em laugh?" interrupted Karn.

"We must think of a way," Grannie replied soberly.

I, for one, am glad that no representative of the Interstellar Psychiatry Society witnessed our antics during the early hours of that morning and on into the long reaches of the afternoon, as we vainly tried to provoke the laughter of the Varsoom. All to no avail. Utter silence greeted our efforts. And the time was growing close to the scheduled Doctor Universe program.

Ezra Karn wiped a bead of perspiration from his brow. "Maybe we've got to attract their attention first," he suggested. "Miss Flowers, why don't you go up on the roof and read to 'em? Read 'em something from one of your books, if you've got one along. That ought to make 'em sit up and take notice."

For a moment the old woman gazed at him in silence. Then she got to her feet quickly.

"I'll do it," she said. "I'll read them the attack scene from *Murder On A Space Liner*."

**I**T DIDN'T make sense, of course. But nothing made sense in this mad venture. Grannie Annie opened her duffel bag and drew out a copy of her most popular book. With the volume under her arm, she mounted the ladder to the top of the envelope. Ezra Karn rigged up a radite search lamp, and a moment later the old woman stood in the center of a circle of white radiance.

Karn gripped my arm. "This is it," he said tensely. "If this fails . . ."

His voice clipped off as Grannie began to read. She read slowly at first, then intoned the words and sentences faster and more dramatically.

And out in the swamp a vast hush fell as if unseen ears were listening.

*" . . . the space liner was over on her beam ends now as another shot from the raider's vessel crashed into the stern hold.*



*In the control cabin Cuthbert Strong twisted vainly at his bonds as he sought to free himself. Opposite him, lashed by strong Martian vinta ropes to the grava-scope, Louise Belmont sobbed softly, wringing her hands in mute appeal."*

A restless rustling sounded out in the marsh, as if hundreds of bodies were surging closer. Karn nodded in awe.

"She's got 'em!" he whispered. "Listen. They're eatin' up every word."

I heard it then, and I thought I must be dreaming. From somewhere out in the swamp a sound rose into the thick air. A high-pitched chuckle, it was. The chuckle came again. Now it was followed by another and another. An instant later a wave of low subdued laughter rose into the air.

Ezra Karn gulped. "Gripes!" he said. "They're laughing already. *They're laughing at her book!* And look, the old lady's gettin' sore."

Up on the roof of the evelope Grannie Annie halted her reading to glare savagely out into the darkness.

The laughter was a roar now. It rose louder and louder, peal after peal of mirthful yells and hysterical shouts. And for the first time in my life, I saw Annabella C. Flowers mad. She stamped her foot; she shook her fist at the unseen hordes out before her.

"Ignorant slap-happy fools!" she screamed. "You don't know good science fiction when you hear it."

I turned to Karn and said quietly, "Turn on the visi set. Doctor Universe should

be broadcasting now. Tune your microphone to pull in as much of that laughter as you can."

**I**T TOOK three weeks to make the return trip to Swamp City. The Varsoom followed us far beyond the frontier of their country like an unseen army in the throes of laughing gas. Not until we reached Level Five did the last chuckle fade into the distance.

All during that trek back, Grannie sat in the dugout, staring silently out before her.

But when we reached Swamp City, the news was flung at us from all sides. One newspaper headline accurately told the story: DOCTOR UNIVERSE BID FOR SYSTEM DICTATORSHIP SQUELCHED BY RIDICULE OF UNSEEN AUDIENCE. QUIZ MASTER NOW IN HANDS OF I. P. COUP FAILURE.

"Grannie," I said that night as we sat again in a rear booth of THE JET, "what are you going to do now? Give up writing science fiction?"

She looked at me soberly, then broke into a smile.

"Just because some silly form of life that can't even be seen doesn't appreciate it? I should say not. Right now I've got an idea for a swell yarn about Mars. Want to come along while I dig up some background material?"

"I shook my head. "Not me," I said. But I knew I would.



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# THE EYES OF THAR

By HENRY KUTTNER

She spoke in a tongue dead a thousand years, and she had no memory for the man she faced. Yet he had held her tightly but a few short years before, had sworn eternal vengeance—when she died in his arms from an assassin's wounds.



Illustration by DOOLIN

**H**E HAD come back, though he knew what to expect. He had always come back to Klanvahr, since he had been hunted out of that ancient Mar-

tian fortress so many years ago. Not often, and always warily, for there was a price on Dantan's head, and those who governed the Dry Provinces would have been glad



to pay it. Now there was an excellent chance that they might pay, and soon, he thought, as he walked doggedly through the baking stillness of the night, his ears attuned to any dangerous sound in the thin, dry air.

Even after dark it was hot here. The dead ground, parched and arid, retained the heat, releasing it slowly as the double moons—the Eyes of Thar, in Klanvahr mythology—swung across the blazing immensity of the sky. Yet Samuel Dantan came back to this desolate land as he had come before, drawn by love and by hatred.

The love was lost forever, but the hate could still be satiated. He had not yet glutted his blood-thirst. When Dantan came back to Klanvahr, men died, though if all the men of the Redhelm Tribe were slain, even that could not satisfy the dull ache in Dantan's heart.

Now they were hunting him.

The girl—he had not thought of her for years; he did not want to remember. He had been young when it happened. Of Earth stock, he had during a great Martian drought become godson to an old shaman of Klanvahr, one of the priests who still hoarded scraps of the forgotten knowledge of the past, glorious days of Martian destiny, when bright towers had fingered up triumphantly toward the Eyes of Thar.

Memories . . . the solemn, antique dignity of the Undercities, in ruins now . . . the wrinkled shaman, intoning his rituals . . . very old books, and older stories . . . raids by the Redhelm Tribe . . . and a girl Samuel Dantan had known. There was a raid, and the girl had died. Such things had happened many times before; they would happen again. But to Dantan this one death mattered very much.

Afterward, Dantan killed, first in red fury, then with a cool, quiet, passionless satisfaction. And, since the Redhelms were well represented in the corrupt Martian government, he had become outlaw.

The girl would not have known him now. He had gone out into the spaceways, and the years had changed him. He was still thin, his eyes still dark and opaque as shadowed tarn-water, but he was dry and sinewy and hard, moving with the trained, dangerous swiftness of the predator he was—and, as to morals, Dantan had none worth mentioning. He had broken more

than ten commandments. Between the planets, and in the far-flung worlds bordering the outer dark, there are more than ten. But Dantan had smashed them all.

In the end there was still the dull, sickening hopelessness, part loneliness, part something less definable. Hunted, he came back to Klanvahr, and when he came, men of the Redhelms died. They did not die easily.

But this time it was they who hunted, not he. They had cut him off from the air-car and they followed now like hounds upon his track. He had almost been disarmed in that last battle. And the Redhelms would not lose the trail; they had followed sign for generations across the dying tundras of Mars.

He paused, flattening himself against an outcrop of rock, and looked back. It was dark; the Eyes of Thar had not yet risen, and the blaze of starlight cast a ghastly, leprous shine over the chaotic slope behind him, great riven boulders and jutting monoliths, canyon-like, running jagged toward the horizon, a scene of cosmic ruin that every old and shrinking world must show. He could see nothing of his pursuers, but they were coming. They were still far behind. But that did not matter; he must circle—circle—

And first, he must regain a little strength. There was no water in his canteen. His throat was dust-dry, and his tongue felt swollen and leathery. Moving his shoulders uneasily, his dark face impassive, Dantan found a pebble and put it in his mouth, though he knew that would not help much. He had not tasted water for—how long? Too long, anyhow.

**S**TARING around, he took stock of resources. He was alone—what was it the old shaman had once told him? “You are never alone in Klanvahr. The living shadows of the past are all around you. They cannot help, but they watch, and their pride must not be humbled. You are never alone in Klanvahr.”

But nothing stirred. Only a whisper of the dry, hot wind murmuring up from the distance, sighing and soughing like muted harps. Ghosts of the past riding the night, Dantan thought. How did those ghosts see Klanvahr? Not as this desolate wasteland, perhaps. They saw it with the eyes of memory, as the Mother of Empires which



Klanvahr had once been, so long ago that only the tales persisted, garbled and unbelievable.

A sighing whisper . . . he stopped living for a second, his breath halted, his eyes turned to emptiness. That meant something. A thermal, a river of wind—a downdraft, perhaps. Sometimes these con-old canyons held lost rivers, changing and shifting their courses as Mars crumbled, and such watercourses might be traced by sound.

Well—he knew Klanvahr.

A half mile farther he found the arroyo, not too deep—fifty feet or less, with jagged walls easy to descend. He could hear the trickle of water, though he could not see it, and his thirst became overpowering. But caution made him clamber down the precipice warily. He did not drink till he had reconnoitered and made sure that it was safe.

And that made Dantan's thin lips curl. Safety for a man hunted by the Redhelms? The thought was sufficiently absurd. He would die—he must die; but he did not mean to die alone. This time perhaps they had him, but the kill would not be easy nor without cost. If he could find some weapon, some ambush—prepare some trap for the hunters—

There might be possibilities in this canyon. The stream had only lately been diverted into this channel; the signs of that were clear. Thoughtfully Dantan worked his way upstream. He did not try to mask his trail by water-tricks; the Redhelms were too wise for that. No, there must be some other answer.

A mile or so farther along he found the reason for the diverted stream. Landslide. Where water had chuckled and rustled along the left-hand branch before, now it took the other route. Dantan followed the dry canyon, finding the going easier now, since Phobos had risen . . . an Eye of Thar. "The Eyes of the god miss nothing. They move across the world, and nothing can hide from Thar, or from his destiny."

Then Dantan saw rounded metal. Washed clean by the water that had run here lately, a corroded, curved surface rose dome-shaped from the stream bed.

The presence of an artifact in this place was curious enough. The people of Klanvahr—the old race—had builded with some

substance that had not survived; plastic or something else that was not metal. Yet this dome had the unmistakable dull sheen of steel. It was an alloy, unusually strong or it could never have lasted this long, even though protected by its covering of rocks and earth. A little nerve began jumping in Dantan's cheek. He had paused briefly, but now he came forward and with his booted foot kicked away some of the dirt about the cryptic metal.

A curving line broke it. Scraping vigorously, Dantan discovered that this marked the outline of an oval door, horizontal, and with a handle of some sort, though it was caked and fixed in its socket with dirt. Dantan's lips were very thin now, and his eyes glittering and bright. An ambush—a weapon against the Redhelms—whatever might exist behind this lost door, it was worth investigating, especially for a condemned man.

With water from the brook and a sliver of sharp stone, he pried and chiseled until the handle was fairly free from its heavy crust. It was a hook, like a shepherd's crook, protruding from a small bowl-shaped depression in the door. Dantan tested it. It would not move in any direction. He braced himself, legs straddled, body half doubled, and strained at the hook.

Blood beat against the back of his eyes. He heard drumming in his temples and straightened suddenly, thinking it the footsteps of Redhelms. Then, grinning sardonically, he bent to his work again, and this time the handle moved.

Beneath him the door slid down and swung aside, and the darkness below gave place to soft light. He saw a long tube stretching down vertically, with pegs protruding from the metal walls at regular intervals. It made a ladder. The bottom of the shaft was thirty feet below; its diameter was little more than the breadth of a big man's shoulders.

HE STOOD still for a moment, looking down, his mind almost swimming with wonder and surmise. Old, very old it must be, for the stream had cut its own bed out of the rock whose walls rose above him now. Old—and yet these metal surfaces gleamed as brightly as they must have gleamed on the day they were put together—for what purpose?



The wind sighed again down the canyon, and Dantan remembered the Redhelms on his track. He looked around once more and then lowered himself onto the ladder of metal pegs, testing them doubtfully before he let his full weight come down. They held.

There might be danger down below; there might not. There was certain danger coming after him among the twisting canyons. He reached up, investigated briefly, and swung the door back into place. There was a lock, he saw, and after a moment discovered how to manipulate it. So far, the results were satisfactory. He was temporarily safe from the Redhelms, provided he did not suffocate. There was no air intake here that he could see, but he breathed easily enough so far. He would worry about that when the need arose. There might be other things to worry about before lack of air began to distress him.

He descended.

At the bottom of the shaft was another door. Its handle yielded with no resistance this time, and Dantan stepped across the threshold into a large, square underground chamber, lit with pale radiance that came from the floor itself, as though light had been poured into the molten metal when it had first been made.

The room—

Faintly he heard a distant humming, like the after-resonance of a bell, but it died away almost instantly. The room was large, and empty except for some sort of machine standing against the farther wall. Dantan was not a technician. He knew guns and ships; that was enough. But the smooth, sleek functionalism of this machine gave him an almost sensuous feeling of pleasure.

How long had it been here? Who had built it? And for what purpose? He could not even guess. There was a great oval screen on the wall above what seemed to be a control board, and there were other, more enigmatic devices.

And the screen was black—dead black, with a darkness that ate up the light in the room and gave back nothing.

Yet there was something—

"Sanfel," a voice said. "*Sanfel. Coth dr'gchang. Sanfel—sihan!*"

*Sanfel . . . Sanfel . . . have you returned, Sanfel? Answer!*

It was a woman's voice . . . the voice of

a woman used to wielding power, quiet, somehow proud as the voice of Lucifer or Lilith might have been, and it spoke in a tongue that scarcely half a dozen living men could understand. . . . A whole great race had spoken it once; only the shamans remembered now, and the shamans who knew it were few. Dantan's godfather had been one. And Dantan remembered the slurring syllables of the rituals he had learned, well enough to know what the proud, bodiless voice was saying.

The nape of his neck prickled. Here was something he could not understand, and he did not like it. Like an animal scenting danger he shrank into himself, not crouching, but withdrawing, so that a smaller man seemed to stand there, ready and waiting for the next move. Only his eyes were not motionless. They raked the room for the unseen speaker—for some weapon to use when the time came for weapons.

His glance came back to the dark screen above the machine. And the voice said again, in the tongue of ancient Klanvahr:

"I am not used to waiting, Sanfel! If you hear me, speak. And speak quickly, for the time of peril comes close now. My Enemy is strong—"

Dantan said, "Can you hear me?" His eyes did not move from the screen.

Out of that blackness the girl's voice came, after a pause. It was imperious, and a little wary.

"You are not Sanfel. Where is he? Who are you, Martian?"

DANTAN let himself relax a little. There would be a parley, at any rate. But after that—

Words in the familiar, remembered old language came hesitantly to his lips.

"I am no Martian. I am of Earth blood, and I do not know this Sanfel."

"Then how did you get into Sanfel's place?" The voice was haughty now. "What are you doing there? Sanfel built his laboratory in a secret place."

"It was hidden well enough," Dantan told her grimly. "Maybe for a thousand years, or even ten thousand, for all I know. The door has been buried under a stream—"

"There is no water there. Sanfel's home is on a mountain, and his laboratory is built



underground." The voice rang like a bell. "I think you lie. I think you are an enemy— When I heard the signal summoning me, I came swiftly, wondering why Sanfel had delayed so long. I must find him, stranger. I must! If you are no enemy, bring me Sanfel!" This time there was something almost like panic in the voice.

"If I could, I would," Dantan said. "But there's no one here except me." He hesitated, wondering if the woman behind the voice could be—mad? Speaking from some mysterious place beyond the screen, in a language dead a thousand years, calling upon a man who must be long-dead too, if one could judge by the length of time this hidden room had lain buried.

He said after a moment, "This place has been buried for a long time. And—no one has spoken the tongue of Klanvahr for many centuries. If that was your Sanfel's language—" But he could not go on with that thought. If Sanfel had spoken Klanvahr then he must have died long ago. And the speaker beyond the screen—she who had known Sanfel, yet spoke in a young, sweet, light voice that Dantan was beginning to think sounded familiar. . . . He wondered if he could be mad too.

There was silence from the screen. After many seconds the voice spoke again, sadly and with an undernote of terror.

"I had not realized," it said, "that even time might be so different between Sanfel's world and mine. The space-time continua—yes, a day in my world might well be an age in yours. Time is elastic. In Zha I had thought a few dozen—" she used a term Dantan did not understand, "—had passed. But on Mars—centuries?"

"Tens of centuries," agreed Dantan, staring hard at the screen. "If Sanfel lived in old Klanvahr his people are scarcely a memory now. And Mars is dying. You—you're speaking from another world?"

"From another universe, yes. A very different universe from yours. It was only through Sanfel that I had made contact, until now— What is your name?"

"Dantan. Samuel Dantan."

"Not a Martian name. You are from—Earth, you say? What is that?"

"Another planet. Nearer the sun than Mars."

"We have no planets and no suns in Zha.

This is a different universe indeed. So different I find it hard to imagine what your world must be like." The voice died.

AND IT WAS a voice he knew. Dantan was nearly sure of that now, and the certainty frightened him. When a man in the Martian desert begins to see or hear impossibilities, he has reason to be frightened. As the silence prolonged itself he began almost to hope that the voice—the implausibly familiar voice—had been only imagination. Hesitantly he said, "Are you still there?" and was a little relieved, after all, to hear her say,

"Yes, I am here. I was thinking. . . . I need help. I need it desperately. I wonder—has Sanfel's laboratory changed? Does the machine still stand? But it must, or I could not speak to you now. If the other things work, there may be chance. . . . Listen." Her voice grew urgent. "I may have a use for you. Do you see a lever, scarlet, marked with the Klanvahr symbol for 'sight'?"

"I see it," Dantan said.

"Push it forward. There is no harm in that, if you are careful. We can see each other—that is all. But do not touch the lever with the 'door' symbol on it. Be certain of that . . . Wait!" Sudden urgency was in the voice.

"Yes?" Dantan had not moved.

"I am forgetting. There is danger if you are not protected from—from certain vibration that you might see here. This is a different universe, and your Martian physical laws do not hold good between our worlds. Vibration . . . light . . . other things might harm you. There should be armor in Sanfel's laboratory. Find it."

Dantan glanced around. There was a cabinet in one corner. He went over to it slowly, his eyes wary. He had no intention of relaxing vigilance here simply because that voice sounded familiar. . . .

Inside the cabinet hung a suit of something like space armor, more flexible and skin tight than any he had ever seen, and with a transparent helmet through which vision seemed oddly distorted. He got into the suit carefully, pulling up the rich shining folds over his body, thinking strangely how long time had stood still in this small room since the last time a man had worn it. The whole room looked slightly differ-



ent when he set the helmet into place. It must be polarized, he decided, though that alone could not account for the strange dimming and warping of vision that was evident.

"All ready," he said after a moment."

"Then throw the switch."

With his hand upon it Dantan hesitated for one last instant of wariness. He was stepping into unknown territory now, and to him the unknown meant the perilous. His mind went back briefly to the Redhelms scouring the canyons above for him. He quieted his uneasy mind with the thought that there might be some weapon in the world of the voice which he could turn against them later. Certainly, without a weapon, he had little to lose. But he knew that weapon or no weapon, danger or not, he must see the face behind that sweet, familiar, imperious voice.

He pressed the lever forward. It hesitated, the weight of milleniums behind its inertia. Then, groaning a little in its socket, it moved.

Across the screen above it a blaze of color raged like a sudden shining deluge. Blinded by the glare, Dantan leaped back and swung an arm across his eyes.

When he looked again the colors had cleared. Blinking, he stared—and forgot to look away. For the screen was a window now, with the world of Zha behind it. . . . And in the center of that window—a girl. He looked once at her, and then closed his eyes. He had felt his heart move, and a nerve jumped in his lean cheek.

He whispered a name.

Impassively the girl looked down at him from the screen. There was no change, no light of recognition upon that familiar, beloved face. The face of the girl who had died at the Redhelm hands, long ago, in the fortress of Klanvahr. . . . For her sake he had hunted the Redhelms all these dangerous years. For her sake he had taken to the spaceways and the outlaw life. In a way, for her sake the Redhelms hunted him now through the canyons overhead. But here in the screen, she did not know him.

He knew that this was not possible. Some outrageous trick of vision made the face and the slender body of a woman from another universe seem the counterpart of that remembered woman. But he knew it must be an illusion, for in a world as differ-

ent as Zha surely there could be no human creatures at all, certainly no human who wore the same face as the girl he remembered.

ASIDE from the girl herself, there was nothing to see. The screen was blank, except for vague shapes—outlines— The helmet, he thought, filtered out more than light. He sensed, somehow, that beyond her stretched the world of Zha, but he could see nothing except the shifting, ever-changing colors of the background.

She looked down at him without expression. Obviously the sight of him had wakened in her no such deep-reaching echoes of emotion as her face woke in him. She said, her voice almost unbearably familiar; a voice sounding from the silence of death over many chilly years,

"Dantan. Samuel Dantan. Earthly language is as harsh as the Klanvahr I learned from Sanfel. Yet my name may seem strange to you. I am Quiana."

He said hoarsely, "What do you want? What did you want with Sanfel?"

"Help," Quiana said. "A weapon. Sanfel had promised me a weapon. He was working very hard to make one, risking much . . . and now time has eaten him up—that strange, capricious time that varies so much between your world and mine. To me it was only yesterday—and I still need the weapon."

Dantan's laugh was harsh with jealousy of that unknown and long-dead Martian.

"Then I'm the wrong man," he said roughly. "I've no weapon. I've men tracking me down to kill me, now."

She leaned forward a little, gesturing. "Can you escape? You are hidden here, you know."

"They'll find the same way I found, up above."

"The laboratory door can be locked, at the top of the shaft."

"I know. I locked it. But there's no food or water here. . . . No, if I had any weapons I wouldn't be here now."

"Would you not?" she asked in a curious voice. "In old Klanvahr, Sanfel once told me, they had a saying that none could hide from his destiny."

Dantan gave her a keen, inquiring look. Did she mean—herself? That same face and voice and body, so cruelly come back



from death to waken the old grief anew? Or did she know whose likeness she wore—or could it be only his imagination, after all? For if Sanfel had known her too, and if Sanfel had died as long ago as he must have died, then this same lovely image had lived centuries and milleniums before the girl at Klanvahr Fortress. . . .

"I remember," said Dantan briefly.

"My world," she went on, oblivious to the turmoil in his mind, "my world is too different to offer you any shelter, though I suppose you could enter it for a little while, in that protective armor that Sanfel made. But not to stay. We spring from soil too alien to one another's worlds. . . . Even this communication is not easy. And there is no safety here in Zha either, now. Now that Sanfel has failed me."

"I—I'd help you if I could." He said it with difficulty, trying to force the remembrance upon himself that this was a stranger. . . . "Tell me what's wrong."

She shrugged with a poignantly familiar motion.

"I have an Enemy. One of a lower race. And he—it—there is no word!—has cut me off from my people here in a part of Zha that is—well, dangerous—I can't describe to you the conditions here. We have no common terms to use in speaking of them. But there is great danger, and the Enemy is coming closer—and I am alone. If there were another of my people here to divide the peril I think I could destroy him. He has a weapon of his own, and it is stronger than my power, though not stronger than the power two of my race together can wield. It—it *pulls*. It destroys, in a way I can find no word to say. I had hoped from Sanfel something to divert him until he could be killed. I told him how to forge such a weapon, but—time would not let him do it. The teeth of time ground him into dust, as my Enemy's weapon will grind me soon."

She shrugged again.

"If I could get you a gun," Dantan said. "A force-ray—"

"What are they?"

He described the weapons of his day. But Quiana's smile was a little scornful when he finished.

"We of Zha have passed beyond the use of missile weapons—even such missiles as bullets or rays. Nor could they touch my

Enemy. No, we can destroy in ways that require no—no beams or explosives. No, Dantan, you speak in terms of your own universe. We have no common ground. It is a pity that time eddied between Sanfel and me, but eddy it did, and I am helpless now. And the Enemy will be upon me soon. Very soon."

SHE let her shoulders sag and resignation dimmed the remembered vividness of her face. Dantan looked up at her grimly, muscles riding his set jaw. It was almost intolerable, this facing her again in need, and again helpless, and himself without power to aid. It had been bad enough that first time, to learn long afterward that she had died at enemy hands while he was too far away to protect her. But to see it all take place again before his very eyes!

"There must be a way," he said, and his hand gripped the lever marked "door" in the ancient tongue.

"Wait!" Quiana's voice was urgent.

"What would happen?"

"The door would open. I could enter your world, and you mine."

"Why can't you leave, then, and wait until it's safe to go back?"

"I have tried that," Quiana said. "It will never be safe. The Enemy waited too. No, it must come, in the end, to a battle—and I shall not win that fight. I shall not see my own people or my own land again, and I suppose I must face that knowledge. But I did hope, when I heard Sanfel's signal sound again. . . ." She smiled a little. "I know you would help me if you could, Dantan. But there is nothing to be done now."

"I'll come in," he said doggedly. "Maybe there's something I could do."

"You could not touch him. Even now there's danger. He was very close when I heard that signal. This is his territory. When I heard the bell and thought Sanfel had returned with a weapon for me, I dared greatly in coming here." Her voice died away; a withdrawn look veiled her eyes from him.

After a long silence she said, "The Enemy is coming. Turn off the screen, Dantan. And goodbye."

"No," he said. "Wait!" But she shook her head and turned away from him, her thin robe swirling, and moved off like a



pale shadow into the dim, shadowless emptiness of the background. He stood watching helplessly, feeling all the old despair wash over him a second time as the girl he loved went alone into danger he could not share. Sometimes as she moved away she was eclipsed by objects he could not see—trees, he thought, or rocks, that did not impinge upon his eyes through the protective helmet. A strange world indeed Zha must be, whose very rocks and trees were too alien for human eyes to look upon in safety. . . . Only Quiana grew smaller and smaller upon the screen, and it seemed to Dantan as though a cord stretched between them, pulling thinner and thinner as she receded into danger and distance.

It was unbearable to think that the cord might break—break a second time. . . .

Far away something moved in the cloudy world of Zha. Tiny in the distance though it was, it was unmistakably not human. Dantan lost sight of Quiana. Had she found some hiding place behind some unimaginable outcropping of Zha's terrain?

The Enemy came forward.

It was huge and scaled and terrible, human, but not a human; tailed, but no beast; intelligent, but diabolic. He never saw it too clearly, and he was grateful to his helmet for that. The polarized glass seemed to translate a little, as well as to blot out. He felt sure that this creature which he saw—or almost saw—did not look precisely as it seemed to him upon the screen. Yet it was easy to believe that such a being had sprung from the alien soil of Zha. There was nothing remotely like it on any of the worlds he knew. And it was hateful. Every line of it made his hackles bristle.

It carried a coil of brightly colored tubing slung over one grotesque shoulder, and its monstrous head swung from side to side as it paced forward into the screen like some strange and terrible mechanical toy. It made no sound, and its progress was horrible in its sheer relentless monotony.

**A**BRUPTLY it paused. He thought it had sensed the girl's presence, somewhere in hiding. It reached for the coil of tubing with one malformed—hand?

"Quiana," it said—its voice as gentle as a child's.

Silence. Dantan's breathing was loud in the emptiness.

"Quiana?" The tone was querulous now.

"Quiana," the monster crooned, and swung about with sudden, unexpected agility. Moving with smooth speed, it vanished into the clouds of the background, as the girl had vanished. For an eternity Dantan watched colored emptiness, trying to keep himself from trembling.

Then he heard the voice again, gentle no longer, but ringing like a bell with terrible triumph, "*Quiana!*"

And out of the swirling clouds he saw Quiana break, despair upon her face, her sheer garments streaming behind her. After her came the Enemy. It had unslung the tube it wore over its shoulder, and as it lifted the weapon Quiana swerved desperately aside. Then from the coil of tubing blind lightning ravened.

Shattering the patternless obscurity, the blaze of its color burst out, catching Quiana in a cone of expanding, shifting brilliance. And the despair in her eyes was suddenly more than Dantan could endure.

His hand struck out at the lever marked "door"; he swung it far over and the veil that had masked the screen was gone. He vaulted up over its low threshold, not seeing anything but the face and the terror of Quiana. But it was not Quiana's name he called as he leaped.

He lunged through the Door onto soft, yielding substance that was unlike anything he had ever felt underfoot before. He scarcely knew it. He flung himself forward, fists clenched, ready to drive futile blows into the monstrous mask of the Enemy. It loomed over him like a tower, tremendous, scarcely seen through the shelter of his helmet—and then the glare of the light-cone caught him.

It was tangible light. It flung him back with a piledriver punch that knocked the breath from his body. And the blow was psychic as well as physical. Shaking and reeling from the shock, Dantan shut his eyes and fought forward, as though against a steady current too strong to breast very long. He felt Quiana beside him, caught in the same dreadful stream. And beyond the source of the light the Enemy stood up in stark, inhuman silhouette.

He never saw Quiana's world. The light was too blinding. And yet, in a subtle



sense, it was not blinding to the eyes, but to the mind. Nor was it light, Dantan thought, with some sane part of his mind. Too late he remembered Quiana's warning that the world of Zha was not Mars or Earth, that in Zha even light was different.

Cold and heat mingled, indescribably bewildering, shook him hard. And beyond these were—other things. The light from the Enemy's weapon was not born in Dantan's universe, and it had properties that light should not have. He felt bare, emptied, a hollow shell through which radiance streamed.

For suddenly, every cell of his body was an eye. The glaring brilliance, the intolerable vision beat at the foundations of his sanity. Through him the glow went pouring, washing him, nerves, bone, flesh, brain, in floods of color that were not color, sound that was not sound, vibration that was spawned in the shaking hells of worlds beyond imagination.

It inundated him like a tide, and for a long, long, timeless while he stood helpless in its surge, moving within his body and without it, and within his mind and soul as well. The color of stars thundered in his brain. The crawling foulness of unspeakable hues writhed along his nerves so monstrously that he felt he could never cleanse himself of that obscenity.

And nothing else existed—only the light that was not light, but blasphemy.

Then it began to ebb . . . faded . . . grew lesser and lesser, until— Beside him he could see Quiana now. She was no longer stumbling in the cone of light, no longer shuddering and wavering in its violence, but standing erect and facing the Enemy, and from her eyes—something—poured.

Steadily the cone of brilliance waned. But still its glittering, shining foulness poured through Dantan. He felt himself weakening, his senses fading, as the tide of dark horror mounted through his brain.

And covered him up with its blanketing immensity.

**H**E WAS back in the laboratory, leaning against the wall and breathing in deep, shuddering draughts. He did not remember stumbling through the Door again, but he was no longer in Zha. Quiana stood beside him, here upon the Martian

soil of the laboratory. She was watching him with a strange, quizzical look in her eyes as he slowly fought back to normal, his heart quieting by degrees, his breath becoming even. He felt drained, exhausted, his emotions cleansed and purified as though by baths of flame.

Presently he reached for the clasp that fastened his clumsy armor. Quiana put out a quick hand, shaking her head.

"No," she said, and then stared at him again for a long moment without speaking. Finally, "I had not known—I did not think this could be done. Another of my own race—yes. But you, from Mars—I would not have believed that you could stand against the Enemy for a moment, even with your armor."

"I'm from Earth, not Mars. And I didn't stand long."

"Long enough," She smiled faintly. "You see now what happened? We of Zha can destroy without weapons, using only the power inherent in our bodies. Those like the Enemy have a little of that power too, but they need mechanical devices to amplify it. And so when you diverted the Enemy's attention and forced him to divide his attack between us—the pressure upon me was relieved, and I could destroy him. But I would not have believed it possible."

"You're safe now," Dantan said, with no expression in voice or face.

"Yes. I can return."

"And you will?"

"Of course I shall."

"We are more alike than you had realized."

She looked up toward the colored curtain of the screen. "That is true. It is not the complete truth, Dantan."

He said, "I love you—Quiana." This time he called her by name.

Neither of them moved. Minutes went by silently.

Quiana said, as if she had not heard him, "Those who followed you are here. I have been listening to them for some time now. They are trying to break through the door at the top of the shaft."

He took her hand in his gloved grasp. "Stay here. Or let me go back to Zha with you. Why not?"

"You could not live there without your armor."

"Then stay."



Quiana looked away, her eyes troubled. As Dantan moved to slip off his helmet her hand came up again to stop him.

"Don't."

"Why not?"

For answer she rose, beckoning for him to follow. She stepped across the threshold into the shaft and swiftly began to climb the pegs toward the surface and the hammering of the Redhelms up above. Dantan, at her gesture, followed.

Over her shoulder she said briefly,

"We are of two very different worlds. Watch—but be careful." And she touched the device that locked the oval door.

It slipped down and swung aside.

**D**ANTAN caught one swift glimpse of Redhelm heads dodging back to safety. They did not know, of course, that he was unarmed. He reached up desperately, trying to pull Quiana back but she slipped aside and sprang lightly out of the shaft into the cool gray light of the Martian morning.

Forgetting her warning, Dantan pulled himself up behind her. But as his head and shoulders emerged from the shaft he stopped, frozen. For the Redhelms were falling. There was no mark upon them, yet they fell. . . .

She did not stir, even when the last man had stiffened into rigid immobility. Then Dantan clambered up and without looking at Quiana went to the nearest body and turned it over. He could find no mark. Yet the Redhelm was dead.

"That is why you had to wear the armor," she told him gently. "We are of different worlds, you and I."

He took her in his arms—and the soft resilience of her was lost against the stiffness of the protective suit. He would never even know how her body felt, because of the armor between them. . . . He could not even kiss her—again. He had taken his last kiss of the mouth so like Quiana's mouth, long years ago, and he would never kiss it again. The barrier was too high between them.

"You can't go back," he told her in a rough, uneven voice. "We *are* of the same world, no matter what—no matter how—You're no stranger to me, Quiana!"

She looked up at him with troubled eyes,

shaking her head, regret in her voice.

"Do you think I don't know why you fought for me, Dantan?" she asked in a clear voice. "Did you ever stop to wonder why Sanfel risked so much for me, too?"

He stared down at her, his brain spinning, almost afraid to hear what she would say next. He did not want to hear. But her voice went on inexorably.

"I cheated you, Dantan. I cheated Sanfel yesterday—a thousand years ago. My need was very great, you see—and our ways are not yours. I knew that no man would fight for a stranger as I needed a man to fight for me."

He held her tightly in gloved hands that could feel only a firm body in their grasp, not what that body was really like, nothing about it except its firmness. He caught his breath to interrupt, but she went on with a rush.

"I have no way of knowing how you see me, Dantan," she said relentlessly. "I don't know how Sanfel saw me. To each of you—because I needed your help—I wore the shape to which you owed help most. I could reach into your minds deeply enough for that—to mould a remembered body for your eyes. My own shape is—different. You will never know it." She sighed. "You were a brave man, Dantan. Braver and stronger than I ever dreamed an alien could be. I wish— I wonder— Oh, let me go! Let me go!"

She whirled out of his grasp with sudden vehemence, turning her face away so that he could not see her eyes. Without glancing at him again she bent over the shaft and found the topmost pegs, and in a moment was gone.

Dantan stood there, waiting. Presently he heard the muffled humming of a muted bell, as though sounding from another world. Then he knew that there was no one in the ancient laboratory beneath his feet.

He shut the door carefully and scraped soil over it. He did not mark the place. The dim red spot of the sun was rising above the canyon wall. His face set, Dantan began walking toward the distant cavern where his aircar was hidden. It was many miles away, but there was no one to stop him, now.

He did not look back.



# PS's Feature Flash

**FLASHING** you the highlights on two of the men you've met in preceding issues—those cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories and the Vizigraph.

## THIS GUY IS NUTS!

Yes, it is I. In the *Flash*.

Since this is supposed to be an autobiog., four things should be considered.

(1) *When and where was I born?* (Tear off the top of your head and mail with 25¢ to me, care of this column, for complete details.)

(2) *What do I look like?* To answer this, you must drag out the March, 1943, ish of PLANET STORIES. Now look at the cover. See that muscular hero? Well, I am the green guy right next to him. That sharp elbow of mine is extremely useful for getting me through the drug-store crowd when the latest PLANET is on the stands.

(3) *What is my draft classification?* 4-F, due to an ingrown whisker.

(4) *What's my occupation?* I'm a cushion stuffer in a toadstool factory!!!!

For a hobby, I write 16,000 word novelets about thrilling adventure beyond far-fetched galaxies. My stories are filled with scope. (Horoscope, telescope, microscope, and two scopes of ice-cream.)

I'm not really as sour-caustic as I may seem; I'm a kind-hearted guy. I'm fond of dogs, cats, and little children. (Sometimes I eat rabbit instead.)

Ho hum. My garage has caught fire again. Does anyone know a good way to get rid of *thermites*? Anyhow, you must excuse me now, for I must go out and drool on the flames.

(Finish this essay in one additional word or less and win a beautiful, hand-engraved cake of Lifebuoy. . . .)

G. ALACTIC WAIBLE,  
S-N-9-1.

And this brings us to the second of our contributors, one who has earned his way into this department by the cleverness and versatility with which he writes the missives for the Vizigraph. Ladies and Gentlemen, we give you—

## SEABEE SCOURGE NOW!

Camp Peary  
Williamsburg, Virginia

Readers, you are about to receive an autobiography written by the person under discussion. It will naturally be written in the first person.

I was born twenty years and three months ago, approximately, in a small Idaho town which then went by the name of Rigby. My first recollections are of school. I spent my first eight years of school in four different schools. My next 4 years were spent in three different high schools. As an explanatory note for so much moving around, I might add that my mother is a school teacher.

Now wasn't that a colorful life, folks? Incidentally, the town I was born in still goes by the name of Rigby.

It is going on three years since I graduated from school. That time has been spent in running around doing odd jobs. I visited California, Utah, Kansas, Wyoming and Colorado to mention but a few. For some strange reason, I always returned to good old Idaho.

Almost two months ago Uncle Sam sent me an invitation for a nice long camping trip. I considered turning it down but finally I decided that I would go; and if I didn't like it, I would then turn it down. From Idaho to Virginia is quite a long camping trip. I've found out since I left home that the invitation couldn't be turned down even if I wanted to.

Seriously, though, I am proud to be a member of Uncle Sam's fighting forces and I am going into it with heart and soul. When the war is won, I can make a grand flourish and say "I helped bring trimmed edges to all science-fiction magazines." You all know they've been promised to us after the war. Until that time, keep buying war bonds and stamps and doing your bit to help.

CLINTON BLACKBURN,  
*The Scourge of the Vizigraph.*

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
**BUY WAR BONDS**  
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★





# Mr. Meek Plays Polo

By **CLIFFORD D. SIMAK**

**Mr. Meek was having his troubles. First, the *educated* bugs worried him; then the welfare worker tried to stop the Ring Rats' feud by enlisting his aid. And now, he was a drafted space-polo player—a fortune bet on his ability at a game he had never played in his cloistered life.**

Illustration by **INGELS**



# THE SIGN READ:

*Atomic Motors Repaired. Busted Plates Patched Up. Rocket Tubes Relined. Wheeze In, Whiz Out!*

It added, as an afterthought, in shaky, inept lettering:

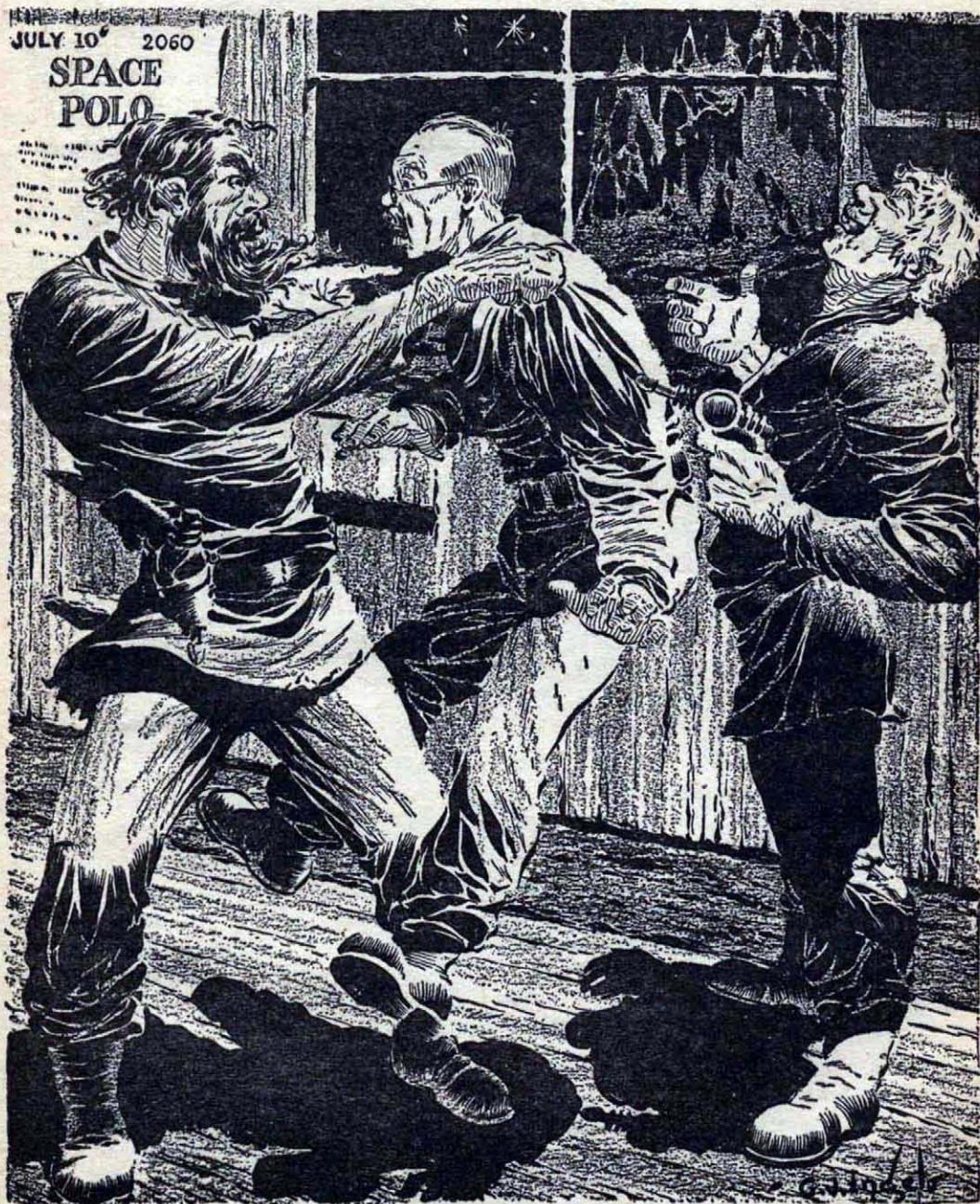
*We Fix Anything.*

Mr. Oliver Meek stared owlishly at the sign, which hung from an arm attached to a metal standard sunk in solid rock. A second sign was wired to the standard just below the metal arm, but its legend was

faint, almost illegible. Meek blinked at it through thick-lensed spectacles, finally deciphered its scrawl:

ASK ABOUT EDUCATED BUGS.

A bit bewildered, but determined not to show it, Meek swung away from the signpost and gravely regarded the settlement. On the chart it was indicated by a fairly sizeable dot, but that was merely a matter of comparison. Out Saturn-way even the tiniest outpost assumes importance far beyond its size.



"Ulp!" ulped Mr. Meek shakily.



The slab of rock was no more than five miles across, perhaps even less. Here in its approximate center, were two buildings, both of almost identical construction, semi-spherical and metal. Out here, Meek realized, shelter was the thing. Architecture merely for architecture's sake was still a long way off.

One of the buildings was the repair shop which the sign advertised. The other, according to the crudely painted legend smeared above its entrance lock, was the *Saturn Inn*.

The rest of the rock was landing field, pure and simple. Blasters had leveled off the humps and irregularities so spaceships could sit down.

Two ships now were on the field, pulled up close against the repair shop. One, Meek noticed, belonged to the Solar Health and Welfare Department, the other to the Galactic Pharmaceutical Corporation. The Galactic ship was a freighter, ponderous and slow. It was here, Meek knew, to take on a cargo of radiation moss. But the other was a puzzler. Meek wrinkled his brow and blinked his eyes, trying to figure out what a welfare ship would be doing in this remote corner of the Solar System.

Slowly and carefully, Meek clumped toward the squat repair shop. Once or twice he stumbled, hoping fervently he wouldn't get the feet of his cumbersome spacesuit all tangled up. The gravity was slight, next to non-existent, and one who wasn't used to it had to take things easy and remember where he was.

Behind him Saturn filled a tenth of the sky, a yellow, lemon-tinged ball, streaked here and there with faint crimson lines and blotched with angry, bright green patches.

To right and left glinted the whirling, twisting, tumbling rocks that made up the Inner Ring, while arcing above the horizon opposed to Saturn was the spangled glistening rainbows of the other rings.

"Like dewdrops in the black of space," Meek mumbled to himself. But he immediately felt ashamed of himself for growing poetic. This sector of space, he knew, was not in the least poetic. It was hard and savage and as he thought about that, he hitched up his gun belt and struck out with a firmer tread that almost upset him.

After that, he tried to think of nothing except keeping his two feet under him.

Reaching the repair shop's entrance lock, he braced himself solidly to keep his balance, reached out and pressed a buzzer. Swiftly the lock spun outward and a moment later Meek had passed through the entrance vault and stepped into the office.

A dungareed mechanic sat tilted in a chair against a wall, feet on the desk, a greasy cap pushed back on his head.

Meek stamped his feet gratefully, pleased at feeling Earth gravity under him again. He lifted the hinged helmet of his suit back on his shoulders.

"You are the gentleman who can fix things?" he asked the mechanic.

THE mechanic stared. Here was no hell-for-leather freighter pilot, no be-whiskered roamer of the outer orbits. Meek's hair was white and stuck out in uncombed tufts in a dozen directions. His skin was pale. His blue eyes looked watery behind the thick lenses that rode his nose. Even the bulky spacesuit failed to hide his stooped shoulders and slight frame.

The mechanic said nothing.

Meek tried again. "I saw the sign. It said you could fix anything. So I . . ."

The mechanic shook himself.

"Sure," he agreed, still slightly dazed. "Sure I can fix you up. What you got?"

He swung his feet off the desk.

"I ran into a swarm of pebbles," Meek confessed. "Not much more than dust, really, but the screen couldn't stop it all."

He fumbled his hands self-consciously. "Awkward of me," he said.

"It happens to the best of them," the mechanic consoled. "Saturn sweeps in clouds of the stuff. Thicker than hell when you reach the Rings. Lots of ships pull in with punctures. Won't take no time."

Meek cleared his throat uneasily. "I'm afraid it's more than a puncture. A pebble got into the instruments. Washed out some of them."

The mechanic clucked sympathetically. "You're lucky. Tough job to bring in a ship without all the instruments. Must have a honey of a navigator."

"I haven't got a navigator," Meek said, quietly.

The mechanic stared at him, eyes pop-



ping. "You mean you brought it in alone? No one with you?"

Meek gulped and nodded. "Dead reckoning," he said.

The mechanic glowed with sudden admiration. "I don't know who you are, mister," he declared, "but whoever you are, you're the best damn pilot that ever took to space."

"Really I'm not," said Meek. "I haven't done much piloting, you see. Up until just awhile ago, I never had left Earth. Bookkeeper for Lunar Exports."

"Bookkeeper!" yelled the mechanic. "How come a bookkeeper can handle a ship like that?"

"I learned it," said Meek.

"You learned it?"

"Sure, from a book. I saved my money and I studied. I always wanted to see the Solar System and here I am."

Dazedly, the mechanic took off his greasy cap, laid it carefully on the desk, reached out for a spacesuit that hung from a wall hook.

"Afraid this job might take a while," he said. "Especially if we have to wait for parts. Have to get them in from Titan City. Why don't you go over to the *Inn*. Tell Moe I sent you. They'll treat you right."

"Thank you," said Meek, "but there's something else I'm wondering about. There was another sign out there. Something about educated bugs."

"Oh, them," said the mechanic. "They belong to Gus Hamilton. Maybe belong ain't the right word because they were on the rock before Gus took over. Anyhow, Gus is mighty proud of them, although at times they sure run him ragged. First year they almost drove him loopy trying to figure out what kind of game they were playing."

"Game?" asked Meek, wondering if he was being hoaxed.

"Sure, game. Like checkers. Only it ain't. Not chess, neither. Even worse than that. Bugs dig themselves a batch of holes, then choose up sides and play for hours. About the time Gus would think he had it figured out, they'd change the rules and throw him off again."

"That doesn't make sense," protested Meek.

"Stranger," declared the mechanic, sol-

emly, "there ain't nothing about them bugs that make sense. Gus' rock is the only one they're on. Gus thinks maybe the rock don't even belong to the Solar system. Thinks maybe it's a hunk of stone from some other solar system. Figures maybe it crossed space somehow and was captured by Saturn, sucked into the Ring. That would explain why it's the only one that has the bugs. They come along with it, see."

"This Gus Hamilton," said Meek. "I'd like to see him. Where could I find him?"

"Go over to the *Inn* and wait around," advised the mechanic. "He'll come in sooner or later. Drops around regular, except when his rheumatism bothers him, to pick up a bundle of papers. Subscribes to a daily paper, he does. Only man out here that does any reading. But all he reads is the sports section. Nuts about sports, Gus is."

## II

**M**OE, bartender at Saturn Inn, leaned his elbow on the bar and braced his chin in an outspread palm. His face wore a melancholy, hang-dog look. Moe liked things fairly peaceable, but now he saw trouble coming in big batches.

"Lady," he declared mournfully, "you sure picked yourself a job. The boys around here don't take to being uplifted and improved. They ain't worth it, either. Just ring-rats, that's all they are."

Henrietta Perkins, representative for the public health and welfare department of the Solar government, shuddered at his suggestion of anything so low it didn't yearn for betterment.

"But those terrible feuds," she protested. "Fighting just because they live in different parts of the Ring. It's natural they might feel some rivalry, but all this killing! Surely they don't enjoy getting killed."

"Sure they enjoy it," declared Moe. "Not being killed, maybe . . . although they're willing to take a chance on that. Not many of them get killed, in fact. Just a few that get sort of careless. But even if some of them are killed, you can't go messing around with that feud of theirs. If them boys out in sectors Twenty-Three and Thirty-Seven didn't have their feud they'd plain die of boredom. They just



got to have somebody to fight with. They been fighting, off and on, for years."

"But they could fight with something besides guns," said the welfare lady, a-smirk with righteousness. "That's why I'm here. To try to get them to turn their natural feelings of rivalry into less deadly and disturbing channels. Direct their energies into other activities."

"Like what?" asked Moe, fearing the worst.

"Athletic events," said Miss Perkins.

"Tin shinny, maybe," suggested Moe, trying to be sarcastic.

She missed the sarcasm. "Or spelling contests," she said.

"Them fellow can't spell," insisted Moe.

"Games of some sort, then. Competitive games."

"Now you're talking," Moe enthused.

"They take to games. Seven-toed Pete with the deuces wild."

The inner door of the entrance lock grated open and a spacesuited figure limped into the room. The spacesuit visor snapped up and a brush of grey whiskers spouted into view.

It was Gus Hamilton.

He glared at Moe. "What in tarnation is all this foolishness?" he demanded. "Got your message, I did, and here I am. But it better be important."

He hobbled to the bar. Moe reached for a bottle and shoved it toward him, keeping out of reach.

"Have some trouble?" he asked, trying to be casual.

"Trouble! Hell, yes!" blustered Gus. "But I ain't the only one that's going to have trouble. Somebody sneaked over and stole the injector out of my space crate. Had to borrow Hank's to get over here. But I know who it was. There ain't but one other ring-rat got a rocket my injector will fit."

"Bud Craney," said Moe. It was no secret. Every man in the two sectors of the Ring knew just exactly what kind of spacecraft the other had.

"That's right," said Gus, "and I'm fixing to go over into Thirty-seven and yank Bud up by the roots."

He took a jolt of liquor. "Yes, sir, I sure aim to crucify him."

His eyes lighted on Miss Henrietta Perkins.

"Visitor?" he asked.

"She's from the government," said Moe.

"Revenuer?"

"Nope. From the welfare outfit. Aims to help you fellows out. Says there ain't no sense in you boys in Twenty-three all the time fighting with the gang from Thirty-seven."

Gus stared in disbelief.

Moe tried to be helpful. "She wants you to play games."

Gus strangled on his drink, clawed for air, wiped his eyes.

"So that's why you asked me over here. Another of your danged peace parleys. Come and talk things over, you said. So I came."

"There's something in what she says," defended Moe. "You ring-rats been ripping up space for a long time now. Time you growed up and settled down. You're aiming on going over right now and pulverizing Bud. It won't do you any good."

"I'll get a heap of satisfaction out of it," insisted Gus. "And, besides, I'll get my injector back. Might even take a few things off Bud's ship. Some of the parts on mine are wearing kind of thin."

Gus took another drink, glowering at Miss Perkins.

"So the government sent you out to make us respectable," he said.

"Merely to help you, Mr. Hamilton," she declared. "To turn your hatreds into healthy competition."

"Games, eh?" said Gus. "Maybe you got something, after all. Maybe we could fix up some kind of game . . ."

"Forget it, Gus," warned Moe. "If you're thinking of energy guns at fifty paces, it's out. Miss Perkins won't stand for anything like that."

**G**US wiped his whiskers and looked hurt. "Nothing of the sort," he denied. "Dang it, you must think I ain't got no sportsmanship at all. I was thinking of a real sport. A game they play back on Earth and Mars. Read about it in my papers. Follow the teams, I do. Always wanted to see a game, but never did."

Miss Perkins beamed. "What game is it, Mr. Hamilton?"

"Space polo," said Gus.

"Why, how wonderful," simpered Miss



Perkins. "And you boys have the space-ships to play it with."

Moe looked alarmed. "Miss Perkins," he warned, "don't let him talk you into it."

"You shut your trap," snapped Gus. "She wants us to play games, don't she. Well, polo is a game. A nice, respectable game. Played in the best society."

"It wouldn't be no nice, respectable game the way you fellows would play it," predicted Moe. "It would turn into mass murder. Wouldn't be one of you who wouldn't be planning on getting even with someone else, once you got him in the open."

Miss Perkins gasped. "Why, I'm sure they wouldn't!"

"Of course we wouldn't," declared Gus, solemn as an owl.

"And that ain't all," said Moe, warming to the subject. "Those crates you guys got wouldn't last out the first chukker. Most of them would just naturally fall apart the first sharp turn they made. You can't play polo in ships tied up with haywire. Those broomsticks you ring-rats ride around on are so used to second rate fuel they'd split wide open first squirt of high test stuff you gave them."

The inner locks grated open and a man stepped through into the room.

"You're prejudiced," Gus told Moe. "You just don't like space polo, that is all. You ain't got no blueblood in you. We'll leave it up to this man here. We'll ask his opinion of it."

The man flipped back his helmet, revealing a head thatched by white hair and dominated by a pair of outsize spectacles.

"My opinion, sir," said Oliver Meek, "seldom amounts to much."

"All we want to know," Gus told him, "is what you think of space polo."

"Space polo," declared Meek, "is a noble game. It requires expert piloting, a fine sense of timing and . . ."

"There, you see!" whooped Gus, triumphantly.

"I saw a game once," Meek volunteered.

"Swell," bellowed Gus. "We'll have you coach our team."

"But," protested Meek, "but . . . but."

"Oh, Mr. Hamilton," exulted Miss Perkins, "you are so wonderful. You think of everything."

"Hamilton!" squeaked Meek.

"Sure," said Gus. "Old Gus Hamilton. Grow the finest dog-gone radiation moss you ever clapped your eyes on."

"Then you're the gentleman who has bugs," said Meek.

"Now, look here," warned Gus, "you watch what you say or I'll hang one on you."

"He means your rock bugs," Moe explained, hastily.

"Oh, them," said Gus.

"Yes," said Meek, "I'm interested in them. I'd like to see them."

"See them," said Gus. "Mister, you can have them if you want them. Drove me out of house and home, they did. They're dippy over metal. Any kind of metal, but alloys especially. Eat the stuff. They'll tromp you to death heading for a space-ship. Got so I had to move over to another rock to live. Tried to fight it out with them, but they whipped me pure and simple. Moved out and let them have the place after they started to eat my shack right out from underneath my feet."

Meek looked crestfallen.

"Can't get near them, then," he said.

"Sure you can," said Gus. "Why not?"

"Well, a spacesuit's metal and . . ."

"Got that all fixed up," said Gus. "You come back with me and I'll let you have a pair of stilts."

"Stilts?"

"Yeah. Wooden stilts. Them danged fool bugs don't know what wood is. Seem to be scared of it, sort of. You can walk right among them if you want to, long as you're walking on the stilts."

Meek gulped. He could imagine what stilt walking would be like in a place where gravity was no more than the faintest whisper.

### III

THE BUGS had dug a new set of holes, much after the manner of a Chinese checker board, and now were settling down into their respective places preparatory to the start of another game.

For a mile or more across the flat surface of the rock that was Gus Hamilton's moss garden, ran a string of such gameboards, each one different, each one having



served as the scene of a now-completed game.

Oliver Meek cautiously wedged his stilts into two pitted pockets of rock, eased himself slowly and warily against the face of a knob of stone that jutted from the surface.

Even in his youth, Meek remembered, he never had been any great shakes on stilts. Here, on this bucking, weaving rock, with slick surfaces and practically no gravity, a man had to be an expert to handle them. Meek knew now he was no expert. A half-dozen dents in his space armor was ample proof of that.

Comfortably braced against the upjutting of stone, Meek dug into the pouch of his space gear, brought out a notebook and stylus. Flipping the pages, he stared, frowning, at the diagrams that covered them.

None of the diagrams made sense. They showed the patterns of three other boards and the moves that had been made by the bugs in playing out the game. Apparently, in each case, the game had been finished. Which, Meek knew, should have meant that some solution had been reached, some point won, some advantage gained.

But so far as Meek could see from study of the diagrams there was not even a purpose or a problem, let alone a solution or a point.

The whole thing was squirrely. But, Meek told himself, it fitted in. The whole Saturnian system was wacky. The rings, for example. Debris of a moon smashed up by Saturn's pull? Sweepings of space? No one knew.

Saturn itself, for that matter. A planet that kept Man at bay with deadly radiations. But radiations that, while they kept Man at a distance, at the same time served Man. For here, on the Inner Ring, where they had become so diluted that ordinary space armor filtered them out, they made possible the medical magic of the famous radiation moss.

One of the few forms of plant life found in the cold of space, the moss was nurtured by those mysterious radiations. Planted elsewhere, on kindlier worlds, it wilted and refused to grow. The radiations had been analyzed, Meek knew, and reproduced under laboratory conditions, but there still was something missing, some vital, elusive

factor that could not be analyzed. Under the artificial radiation, the moss still wilted and died.

And because Earth needed the moss to cure a dozen maladies and because it would grow nowhere else but here on the Inner Ring, men squatted on the crazy swirl of spacial boulders that made up the ring. Men like Hamilton, living on rocks that bucked and heaved along their orbits like chips riding the crest of a raging flood. Men who endured loneliness, dared death when crunching orbits intersected or, when rickety spacecraft flared, who went mad with nothing to do, with the mockery of space before them.

Meek shrugged his shoulders, almost upsetting himself.

**T**HE BUGS had started the game and Meek craned forward cautiously, watching eagerly, stylus poised above the notebook.

Crawling clumsily, the tiny insect-like creatures moved about, solemnly popping in and out of holes.

If there were opposing sides . . . and if it were a game, there'd have to be . . . they didn't seem to alternate the moves. Although, Meek admitted, certain rules and conditions which he had failed to note or recognize, might determine the number and order of moves allowed each side.

Suddenly there was confusion on the board. For a moment a half-dozen of the bugs raced madly about, as if seeking the proper hole to occupy. Then, as suddenly, all movement had ceased. And in another moment, they were on the move again, orderly again, but retracing their movements, going back several plays beyond the point of confusion.

Just as one would do when one made a mistake working a mathematical problem . . . going back to the point of error and going on again from there.

"Well, I'll be . . ." Mr. Meek said.

Meek stiffened and the stylus floated out of his hand, settled softly on the rock below.

A mathematical problem!

His breath gurgled in his throat.

He knew it now! He should have known it all the time. But the mechanic had talked about the bugs playing games and so had Hamilton. That had thrown him off.



Games! Those bugs weren't playing any game. They were solving mathematical equations!

Meek leaned forward to watch, forgetting where he was. One of the stilts slipped out of position and Meek felt himself start to fall. He dropped the notebook and frantically clawed at empty space.

The other stilt went, then, and Meek found himself floating slowly downward, gravity weak but inexorable. His struggle to retain his balance had flung him forward, away from the face of the rock and he was falling directly over the board on which the bugs were arrayed.

He pawed and kicked at space, but still floated down, course unchanged. He struck and bounced, struck and bounced again.

On the fourth bounce he managed to hook his fingers around a tiny projection of the surface. Fighting desperately, he regained his feet.

Something scurried across the face of his helmet and he lifted his hand before him. It was covered with the bugs.

Fumbling desperately, he snapped on the rocket motor of his suit, shot out into space, heading for the rock where the lights from the ports of Hamilton's shack blinked with the weaving of the rock.

Oliver Meek shut his eyes and groaned.

"Gus will give me hell for this," he told himself.

GUS shook the small wooden box thoughtfully, listening to the frantic scurrying within it.

"By rights," he declared, judiciously, "I should take this over and dump it in Bud's ship. Get even with him for swiping my injector."

"But you got the injector back," Meek pointed out.

"Oh, sure, I got it back," admitted Gus. "But it wasn't orthodox, it wasn't. Just getting your property back ain't getting even. I never did have a chance to smack Bud in the snoot the way I should of smacked him. Moe talked me into it. He was the one that had the idea the welfare lady should go over and talk to Bud. She must of laid it on thick, too, about how we should settle down and behave ourselves and all that. Otherwise Bud never would have given her that injector."

He shook his head dolefully. "This here

Ring ain't ever going to be the same again. If we don't watch out, we'll find ourselves being polite to one another."

"That would be awful," agreed Meek.

"Wouldn't it, though," declared Gus.

Meek squinted his eyes and pounced on the floor, scrabbling on hands and knees after a scurrying thing that twinkled in the lamplight.

"Got him," yelled Meek, scooping the shining mote up in his hand.

Gus inched the lid of the wooden box open. Meek rose and popped the bug inside.

"That makes twenty-eight of them," said Meek.

"I told you," Gus accused him, "that we hadn't got them all. You better take another good look at your suit. The danged things burrow right into solid metal and pull the hole in after them, seems like. Sneakiest cusses in the whole dang system. Just like chiggers back on Earth."

"Chiggers," Meek told him, "burrow into a person to lay eggs."

"Maybe these things do, too," Gus contended.

The radio on the mantel blared a warning signal, automatically tuning in on one of the regular newscasts from Titan City out on Saturn's biggest moon.

The syrupy, chamber of commerce voice of the announcer was shaky with excitement and pride.

"Next week," he said, "the annual Martian-Earth football game will be played at Greater New York on Earth. But in the Earth's newspapers tonight another story has pushed even that famous classic of the sporting world down into secondary place."

He paused and took a deep breath and his voice practically yodeled with delight.

"The sporting event, ladies and gentlemen, that is being talked up and down the streets of Earth tonight, is one that will be played here in our own Saturnian system. A space polo game. To be played by two unknown, pick-up, amateur teams down in the Inner Ring. Most of the men have never played polo before. Few if any of them have even seen a game. There may have been some of them who didn't, at first, know what it was.

"But they're going to play it. The men who ride those bucking rocks that make



up the Inner Ring will go out into space in their rickety ships and fight it out. And ladies and gentlemen, when I say fight it out, I really mean fight it out. For the game, it seems, will be a sort of tournament, the final battle in a feud that has been going on in the Ring for years. No one knows what started the feud. It has gotten so it really doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is that when men from sector Twenty-three meet those from sector Thirty-seven, the feud is taken up again. But that is at an end now. In a few days the feud will be played out to its bitter end when the ships from the Inner Ring go out into space to play that most dangerous of all sports, space polo. For the outcome of that game will decide, forever, the supremacy of one of the two sectors."

MEEK rose from his chair, opened his mouth as if to speak, but sank back again when Gus hissed at him and held a finger to his lips for silence.

"The teams are now in training," went on the newscaster, the happy lilt in his voice still undimmed, "and it is understood that sector Twenty-three has the advantage, at the start at least, of having a polo expert as its coach. Just who this expert is no one can say. Several names have been mentioned, but . . ."

"No, no," yelled Meek, struggling to his feet, but Gus shushed him, poking a finger toward him and grinning like a bearded imp.

". . . Bets are mounting high throughout the entire Saturnian system," the announcer was saying, "but since little is known about the teams, the odds still are even. It is likely, however, that odds will be demanded on the sector of Thirty-seven team on the basis of the story about the expert coach.

"The very audacity of such a game has attracted solar-wide attention and special fleets of ships will leave both Earth and Mars within the next few days to bring spectators to the game. Newsmen from the inner worlds, among them some of the system's most famous sports writers, are already on their way.

"Originally intended to be no more than a recreation project under the supervision of the department of health and welfare,

the game has suddenly become a solar attraction. The *Daily Rocket* back on Earth is offering a gigantic loving cup for the winning team, while the *Morning Spaceways* has provided another loving cup, only slightly smaller, to be presented the player adjudged the most valuable to his team. We may have more to tell you about the game before the newscast is over, but in the meantime we shall go on to other news of Solar int . . ."

Meek leaped up. "He meant me," he whooped. "That was me he meant when he was talking about a famous coach!"

"Sure," said Gus. "He couldn't have meant anyone else but you."

"But I'm not a famous coach," protested Meek. "I'm not even a coach at all. I never saw but one space polo game in all my life. I hardly know how it's played. I just know you go up there in space and bat a ball around. I'm going to . . ."

"You ain't going to do a blessed thing," said Gus. "You ain't skipping out on us. You're staying right here and give us all the fine pointers of the game. Maybe you ain't as hot as the newscaster made out, but you're a dang sight better than anyone else around here. At least you seen a game once and that's more than any of the rest of us have."

"But I . . ."

"I don't know what's the matter with you," declared Gus. "You're just pretending you don't know anything about polo, that's all. Maybe you're a fugitive from justice. Maybe that's why you're so anxious to make a getaway. Only reason you stopped at all was because your ship got stoved up."

"I'm no fugitive," declared Meek, drawing himself up. "I'm just a bookkeeper out to see the system."

"Forget it," said Gus. "Forget it. Nobody around here's going to give you away. If they even so much as peep, I'll plain paralyze them. So you're a bookkeeper. That's good enough for me. Just let anyone say you ain't a bookkeeper and see what happens to him."

Meek opened his mouth to speak, closed it again. What was the use? Here he was, stuck again. Just like back on Juno when that preacher had thought he was a gunman and talked him into taking over the job of cleaning up the town. Only this



time it was a space polo game and he knew even less about space polo than he did about being a lawman.

Gus rose and limped slowly across the room. Ponderously, he hauled a red bandanna out of his back pocket and carefully dusted off the one uncrowded space on the mantel shelf, between the alarm clock and the tarnished silver model of a rocket ship.

"Yes, sir," he said, "she'll look right pretty there."

He backed away and stared at the place on the shelf.

"I can almost see her now," he said. "Glinting in the lamplight. Something to keep me company. Something to look at when I get lonesome."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Meek.

"That there cup the radio was talking about," said Gus. "The one for the most valuable team member."

Meek stammered. "But . . . but . . ."

"I'm going to win her," Gus declared.

#### IV

**S**ATURN INN BULGED. Every room was crowded, with half a dozen to the cubicle, sleeping in relays. Those who couldn't find anywhere else to sleep spread blankets in the narrow corridors or dozed off in chairs or slept on the barroom floor. A few of them got stepped on.

Titan City's Junior Chamber of Commerce had done what it could to help the situation out, but the notice had been short. A half-dozen nearby rocks which had been hastily leveled off for parking space, now were jammed with hundreds of space vehicles, ranging from the nifty two man job owned by Billy Jones, sports editor of the *Daily Rocket*, to the huge excursion liners sent out by the three big transport companies. A few hastily-erected shelters helped out to some extent, but none of these shelters had a bar and were mostly untenanted.

Moe, the bartender at the Inn, harried with too many customers, droopy with lack of sleep, saw Oliver Meek bobbing around in the crowd that surged against the bar, much after the manner of a cork caught in a raging whirlpool. He reached out a hand and dragged Meek against the bar.

"Can't you do something to stop it?"

Meek blinked at him. "Stop what?"

"This game," said Moe. "It's awful, Mr. Meek. Honestly. The crowd has got the fellers so worked up, it's apt to be mass murder."

"I know it," Meek agreed, "but you can't stop it now. The Junior Chamber of Commerce would take the hide off anyone who even said he would like to see it stopped. It's more publicity than Saturn has gotten since the first expeditions were lost here."

"I don't like it," declared Moe, stolidly.

"I don't like it either," Meek confessed.

"Gus and those other fellows on his team think I'm an expert. I told them what I knew about space polo, but it wasn't much. Trouble is they think it's everything there is to know. They figure they're a cinch to win and they got their shirts bet on the game. If they lose, they'll more than likely space-walk me."

Fingers tapped Meek's shoulders and he twisted around. A red face loomed above him, a cigarette drooping from the corner of its lips.

"Hear you say you was coaching the Twenty-three bunch?"

Meek gulped.

"Billy Jones, that's me," said the lips with the cigarette. "Best damn sports writer ever pounded keys. Been trying to find out who you was. Nobody else knows. Treat you right."

"You must be wrong," said Meek.

"Never wrong," insisted Jones. "Nose for news. Smell it out. Like this. *Sniff. Sniff.*"

His nose crinkled in imitation of a bloodhound, but his face didn't change otherwise. The cigarette still dangled, pouring smoke into a watery left eye.

"Heard the guy call you Meek," said Jones. "Name sounds familiar. Something about Juno, wasn't it? Rounded up a bunch of crooks; Found a space monster of some sort."

Another hand gripped Meek by the shoulder and literally jerked him around.

"So you're the guy!" yelled the owner of the hand. "I been looking for you. I've a good notion to smack you in the puss."

"Now, Bud," yelled Moe, in mounting fear, "you leave him alone. He ain't done a thing."



Meek gaped at the angry face of the hulking man, who still had his shoulder in the grip of a monstrous paw.

Bud Craney! The ring-rat that had stolen Gus' injector! The captain of the Thirty-seven team.

"If there was room," Craney grated, "I'd wipe up the floor with you. But since there ain't, I'm just plain going to hammer you down about halfway into it."

"But he ain't done nothing!" shrilled Moe.

"He's an outsider, ain't he?" demanded Craney. "What business he got coming in here and messing around with things?"

"I'm not messing around with things, Mr. Craney," Meek declared, trying to be dignified about it. But it was hard to be dignified with someone lifting one by the shoulder so one's toes just barely touched the floor.

"All that's the matter with you," insisted the dangling Meek, "is that you know Gus and his men will give you a whipping. They'd done it, anyhow. I haven't helped them much. I haven't helped them hardly at all."

Craney howled in rage. "Why . . . you . . . you . . ."

And then Oliver Meek did one of those things no one ever expected him to do, least of all himself.

"I'll bet you my spaceship," he said, "against anything you got."

Astonished, Craney opened his hand and let him down on the floor.

"You'll what?" he roared.

"I'll bet you my spaceship," said Meek, the madness still upon him, "that Twenty-three will beat you."

He rubbed it in. "I'll even give you odds."

Craney gasped and sputtered. "I don't want any odds," he yelped. "I'll take it even. My moss patch against your ship."

Someone was calling Meek's name in the crowd.

"Mr. Meek! Mr. Meek!"

"Here," said Meek.

"What about that story?" demanded Billy Jones, but Meek didn't hear him.

A man was tearing his way through the crowd. It was one of the men from Twenty-three.

"Mr. Meek," he panted, "you got to

come right away. It's Gus. He's all tangled up with rheumatiz!"

GUS stared up with anguished eyes at Meek.

"It sneaked up on me while I slept," he squeaked. "Laid off of me for years until just now. Limped once in a while, of course, and got a few twinges now and then, but that was all. Never had me tied up like this since I left Earth. One of the reasons I never did go back to Earth. Space is good climate for rheumatiz. Cold but dry. No moisture to get into your bones."

Meek looked around at the huddled men, saw the worry that was etched upon their faces.

"Get a hot water bottle," he told one of them.

"Hell," said Russ Jensen, a hulking framed spaceman, "there ain't no such a thing as a hot water bottle nearer than Titan City."

"An electric pad, then."

Jensen shook his head. "No pads, neither. Only thing we can do is pour whiskey down him and if we pour enough down him to cure the rheumatiz, we'll get him drunk and he won't be no more able to play in that game than he is right now."

Meek's weak eyes blinked behind his glasses, staring at Gus.

"We'll lose sure if Gus can't play," said Jensen, "and me with everything I got bet on our team."

Another man spoke up. "Meek could play in Gus' place."

"Nope, he couldn't," declared Jensen. "The rats from Thirty-seven wouldn't stand for it."

"They couldn't do a thing about it," declared the other man. "Meek's been here six weeks today. That makes him a resident. Six Earth weeks, the law says. And all that time he's been in sector Twenty-three. They wouldn't have a leg to stand on. They might squawk but they couldn't make it stick."

"You're certain of that?" demanded Jensen.

"Dead certain," said the other.

Meek saw them looking at him, felt a queasy feeling steal into his stomach.



"I couldn't," he told them. "I couldn't do it. I . . . I . . ."

"You go right ahead, Oliver," said Gus. "I wanted to play, of course. Sort of set my heart on that cup. Had the mantel piece all dusted off for it. But if I can't play, there ain't another soul I'd rather have play in my place than you."

"But I don't know a thing about polo," protested Meek.

"You taught it to us, didn't you?" belated Jensen. "You pretended like you knew everything there was to know."

"But I don't," insisted Meek. "You wouldn't let me explain. You kept telling me all the time what a swell coach I was and when I tried to argue with you and tell you that I wasn't you yelled me down. I never saw more than one game in all my life and the only reason I saw it then was because I found the ticket. It was on the sidewalk and I picked it up. Somebody had dropped it."

"So you been stringing us along," yelled Jensen. "You been making fools of us! How do we know but you showed us wrong. You been giving us the wrong dope."

He advanced on Meek and Meek backed against the wall.

Jensen lifted his fist, held it in front of him as if he were weighing it.

"I ought to bop you one," he decided. "All of us had ought to bop you one. Every danged man in this here room has got his shirt bet on the game because we figured we couldn't lose with a coach like you."

"So have I," said Meek. But it wasn't until he said it that he really realized he did have his shirt bet on Twenty-three. His spaceship. It wasn't all he had, of course, but it was the thing that was nearest to his heart . . . the thing he had slaved for thirty years to buy.

He suddenly remembered those years now. Years of bending over account books in the dingy office back on Earth, watching other men go out in space, longing to go himself. Counting pennies so that he could go. Spending only a dime for lunch and eating crackers and cheese instead of going out for dinner in the evening. Piling up the dollars, slowly through the years . . . dollars to buy the ship that now stood out

on the field, all damage repaired. Sitting, poised for space.

But if Thirty-seven won it wouldn't be his any longer. It would be Craney's. He'd just made a bet with Craney and there were plenty of witnesses to back it up.

"Well?" demanded Jensen.

"I will play," said Meek.

"And you really know about the game? You wasn't kidding us?"

Meek looked at the men before him and the expression on their faces shaped his answer.

He gulped . . . gulped again. Then slowly nodded.

"Sure, I know about it," he lied.

They didn't look quite satisfied.

He glanced around, but there was no way of escape. He faced them again, back pressed against the wall.

He tried to make his voice light and breezy, but he couldn't quite keep out the croak.

"Haven't played it much in the last few years," he said, "but back when I was a kid I was a ten-goal man."

They were satisfied at that.

## V

**H**UNCHED behind the controls, Meek slowly circled Gus' crate, waiting for the signal, half fearful of what would happen when it came.

Glancing to left and right, he could see the other ships of Sector Twenty-three, slowly circling too, red identification lights strung along their hulls.

Ten miles away a gigantic glowing ball danced in the middle of the space-field, bobbing around like a jiggling lantern. And beyond it were the circling blue lights of the Thirty-seven team. And beyond them the glowing green space-buoys that marked the Thirty-seven goal line.

Meek bent an attentive ear to the ticking of the motor, listening intently for the alien click he had detected a moment before. Gus' ship, to tell the truth, was none too good. It might have been a good ship once, but now it was worn out. It was sluggish and slow to respond to the controls, it had a dozen little tricks that kept one on the jump. It had followed space trails too long, had plumped down to too



many bumpy landings in the maelstrom of the Belt.

Meek sighed gustily. It would have been different if they had let him take his own ship, but it was only on the condition that he use Gus' ship that Thirty-seven had agreed to let him play at all. They had raised a fuss about it, but Twenty-three had the law squarely on its side.

He stole a glance toward the sidelines and saw hundreds of slowly cruising ships. Ships crammed with spectators out to watch the game. Radio ships that would beam a play by play description to be channeled to every radio station throughout the Solar system. Newsreel ships that would film the clash of opposing craft. Ships filled with newsmen who would transmit reams of copy back to Earth and Mars.

Looking at them, Meek shuddered.

How in the world had he ever let himself get into a thing like this? He was out to see the solar system, not to play a polo game . . . especially a polo game he didn't want to play.

It had been the bugs, of course. If it hadn't been for the bugs, Gus never would have had the chance to talk him into that coaching business.

He should have spoken out, of course. Told them, flat out, that he didn't know a thing about polo. Made them understand he wasn't going to have a thing to do with this silly scheme. But they had shouted at him and laughed at him and bullied him. Been nice to him, too. That was the biggest trouble. He was a sucker, he knew, for anyone who was nice to him. Not many people had been.

Maybe he should have gone to Miss Henrietta Perkins and explained. She might have listened and understood. Although he wasn't any too sure about that. She probably had plenty to do with starting the publicity rolling. After all, it was her job to make a showing on the jobs she did.

If it hadn't been for Gus dusting off the place on the mantelpiece. If it hadn't been for the Titan City Junior Chamber of Commerce. If it hadn't been for all the ballyhoo about the mystery coach.

But more especially, if he'd kept his fool mouth shut and not made that bet with Craney.

MEEK groaned and tried to remember the few things he did know about polo. And he couldn't think of a single thing, not even some of the things he had made up and told the boys.

Suddenly a rocket flared from the referee's ship and with a jerk Meek hauled back the throttle. The ship gurgled and stuttered and for a moment, heart in his throat, Meek thought it was going to blow up right then and there.

But it didn't. It gathered itself together and leaped, forcing Meek hard against the chair, snapping back his head. Dazed, he reached out for the repulsor trigger.

Ahead the glowing ball bounced and quivered, jumped this way and that as the ships spun in a mad melee with repulsor beams whipping out like stabbing knives.

Two of the ships crashed and fell apart like matchboxes. A third, trying a sharp turn above the field of play, came unstuck and strewed itself across fifty miles of space.

Substitute ships dashed in from the sidelines, signalled by the referee's blinking light. Rescue ships streaked out to pick up the players, salvage ships to clear away the pieces.

For a fleeting moment, Meek got the bobbing sphere in the cross-hairs and squeezed the trigger. The ball jumped as if someone had smacked it with his fist, sailed across the field.

Fighting to bring the ship around, Meek yelled in fury at its slowness. Desperately pouring on the juice, he watched with agony as a blue-lighted ship streamed down across the void, heading for the ball.

The ship groaned in every joint, protesting and twisting as if in agony, as Meek forced it around. Suddenly there was a snap and the sudden swoosh of escaping air. Startled, Meek looked up. Bare ribs stood out against star-spangled space. A plate had been ripped off!

Face strained behind the visor of his spacesuit, hunched over the controls, he waited for the rest of the plates to go. By some miracle they hung on. One worked loose and flapped weirdly as the ship shivered in the turn.

But the turn had taken too long and Meek was too late. The blue-lamped ship already had the ball, was streaking for the goal line. Jensen somehow had had sense



enough to refuse to be sucked out goalie position, and now he charged in to intercept.

But he muffed his chance. He dived in too fast and missed with his repulsor beam by a mile at least. The ball sailed over the lighted buoys and the first chukker was over with Thirty-seven leading by one score.

The ships lined up again.

The rocket flared from the starter's ship and the ships plunged out. One of Thirty-seven's ships began to lose things. Plates broke loose and fell away, a rocket snapped its moorings and sailed off at a tangent, spouting gouts of flame, the structural ribs came off and strewed themselves along like spilling toothpicks.

Battered by repulsor beams, the ball suddenly bounced upward and Meek, trailing the field, waiting for just such a chance, played a savage tune on the tube controls.

The ship responded with a snap, executing a half roll and a hairpin turn that shook the breath from Meek. Two more plates tore off in the turn, but the ship plowed on. Now the ball was dead ahead and Meek gave it the works. The beam hit squarely and Meek followed through. The second chukker was over and the score was tied.

Not until he was curving back above the Thirty-seven goal line, did Meek have time to wonder what had happened to the ship. It was sluggish no longer. It was full of zip. Almost like driving his own sleek craft. Almost as if the ship knew where he wanted it to go and went there.

A hint of motion on the instrument panel caught his eye and he bent close to see what it was. He stiffened. The panel seemed to be alive. Seemed to be crawling.

He bent closer and froze. It was crawling. There was no doubt of that. Crawling with rock-bugs.

**B**REATH whistling between his teeth, Meek ducked his head under the panel. Every wire, every control was oozing bugs!

For a moment he sat paralyzed by the thoughts that flickered through his brain.

Gus, he knew, would have his scalp for this. Because he was the one that had brought the bugs over to the rock where Gus lived and kept the ship. They thought,

of course, they had caught all of them that was on his suit, but now it was clear they hadn't. Some of them must have gotten away and found the ship. They would have made straight for it, of course, because of the alloys that were in it. Why bother with a spacesuit or anything else when there was a ship around.

Only there were too many of them. There were thousands in the instrument panel and other thousands in the controls and he couldn't have brought back that many. Not if he'd hauled them back in pails.

What was it Gus had said about them burrowing into metal just like chiggers burrow into human flesh?

Chiggers attacked humans to lay their eggs. Maybe . . . maybe . . .

A battalion of the bugs trooped across the face of an indicator and Meek saw they were smaller than the ones he had seen back on Gus' rock.

There was no doubt about it. They were young bugs. Bugs that has just hatched out. Thousands of them . . . millions of them, maybe! And they wouldn't be in the instruments and controls alone, but all through the ship. They'd be in the motors and the firing mechanisms . . . all the places where the best alloys were used.

Meek wrung his hands, watching them play tag across the panel. If they'd had to hatch, why couldn't they have waited. Just until the game was over, anyhow. That would have been all he'd asked. But they hadn't and here he was, with a couple of million bugs or so right smack in his lap.

The rocket flared again and the ships shot out.

Bitterness chewing at him, Meek flung the ship out savagely. What did it matter what happened now. Gus would take the hide off him, rheumatism or no rheumatism,, as soon as he found out about the bugs.

For a wild moment, he hoped he would crack up. Maybe the ship would fall apart like some of the others had. Like the old one hoss shay the poet had written about centuries ago. The ship had lost so many plates that even now it was like flying a space-going box-kite.

Suddenly a ship loomed directly ahead, diving from the zenith. Meek, forgetting his half-formed hope of a crackup a sec-



ond before, froze in terror, but his fingers acted by pure instinct, stabbing at keys. Although in the petrified second that seemed half an eternity, Meek knew the ships would crash before he even touched the keys. And even as he thought it, the ship ducked in a nerve-rending jerk and they were skinning past, hulls almost touching. Another jerk and more plates gone and there was the ball, directly ahead, with the repulsor beam already licking out.

Meek's jaw fell and a chill through his body and he couldn't move a muscle. For he hadn't even touched the trigger and yet the repulsor beam was flaring out, driving the ball ahead of it while the ship twisted and squirmed its way through a mass of fighting craft.

Hands dangling limply at his side, Meek gaped in terror and disbelief. He wasn't touching the controls, and yet the ship was like a thing bewitched. A split second later the ball was over the goal and the ship was curving back, repulsor beam snapped off.

"It's the bugs!" Meek whispered to himself, lips scarcely moving. "The bugs have taken over!"

The craft he was riding, he knew, was no longer just a ship, but a collection of rock bugs. Bugs that could work out mathematical equations. And now were playing polo!

For what was polo, anyhow, except a mathematical equation, a problem of using certain points of force at certain points in space to arrive at a predetermined end? Back on Gus' rock the bugs had worked as a unit to solve equations . . . and the new hatch in the ship was working as a unit, too, to solve another kind of problem . . . the problem of taking a certain ball to a certain point despite certain variable and random factors in the form of opposing spaceships.

Tentatively, half fearfully, Meek stabbed cautiously at a key which should have turned the ship. The ship didn't turn. Meek snatched his hand away as if the key had burned his finger.

**B**ACK on the line the ship wheeled into position of its own accord and a moment later was off again. Meek clung to his chair with shaking hands. There was, he knew, no use of even pretending he was trying to operate the ship. There was just

one thing that he was glad of. No one could see him sitting there, doing nothing.

But the time would come . . . and soon . . . when he would have to do something. For he couldn't let the ship return to the Ring. To do that would be to infest the other ships parked there, spread the bugs throughout the solar system. And those bugs definitely were something the solar system could get along without.

The ship shuddered and twisted, weaving its way through the pack of players. More plates ripped loose. Glancing up, Meek could see the glory of Saturn through the gleaming ribs.

Then the ball was over the line and Meek's team mates were shrieking at him over the radio in his spacesuit . . . happy, glee-filled yells of triumph. He didn't answer. He was too busy ripping out the control wires. But it didn't help. Even while he was doing it the ship went on unhampered and piled up another score.

Apparently the bugs didn't need the controls to make the ship do what they wanted. More than likely they were in control of the firing mechanism at its very source. Maybe, and the thought curled the hair on Meek's neck, they were the firing mechanism. Maybe they had integrated themselves with the very structure of the entire mechanism of the ship. That would make the ship alive. A living chunk of machinery that paid no attention to the man who sat at the controls.

Meanwhile, the ship made another goal. . . .

There was a way to stop the bugs . . . only one way . . . but it was dangerous.

But probably not half as dangerous, Meek told himself, as Gus or the Junior Chamber or the Thirty-seven team . . . especially the Thirty-seven team . . . if any of them found out what was going on.

He found a wrench and crawled back along the shivering ship.

Working in a frenzy of fear and need for haste, Meek took off the plate that sealed the housing of the rear rocket assembly. Breath hissing in his throat, he fought the burrs that anchored the tubes. There were a lot of them and they didn't come off easily. Rockets had to be anchored securely . . . securely enough so the blast of atomic fire within their chambers wouldn't rip them free.



Meanwhile, the ship piled up the score. Loose burrs rolled and danced along the floor and Meek knew the ship was in the thick of play again. Then they were curving back. Another goal!

Suddenly the rocket assembly shook a little, began to vibrate. Wielding the wrench like a madman, knowing he had seconds at the most, Meek spun two or three more bolts, then dropped the wrench and ran. Leaping for a hole from which a plate had been torn, he caught a rib, swung with every ounce of power he had, launching himself into space.

His right hand fumbled for the switch of the suit's rocket motor, found it, snapped it on to full acceleration. Something seemed to hit him on the head and he sailed into the depths of blackness.

## VI

**B**ILLY JONES sat in the office of the repair shop, cigarette dangling from his lip, pouring smoke into his watery eye.

"Never saw anything like it in my life," he declared. "How he made that ship go at all with half the plates ripped off is way beyond me."

The dungareed mechanic sighted along the toes of his shoes, planted comfortably on the desk.

"Let me tell you, mister," he declared, "the solar system never has known a pilot like him . . . never will again. He brought his ship down here with the instruments knocked out. Dead reckoning."

"Wrote a great piece about him," Billy said. "How he died in the best tradition of space. Stuff like that. The readers will eat it up. The way that ship let go he didn't have a chance. Seemed to go out of control all at once and went weaving and bucking almost into Saturn. Then blooey . . . that's the end of it. One big splash of flame."

The mechanic squinted carefully at his toes. "They're still out there, messing around," he said, "But they'll never find him. When that ship blew up he was scattered halfway out to Pluto."

The inner lock swung open ponderously and a spacesuited figure stepped in.

They waited while he snapped back his helmet.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Oliver Meek.

They stared, slack-jawed.

Jones was the first to recover. "But it can't be you! Your ship . . . it exploded!"

"I know," said Meek. "I got out just before it went. Turned on my suit rocket full blast. Knocked me out. By the time I come to I was halfway out to the second Ring. Took me awhile to get back."

He turned to the mechanic. "Maybe you have a second hand suit you would sell me. I have to get rid of this one. Has some bugs in it."

"Bugs? Oh, yes, I see. You mean something's wrong with it."

"That's it," said Meek. "Something's wrong with it."

"I got one I'll let you have, free for nothing," said the mechanic. "Boy, that was a swell game you played!"

"Could I have the suit now?" asked Meek. "I'm in a hurry to get away."

Jones bounced to his feet. "But you can't leave. Why, they think you're dead. They're out looking for you. And you won the cup . . . the cup as the most valuable team member."

"I just can't stay," said Meek. He shuffled his feet uneasily. "Got places to go. Things to see. Stayed too long already."

"But the cup . . ."

"Tell Gus I won the cup for him. Tell him to put it on that mantelpiece. In the place he dusted off for it."

Meek's blue eyes shone queerly behind his glasses. "Tell him maybe he'll think of me sometimes when he looks at it."

The mechanic brought the suit. Meek bundled it under his arm, started for the lock.

Then turned back.

"Maybe you gentlemen. . . ."

"Yes," said Jones.

"Maybe you can tell me how many goals I made. I lost count, you see."

"You made nine," said Jones.

Meek shook his head. "Must be getting old," he said. "When I was a kid I was a *ten goal* man."

Then he was gone, the lock swinging shut behind him.



# The Citadel Of Death

By **CARL SELWYN**

**Vulcan held the weirdest secret of the ages, one of eternal life that Rick Norman had to find to save his friend from death. But it held another secret, too—one that was so vicious, even knowing it meant Rick Norman was doomed.**

*Illustration by ELIAS*







*Keren whirled and lunged at the screaming Mercurian.*

**I**T'S TOO RISKY for you to go alone, Johnny," Rick Norman said. "Wait till I get through showing the Senator around the mine. Then if you still think your gravity gadget can get us to Vulcan against Sun drag, we'll go look into this Fountain of Youth business together." He knew Johnny wasn't paying any attention to his argument, however, and as he talked his big fingers were busy under the table unfolding the wax paper

from the two small green capsules—Martian knockout drops. Two of them would be enough to put Johnny out for a week.

Johnny Gordon's black hair gleamed in the nightclub's orange light. When he laughed, his tanned face was surprisingly boyish—surprising because his name was linked with adventure in headlines on many planets. "You think the patrol's going to be laying for me off Mercury," he laughed. "Well, I'd like a little excitement."



Norman dropped the wax paper on the floor and hid the capsules in his big palm. Johnny was right—they would've had a lot more fun if they'd never bumped into that dead comet off Neptune. But how were they to know that cold hunk of drift metal would turn out to be solid platinum? That was three years ago and now their income was a number like the circumference of Jupiter in feet. To him it was a devil of a responsibility. To Johnny it was just plain boring.

But he couldn't let Johnny get himself killed running away from a full dress suit. "Okay," he said, faking resignation. "You win." Roughly handsome, Norman's hell or high water smile was as much a part of him as his long legs. He filled their glasses as the orchestra started moaning *Martian Moon*, dropped the capsules into the bubbly green wine in Johnny's glass. "Here's to the Twenty-First Century Ponce de Leon," he smiled, raising his glass.

Johnny reached across the table and picked up the bottle. "Here's to the boredom of a million dollars," he said and drank the toast straight from the bottle. He wiped his chin, grinning. "You ought to know you can't catch me on a Martian mickey. They stop the bubbles."

As Norman stared at the suddenly lifeless wine in Johnny's glass, he realized there was only one thing left to do. He knew a couple of boys who were pretty handy with a blackjack and he knew an old hunting lodge in the Adirondacks where they could lock Johnny up for a week.

**T**HE NEXT morning as Norman was packing his bags, one of his "boys" appeared at the door. His eyes were black and swollen. Embarrassed, he held out an envelope. Norman tore it open.

"You'll find your other playmate locked in my bathroom. I'll bring you a jugfull of the Fountain of Youth." The note was written in Johnny's careless scrawl! Norman flicked the ampliphone button in the little table beside his bed.

"Interstellar Spaceport!" he ordered the invisible telemike as he pulled a handful of bills from his pocket and shoved them at the battered gentleman in the door. "Thanks for trying, Spike. Go kick Johnny's bathroom door down. Joe's locked up in there—"

"Spaceport," the wall speaker said.

"John Gordon," Norman asked, waving Spike out, "has he been there?"

"Mr. Gordon took off half an hour ago, sir," said the ampliphone. "For Mercury."

"Thanks . . ." As Norman clicked off the receiver, premonition crept over him like a shadow. His hand moved to the receiver again—to call for a ship and follow Johnny. Then the ampliphone buzzed under his hand.

It was the Senator. He was waiting at the capital.

As he started throwing shirts into his bag, Norman knew it was against his better judgment. But after all, Johnny could take care of himself. Spike's hamburger face proved that.

It was with this thought that he picked up the plump Senator and left for the platinum comet. When the sleek private cruiser nosed into the little world's artificial air three days later, the mine foreman met them with a radiogram in his hand.

Silently cursing the static that had interfered with space reception on the way over, cold fear clutched at Norman's heart as he read the message. "The platinum's yours," he told the astonished mine foreman. "Show the Senator around."

As their bewildered faces stared after him, he took off for Earth again immediately.

The trip back was maddening and he ignored all speed laws as he roared full-throttle into the bright mountain range that was New York City. Newsboys were still shouting the headlines on the street when he reached the hospital.

**"FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH IN TRAGIC REVERSE! JOHN GORDON FOUND IN DRIFTING SPACE BOAT! INVENTION MISSING!"**

Norman shoved a bill at the driver, jumped out of the taxi and ran up the hospital steps. The girl at the desk recognized him. "Room 947, Mr. Norman. Dr. Smyth is expecting you."

He hurried to the elevator where a mob of reporters were also waiting. "What do you think happened to him, Mr. Norman? Do you think he reached Vulcan? What do you think became of his cruiser with the anti-gravity invention?"

"Later, boys," Norman said, his familiar



smile a little shaky now. "I've got to see Johnny first."

A black-bearded doctor opened the door at his knock. From within the room came an odd babbling sound like a child talking to itself. Looking over the doctor's shoulder, Norman saw an old man lying on the white bed. He stepped past the doctor into the room.

Propped up on pillows, the old man lay there like an ancient withered mummy. Only his skull-like eyes were alive, yellow and wild as he stared at his disfigured hands. His hands were more like paws for each finger and thumb had been severed close to the palm, the scars well-healed as if the mutilation had happened years ago.

"They found his pilot's license in his pocket," the doctor said, "and the blood test proved his identity."

"No!" Norman said, turning back to the bed. "This is impossible!"

"I've given him a thorough examination," the doctor said. "He has every condition of advanced senility. We can't say how he lost his fingers nor how they healed so quickly. We only know this," his voice dropped to a whisper, "that he is very near death of old age . . ."

Norman's eyes were damp. Through the window the afternoon sun lined the old man's sunken cheeks with deep shadows, gleamed on his thin, white hair. His voice was a high-pitched quaver. "My hands . . . my hands . . ."

Norman sprang to the bed, knelt beside the ancient creature. "Johnny! It's me! Rick! Tell me what happened!"

But the old man stared at him blankly, then looked back down at his hands again.

Norman got to his feet slowly. "Okay, Johnny," he said through tight lips. "But I'll find out what happened to you. And I think I know where to start."

Twenty minutes later, however, the pudgy Gorig Sade, Ambassador from Mercury, could offer little information. He leaned back in his gilded chair and raised his hand toward the sunset at the window. His right hand was artificial, an electric member in flesh-like plastic. "Behind that Sun," he said, a slight smile on his thick lips, "lies a planet without a human footprint. Within the Mercurian Zone of Protection, Vulcan is closely guarded by the Mercurian Zone Patrol. Vulcan is a death

trap—too close in the Sun's gravitational field. We cannot answer to the safety of those who slip past the patrol and enter the whirlpool."

Norman smiled, as a fighter smiles at his opponent when he comes out at the bell. "That's enough of that line, Sade. When did your patrol last see John Gordon? They were waiting for him off Mercury. You've had your paid killers after him ever since he refused to sell out to you. Now his gravitational counteractive turns up missing. It would have meant a lot to Mercury—or to you, rather, since your rotten politics owns the place."

Sade got to his feet like a disturbed bull. "Get out!" His electric hand hummed as he raised it toward the door. "I shall see the Secretary of State about your insult!"

Norman's left hand shot out like a striking snake, clutched the Ambassador's collar and dragged him out of his chair.

"Okay, Sade," he smiled, "but there's one thing maybe you don't know. Johnny built *two* ships, a smaller one before he equipped the cruiser he left in. I'm taking that ship to try to reach Vulcan. Johnny's spectroscope proved a lot about this Fountain of Youth business and now it's the only chance to save his life. Anyway, I'll find out what happened to him, and if you had anything to do with it, I'm going to tear your yellow throat out."

He slammed the sputtering Ambassador back into his chair, and left the office. Now Sade would forget the Secretary of State and order his patrol to be waiting for him. A burst of flame in desolate space and who would know.

**T**EN MINUTES outside the Mercurian Zone of Protection, Norman welcomed the misty glow as live nebulae engulfed the transparent dome surrounding him. It brightened the monotonous blue light in the pilot room and erased his lonely reflection in the foot-thick thermo-glass that darkened the white-hot glare of space ahead.

Traveling near Mercury was like walking a tight rope. A few degrees off course and the delicate balance between worlds would totter—jerk him away to a charred plunge into the Sun. Also, Sade's wolves might appear any moment now. But he'd get through them, he thought, slapping the



trigger grip of his panel guns. The picture of Johnny back there in the hospital, however, was an ache in his throat that dulled his excitement—an excitement reminiscent of hundreds of tight spots they'd squeezed through together before they'd struck it right and traded adventure for tea cups. Helpless, crazed, eighty years old before his time—why hadn't Johnny waited! But he was bull-headed and bored, anxious to prove what his spectroscope hinted—that Vulcan, close in the arms of the mother Sun, was a spawning place for life itself. Ponce de Leon again, in 2063. . . .

Grinding out his cigarette, Norman glanced at the chart in his lap, eyed the circle that was Vulcan, a white circle—*unexplored*. Deep in the whirlpool of the Sun's gravitation, it had lured countless ships to a hurtling destruction until a trade-wise Mercury placed guards around the area and its siren world.

Norman glanced up from his musings as the filter's blue light darkened the room again. The nebulae outside had vanished. Almost human, that glass! The hotter it became outside, the darker the glass became—not only shielding the pilot's eyes but perfectly maintaining the insulation of the control room. Suddenly he jerked his head up, chilled as he stared at the mirrored wall in front of him.

Reflected in the glass, a ghostly figure stood behind him in the galley door. "Hello."

It was a feminine voice. Slowly, Norman swung his long legs around and stared at the girl, too astonished to speak. She was just a kid, about fifteen years old, wearing baggy white coveralls. A mop of honey-colored hair framed her pert freckled face.

She held up her hands as if to keep him away. "Now don't get excited." Her blue eyes were like a kitten's. "I'm Dorothy Gray. My father owns the *Daily Times* and I work on the paper during vacation. I played stowaway because you're on the trail of the news story of the century. While you were checking out with the dispatcher," the girl grinned, "I emptied your food locker and crawled in myself. I know you must be trying to find out what happened to your friend. You're the type that gets things done."

Grinding his teeth, Norman turned back

to the control panel and reached for the turn lever. Now he had to take this brat to Earth—when Johnny's life depended on haste in the opposite direction. No! He'd put her in a space suit and kick her out. Johnny was his best friend. His anger hovered an instant over the decision. And in that instant he saw the girl step aside. His mouth fell open as *another* figure appeared from the galley.

**T**HIS time it was a grown woman—breath-takingly grown. She walked in like she owned the place, smoothing a tweed skirt above bare legs that could have graced a glassilk hose advertisement. Above a crimson blouse, her hair was black as sunless space against her cloud-like skin. She was obviously Venusian, with the orchid-like beauty of all women of the emerald planet. In her hand was a stubby jet of a pistol, the round hole of its barrel staring into Norman's bewildered eyes.

"Hello, handsome," she said, ignoring the girl beside her. "I was in your ammunition locker. I'm Keren Vaun. Just stick at those controls. I'm here to make sure that the patrol gets you." She sat down on the metal box beside the galley door. She crossed her trim legs and held the pistol steady on one rounded knee.

"Okay," Norman smiled. "If that's the way you want it." He turned around, clamped his long legs under the control seat, and flipped the stabilizer switch. Their little world turned upside down, sprawling both females across the floor in a mass of contrasting legs and arms.

When the switch flipped back into contact, the ship righted itself instantly and Norman stepped across the room and picked up the pistol. He stepped back and squeezed his panel triggers. Dead guns. "So you've carted out all my ammunition and Sade is really after me."

The Venusian woman pulled herself up off the floor. "You'll find out when the patrol sights you." Her black eyes looked as deadly as her gun had.

"Let 'em come," Norman said.

As if his words were a cue, a bell tinkled in the room. He jumped to the panel and turned a dial, lighting the blue filter to scan the void outside. The magnetic detector warned of something outside—a patrol cruiser!



NORMAN fingered his triggers instinctively, then left the dead guns in a rage as black as the Venusian's hair. The only thing he could shoot at the patrol were his hull fire extinguishers. He clicked on the rear view screen—he had to see the patrol first now—outmaneuver them somehow. But behind him was only the blackness of space.

The raven-haired woman's sparkling eyes grew nervous. "If those fools shoot—" She lit a cigarette, exhaling quickly.

The bell rang frantically. Something was coming at them, fast. He traversed the screen again but around them was no visible thing. The sun was too bright. There was only one thing to do. His hand fell on the wheel, twirled it around to swoop off course—try to dodge the patrol, wherever they were—take a chance on fighting his way back against Sun drag.

A flash of red light burst into the room. The pilot room keeled over. He fell to the room's glass ceiling that had suddenly become the floor. The women landed in a perfumed heap on top of him.

He stood on the slick curve of glass, eyeing the cut-off on the control panel which was now overhead. A patrol boat had come in from the Sun's blind spot. They'd chanced a long shot. Jammed the exhaust tube and thrown the stabilizer off balance. Seconds off course. Norman could perhaps have brought her back. Minutes—the Sun was an inexorable pull.

Madly, Norman jumped to reach the cut-off—to cut the unbalanced rocket blast that held the ship on its back in the increasing speed of their dive. Out of control, they were streaking toward the Sun under full power.

The diameter of the Sun is 108 times that of Earth. Its mass is 324,000 times as great. Mathematics could calculate easily the speed of falling into that molten inferno but Norman knew only the thundering of his heart in that silent room. He jumped three times for the cut-off lever—and fell back. Then with fear like steel coils in his legs, he floundered up once more, leaped from the glass and the tips of his fingers brought down the clutch.

The room slowly moved out from under him, sliding the girls across the smooth glass. He was at the controls before the

ship righted itself. Sweeping the panel, he jerked every rocket into reverse.

And nothing happened. The power of his blasts was nothing against the direct pull of the Sun, this close. The ship hurtled toward its fiery mass at terrific speed.

Among the battery of instruments on the panel was a small stratometer, calibrated in seconds. Norman saw the pointer moving with the speed of the second hand on a watch. With each jump of the pointer, they fell thousands of miles. Despite the thermo-glass, heat grew in the room like a live thing. In less than three minutes, he realized, the ship would begin to *melt*. He sprang from the controls, bent over the long coffin-shaped box beside the galley door. His fingers were frantic thumbs as he set the dials. It wasn't merely a test of the gravitation counteractive now. The mechanism *had* to work or they would boil like lobsters in the steam of the very air they breathed.

Dorothy Gray stood sensibly out of the way, watching his frenzied hands switch the delicate instrument. The Venusian woman cursed softly, straightening her twisted skirt. "Wait till I see Sade again!" she said. "Ordering his men to fire when he knew I was in here—Hey!" she demanded. "Why's it getting so hot in here?"

Dorothy pointed toward the instrument panel. "See that little clock," she said, oddly observant for one of her few years. "That's a stratometer. My dad's shown 'em to me on the big passenger lines. It says we're falling mighty fast. It's getting hot in here because we're falling into the Sun."

Seconds thundered by as Norman twirled the rheostat knobs in the counteractive, fighting to bring the delicate focus of its power into play against the dread suction that was dragging them down. The thermo-glass was jet black now against the solid heat outside. With apparently a knowing hand, Dorothy set the air conditioning unit up to maximum as drops of moisture formed on the ceiling and dampened the pilot room like hot dew. The thermo-glass began to bulge slightly at its invisible seams, first in thin ridges around the ceiling, jutting out more and more as the mad heat increased. Protection against the extremes of temperature in space, it was constructed to follow these lines of expansion. But for how long?



Keren screamed, razor-edged above the electric tension in the room. "Give me a parasuit!" she cried. "Get me out of here!"

Norman's fingers played the rheostats like a piano. Suddenly an electric eye blinked red as the counteractive fell into focus on the true gravity force sector of the Sun. As he leaped to the controls, his eye caught a glimpse of the stratometer's small death-white face. They were sixty seconds from cremation . . .

Slowly, with nerve-tight slowness, he turned the brake wheel a fraction of an inch as the hand of the clock moved on. The room was dim, the panel lights casting weird shadows along the black ridges in the seams of the thermo-glass. The ridges jutted inward over an inch now, spaced two feet apart like braces or rafters around the room.

Suddenly Keren threw herself upon Norman, locked her arms around his neck, dragging his sweaty hands from the wheel. "Stop us!" she whimpered hoarsely. "Stop us, handsome! I don't want to die!"

## II

**N**ORMAN tried to fling her away from him but the fear-crazed woman clutched his hair as he took the wheel again and he was almost dragged from his seat as he turned the wheel another notch. The wheel blistered his fingers, but he turned it with will-screaming slowness, ignoring Keren's clawing hands. The pointer on the stratometer climbed up the dial in short, inexorable jerks. Tick-tick-tick-tick! Tolling their funeral march at a thousand fiery miles per second . . . per second . . .

In the nightmare of those moments, Norman saw Dorothy's reflection in the fog-smearred glass, tugging at the frantic brunette, trying to pull her away from him. He saw her hand rise, a wrench in it. She brought it down on the Venusian's dark head as the clock swept to its nerve-breaking jump and he spun the wheel with all his strength.

It was a timeless instant. His hand lay limp on the wheel, his eyes on Dorothy's dim figure in the foggy glass. She stood there like a bad camera shot of a little girl dressed up in her papa's overalls. Then, slowly, he realized that what he

thought was the reflection of one of her blue eyes was instead a small luminous globe suspended in the bright nothingness of sunlight ahead. He rubbed his sweat-burning eyes.

The blackness of the glass was fading quickly, the seam bulges sinking back with the contraction. Without the slightest tremor, the counteractive had stopped their plunge into the Sun, and the reverse rockets had taken over. They were headed out again. The blue globe grew swiftly as they approached. Source of a thousand tales of terror, Vulcan sped toward them out of the distance.

In a few moments, washed air cooled the pilot room as the air conditioning unit purred full speed. Its soft whistle, the brighter light and Norman's instruments were the only evidence that they swam effortlessly in a wild current that swept into the gates of the solar hell.

"If we had enough insulation," Norman said, "we could go into the very flames of the sun. Like we almost did anyhow." Johnny's counteractive had given the universe new eyes—to seek an elixir to save his life.

Keren moaned.

Dorothy held a glass of water to Keren's scarlet lips. "There's a mirror in the galley," she told her. "Go freshen up before we land." Keren looked like a wilted orchid and Norman smiled, finding it difficult to hate anyone after the ordeal they had just survived.

Keren's eyes raised to him with an unexpected softness as she stood up. "I'm sorry I acted like an idiot," she said coolly. "You saved my life and you won't regret it." She shook her sleek hair and turned to the galley. "Get out of my way, brat!" she snapped at Dorothy and left the pilot room.

Norman grinned at Dorothy. "You wield a wicked wrench," he said. "I'm glad you're on my side."

The fifteen year old fugitive from a high school journalism class grinned back, wrinkling her freckled nose. "You wield a wicked heart attack," she said. "Miss Vaun's on your side now if not on mine."

He turned back to the controls. They were but a few minutes from the unexplored planet. There was nothing he could do now but take the girls along with him.



A junior miss and a Venusian beauty queen, landing on an unknown world.

As they approached, Vulcan filled their window, a great smooth curve, its blue color lightening to green. Norman switched off the counteractive and cut in the landing rockets.

When Keren's exotic perfume entered the room again, the land below was a map of verdant plains, rolling mountains and glassy seas. Quickly it swelled to jungle and flashing water and, with a champagne tingle in his blood, Norman dropped toward an open well of meadow in the trees.

His excitement, however, was tinged with sadness. Johnny should be here now. They had dropped upon a score of unknown worlds together. Now he landed without his partner, in a last-hope venture to save that partner's life.

The green vegetation was a colorful contrast against the bright yellow of dead grass. They would have to be careful about fire, Norman knew. He'd seen that thick grass on other Sun-tropical worlds; it burned fast as gunpowder.

This close to the Sun, Vulcan probably had a constant wind. The gravity seemed approximately the same as Earth's. He plugged in the spectroscope to test the air and as he glanced out the window at the intake valve a slow chill trickled down his back.

It wasn't only the wind moving the grass outside. The grass was *growing*.

Dorothy and Keren came to the window. As they watched, the grass beside the hull rose two inches.

"It's horrible," Dorothy whispered. Then, "Look!" she shrilled, pointing.

**N**ORMAN shook his head as if recovering from a blow, the words of the Mercurian Ambassador ringing in his ears: "Vulcan is a planet without a human footprint . . ." All science knew of this supposedly untrod planet was suddenly a lie. There, beside the ship, was the unmistakable imprint of a human foot.

As Norman looked up he saw a man step out of the jungle and walk toward them across the grass. A jet gun bounced on the stranger's hip. He wore high-top boots, a checkered hunting shirt and his black-mustached face was heavily tanned.

Norman tore himself from his bewilderment and turned on the outside speaker. "Who are you! How did you get here?"

"Same way you did," the receiver brought the fellow's voice inside. "Think you're the only one with a counteractive?"

To Norman's verified knowledge, Johnny's counteractive was the only one listed under inter-planetary patents. He turned on Keren. "What do you know about this?" But she held her carmine lips tight, staring out the window.

"The air must be all right," he said. "Let's go." He took his jet gun from the compartment in the control panel and strapped the holster close to his right hand. Hot sunlight burnished the room as he threw the panel switch opening the space port.

He walked to the door. The stranger waited below, hairy hands on his hips. "I hope you've got an Earthian cigarette. They're scarce around here."

Norman dropped the folding steps and Dorothy, curiosity bright in her kitten-blue eyes, walked out into the windy sunlight. As Norman started out, the port clanged shut in his face, hurtling him back into the middle of the room. Rockets hummed as the ship leaped ten feet in the air.

Keren stood before the panel with her hand on the rise lever. Norman sprang across the room and jerked her aside as the ship sailed out of the clearing and plowed through the tree tops. "I've had enough of your tricks, lady!" he said through clenched teeth.

"No, handsome!" Keren cried. "You've got to get us away from here!" Before he could right the ship she took him from behind and pinned his arms to his sides.

"You fool!" Norman yelled, twisting her hands from him. "We're going to crash!" But the woman fought like a panther, black eyes blazing. Controls gone wild, the ship rolled over on its side, and bumped heavily down into the shadowed mire and ground to a halt.

"You crazy witch!" Norman got to his feet, eyeing the sloping floor and the smoke curling up from the leaves under the ship. The rockets had set the woods on fire. His port rise-rockets dangled, a twisted mass of tubes. "Why'd you do this?" he demanded, facing her with itching fists.



"Who was that fellow back there? Talk," he ordered, "before I slap your painted face off!"

Her eyes were like a half-tamed cat's. "I'm not talking, handsome."

Norman looked into her black eyes and ice formed in his heart. "So that was one of Sade's men back there."

The outside speaker was still on and in the silence came the crackle of flame as the wind fanned the jungle fire into a rage of orange tongues around the ship. The thermo glass instantly turned black and its faithfully expanding seams began pushing inward against the heat.

Into the room came the hissing of a giant snake. The glass was suddenly drenched with a misty green liquid.

#### *Antipyrrol!*

The fire went out as Norman jumped to the window and a silvery bulk floated down into the jungle beside them.

It was a space cruiser, a late model. Twin burnished coils encircled its silvery hull-counteractive coils. Norman knew that, beginning now, was an ordeal that could end only in death for himself or whoever manned that ship. It was Johnny's ship. Inside it could not be a friend.

Through the filter glass, lighted with the fire gone, he could see out but they couldn't see in. A port opened in the cruiser's glittering side, steps fell to the jungle floor and three men stepped out. Norman was not surprised. Two of them wore the fiery red uniform of the Mercurian patrol and Norman's eyes narrowed when he saw their companion. Fat, clad in a silk shirt with his electric arm swinging jerkily, down the steps came the Mercurian ambassador, Gorig Sade.

He and his patrolmen strode through the muddy ashes with their guns drawn. Norman's fingers itched for the triggers of his starboard guns. With one burst—! But the guns were empty. Cursing the Venusian woman, he reached for his pistol. He'd shoot it out point blank from the door. Then as his hand moved toward the panel switch to open the door he barely felt the needle enter his back. He saw Keren jump away with the hypodermic needle in her hand.

If she had been a man Norman would have shot her on the spot. Instead, he just looked at her with all the hate in his soul,

feeling now the stinging sensation in his back, knowing that *something* was already seeping into his veins—to knock him out, paralyze him, kill him—just when he had a chance at Sade, just when he had a chance to solve the mystery of Johnny's death sentence and perhaps find something here to save him.

"The crash must have shook 'em up pretty bad," said a voice outside. "We'll have to cut the door open."

Oddly, as Norman stared at the hypodermic syringe in Keren's hand he remembered a trick he'd once pulled on Jupiter. A last ditch trick.

**HIS** HAND jumped to a lever on the panel and jerked it down. He heard an oath mingled with the hiss of antipyrrol as his full extinguishers spurted their jets into the jungle for fifty yards around the ship. When he looked out, he saw Sade and the two red-uniformed patrolmen staggering about blindly in the green rain with their hands covering their eyes.

"They'll be blind as bats for half an hour," Norman laughed, cutting off the spray. He jerked a coil of rope from the panel compartment. "I don't know what you stuck me with," he told Keren, "but if I go out, you are going to be tied up till I come to." In a moment he had her wrists securely tied behind her. Keren remained silent, staring at him with black-cat eyes half closed.

Throwing the door switch, he stepped to the port and found the three men standing in the ashes between the ships, digging at their swollen eyes. "Get out," he ordered the sullen Venusian and she walked down the steps ahead of him.

As he went out a streak of flame hissed over the woman's head and splattered on the metal hull beside his shoulder.

He jumped backward into the cabin, behind the protecting wall. Peering out carefully, he saw a gun barrel glinting in the cruiser's door. He smiled. "Sade!" he yelled, loud enough for the blinded Mercurian on the ground to hear. "I'm giving you five seconds to tell whoever's in that cruiser to come out. Then I'm shooting you in the legs—then your good arm—then your yellow belly!"

The fat man groped about wildly, helpless and confused.



"One!" Norman counted. "Two . . . three . . . four—"

"Come out, Swart!" Sade shouted. "He'll kill me!"

"Throw down your gun and come out with your hands in the air," Norman ordered and to his surprise the dark-mustached man of his first acquaintance appeared in the door with his hands upraised as a pistol plopped into the mud. "Who else's in there?" Norman was taking no chances.

"Nobody, Mr. Norman. That's all of 'em." With excitement in her voice, Dorothy appeared behind the dark-faced Swart and Norman felt a warmth of relief that she was safe. "They picked us up right after you left," she said.

"Come here and hold this gun, honey," Norman said. "Miss Vaun sabotaged our ship but we've captured a whole herd of pigs and we're going to have a barbecue." Dorothy ran across the mud to him. "Keep this gun pointed at the fellow with the mustache. If he tries anything while I'm tying his hands, pull the trigger."

In a moment, Swart was firmly bound and sitting on the cruiser's steps. Sade and the patrolmen stood, rubbing their blind eyes and cursing. "You slimy hog," Norman said, jerking Sade around as he kept an eye on the patrolmen. "If I didn't want you to do a lot of talking first, I'd tie this rope around your neck instead of your hands." It was the first time Norman had ever tied up an artificial hand but he only pulled the rope the tighter. Then he sat the unholy group down on the steps of the ship and surveyed them with a wide grin.

"All right," he said, "who's talking first, before I start skinning each one of you with a pen knife."

"There's a notebook in the cruiser, Mr. Norman," Dorothy said. "I heard the fat one talking about it. They've found something here and the notebook tells all about it."

"So it's all written down for me," Norman laughed. "Watch 'em, Dorothy. If they get fidgety, call me." He entered the snug, well-remembered cabin. Keren's hypo must have been pretty weak. He still felt nothing.

He frowned, puzzled to see a narrow

tank built around the cushioned wall. Pushing aside the space units—life preservers—hanging on their customary hooks, he rapped the tank with his knuckles. It was heavily insulated, a liquid of some sort sloshing inside. Shaking his head, he went on into the pilot room where his eyes immediately fell on a small black notebook lying on the control panel. He picked it up eagerly.

"*Complete life cycle accelerated,*" he read on with an eerie thrill. Then, abruptly universal scientific language. "*One year equals approximately twenty minutes . . .*" Remembering the quick growing grass, he read on with amazement. Then, abruptly the page became a cross-word puzzle of chemical symbols—it would take time to figure them out—

"I don't want to stay out there, Mr. Norman," a voice interrupted him. It was Dorothy standing in the door. "They're saying such bad words."

NORMAN grinned. "Point your gun at 'em to hush," he said. She grinned back, wrinkling her freckled nose and went outside again as he returned to his perusal of the symbols.

They were a description of the elements in *something*, in a very unusual combination. Then slowly his eyes raised from the notebook again. Something deep in the shadows of his mind was trying to speak—not about the symbols—about something else. Something he had done? Something he had seen? Anyhow, Norman had been in enough bad spots to pay attention when that ghostly feeling sounded its alarm.

Closing the notebook, he stepped across the pilot room and walked into the cabin, into a pistol's point blank explosion.

The burst of flame seared Norman's left side. In the same second, as his hand came up to grab the gun, he realized the impossibility of getting it in time. Swart was too close. His hand dropped to his blistered side. Swart had him between death and surrender.

"You're lucky," Swart's mustache wiggled as he spoke. "Get outside."

Dazed at the unbelievably swift change of events, Norman obeyed. And as his foot hit the first step he knew what had called him from the notebook.

Dorothy—was no longer Dorothy . . .



SHE HAD been changed when she entered the ship a moment ago but he hadn't realized it. Staring at her full lips, her higher cheek bones, her snub nose that had straightened into a smooth profile—he forgot the sudden switch of gun authority until Swart jabbed him in the back.

He went down the steps, his eyes on what had been the fifteen year old fugitive from a high school journalism class. Just out of pig-tails and giggles—Dorothy Gray was suddenly a woman. Her freckles were weirdly absent now, her blond hair was longer, her arms were more full—her legs—her—! Her white coveralls had shrunk on what was now a slim, lithe figure. But it was really Dorothy—the same pert face, the same kitten-like eyes, wide with an astonishment as great as his own.

Sade's laughter broke Norman's blank stare. "Next time you tie up a man with an artificial arm make sure it isn't electric. It's easy to cause a short circuit when you're soaked with fire extinguisher fluid and when they short circuit they burn through rope very easily."

But Norman barely heard him, barely saw Swart untying the patrolmen whose swollen eyes were beginning to see again. He was remembering! "*Complete life cycle accelerated. One year equals approximately twenty minutes.*" He offered no resistance as Swart jerked the notebook from his hand. As the grass grew, so had Dorothy—so had Johnny, to the horrible near-completion of his life cycle. But why wasn't Sade, Keren, the others affected? Why not himself?

"Let's get in the ship," Keren broke into his thoughts. "There's no sense wasting the best years of this girl's life out here." With an unholy smile she walked up the steps into the cruiser.

"Get in the ship, Norman," Sade said, smiling like a puddle of oil. "You've got a lot more to see before we waste the best years of your life."

Inside the cruiser, Dorothy sank into a pillowed chair and jerked a small pocket mirror before her blue eyes. She seemed unable to decide whether to laugh or cry. Sade, Keren and the patrolmen left for the pilot room, leaving Swart on guard. Immediately, the green foliage fell away from the windows as the ship climbed out of the jungle.

There were tears in Dorothy's eyes but her newly red-bloomed lips were tight. There was horror in this thing that had happened, years of her life whisked away—she must be eighteen now, and she had the radiant loveliness of clear sunshine.

But Norman's thoughts dwelt little on the heart-quickenings results of her sudden change. He pondered the change itself. Again he calculated the time she had been exposed to whatever grim atmosphere enveloped Vulcan—she couldn't have been out there more than a few minutes. And in those few minutes she had raced through two long years.

"But why wasn't I affected?"

Swart sat across the cabin with his pistol in his lap, hungrily nursing a cigarette he had bummed from Keren. "You were in the ship," he squinted his amusement through a smoke ring. "She was on the ground." He grinned, eyeing Dorothy. "Shows up better on her too."

So that was it—something in the dank soil. But what about the others? He asked Swart, who only shook his head. "The boss'll tell you all you need to know." And Norman knew there were many questions yet unanswered. Johnny hadn't been one to fall into a trap laid by nature alone. There was something going on here, more than he knew yet, and something told him that he was on the right track—that in Vulcan's strange power that dealt both beauty and decay, there was power here that might save Johnny . . .

Finally Dorothy decided to laugh. "I don't know what happened," she said, her voice no longer a child's, "but there seems nothing to do about it—except to start running around with an older crowd when I get back home."

If we get back home, Norman thought mirthlessly. If he knew Sade, he and Dorothy were both in the same boat, a boat that would not be long afloat. "I'm sorry, Dorothy," he said. "It's my fault you're here."

"Wrong," she shook her blonde head. "I wanted to come with you." He looked away, sensing for the first time that now, somehow, they were on a different basis. Dorothy was no longer a child and her girlish hero worship was apparently replaced by something more mature.



He felt the cruiser nose down. They were landing again.

Norman reached up and yanked a space suit from its wall hook, threw it to Dorothy. "Put this on over your coveralls." As he jerked another suit down for himself, he caught a glimpse of a jungle-walled clearing with a peculiar shaped building at the end of a small landing field.

As they slid to a quick stop, the port opened and Sade and his little group appeared again. The fat Mercurian laughed as he saw Norman and Dorothy buckling on the stiff garments. He made no move to stop them. "Keren tells me you're very interested in our little world," he said. "That tank along the wall there holds what you're looking for, but first we must show you around."

Encircled by the four patrolmen, Norman and Dorothy were hustled out of the ship and across the landing field. The odd, light-house-like building stood at the end of the field, a large windowless structure with a conical tower on top. They were led to the building in silence, ushered into a huge room and the door closed behind them. Venusian mahogany paneled the tapestry covered walls and heavy carved furniture was scattered about the room's creamy white floor. Sade opened a heavy door at the side and motioned his prisoner-guests in.

"I haven't time to talk now," he said. "Here's something to entertain you until I return." He flicked a button outside the door, then closed the door, leaving them alone in the small room.

NORMAN glanced at Dorothy, then turned to examine the place as he took off his helmet. The room was small, dark paneled and windowless like the one outside. A furry *shak*-skin rug covered the black floor. He started to speak, but a panel at the end of the room suddenly glowed with the transparent clearness of a window. A television screen—what was Sade up to!

Then Norman sucked in his breath through his teeth as Dorothy clutched his arm. Not the withered creature of the hospital but the tousle-headed guy he'd grown up with—Johnny's image appeared on the screen.

Johnny stood in what at first appeared

to be a clearing in the jungle but as he kicked at some invisible obstacle, Norman realized a wall of glass separated him from the surrounding field outside. The scene was sparkling clear, as if they were watching through a window Johnny's futile efforts to scale the smooth wall. His path around the enclosure proved it to be circular, about eight feet in diameter. Norman ground his teeth. So Johnny *had* been Sade's prisoner!

Johnny took off one of his metal-soled shoes and started hammering the fine glass as if something whipped him into a frantic effort to escape. Dorothy silent beside him, Norman watched the black-haired boy rub his eyes wearily as he pounded with the shoe. How had Sade gotten this picture? What was his purpose in showing it now? The glass of Johnny's prison must have been superbly invisible but soft for slowly he ground a shallow niche at the base of the wall, a foothold.

Norman felt like yelling a cheer but he whispered an oath as he watched Johnny grind out a higher foothold. Trying to carve a niche higher still, his fingers stained the glass red. Quickly the glass was dripping with blood. "Look at his hands!" Dorothy whispered. In Johnny's efforts to cling to the wall, the ground glass was eating away the tips of his fingers.

And Norman shuddered to see the gray change creeping over Johnny's face. Before his eyes, Johnny's dark hair became streaked with gray and his ashen face became furrowed with wrinkles. Horror-ridden years, swiftly heaped upon him.

Dorothy covered her face with her hands. But Norman couldn't tear his eyes from the luminous screen. The film had been cut to speed it up. Johnny had hacked five slits in the glass now. His fingers and thumbs were ragged stumps as he hung on the splintered glass, ten feet up the blood-smeared wall. And in his terrible fascination, Norman saw that Johnny's hands healed almost as fast as they were torn. As the dry flesh of age withered his face, as he sacrificed his hands in a mad struggle to escape the invisible terror in Vulcan's sunlight.

Norman slammed his fists against the locked door. "Sade! You scum of the universe!" But there was no answer as his eyes were drawn back to the screen to



see Johnny's fingerless paws grasp the rim of his prison. A wrinkled, animal-like thing, eyes yellowed and wild, he drew up his gnarled legs and fell over the glass wall into the gravel on the other side. Half crawling, half running, he disappeared quickly into the trees.

As though a prolonged roar of sound had suddenly ceased, the panel darkened, leaving only Dorothy's muffled sobs.

But in Norman's brain was a numb hate that froze his reason. He didn't hear the door open behind him.

"Interesting, wasn't it?" It was Sade's voice. "But in a moment an even more interesting experiment will take place in my laboratory."

Norman turned slowly. Swart and the two patrolmen stood with the fat man at the door. Norman took one quick step forward. His right hand shot out. His fingers sank like spikes into the flabby skin of Sade's throat. Another split second and Norman's fingers would have met behind the Mercurian's windpipe and ripped it out, but in that split second the patrolmen were on him. Then he was on the floor, fighting silently in the blackness of his fury. A heavy boot caught him behind the left ear and the blackness engulfed him completely.

### III

**B**ATTERED and bruised, he found himself on his feet when he came to. Sade stood in the door, his good hand fingering the blue welts on his throat. His shirt was in shreds, exposing the white blob of flesh that was his body and the helpless sausage-end stump that was his right arm.

"If I could get my hands on you—" Norman whispered.

"You won't again," Sade said hoarsely. "You're in my hands now. And within the hour I shall have *two* of them. With them I shall keep you alive forever while you die a thousand deaths. I hold the key to life and death, on Vulcan . . ." He whirled again and left, followed by his henchmen and the door locked again behind them.

The silky *shak*-skin rug was worn with Norman's pacing when he heard the key click in the lock again. The door opened to Keren Vaun. Ghostly beautiful

against the soft light outside, her starry loveliness meant nothing to Norman. He sprang to the door and covered her scarlet lips with one hand, closed the door quickly. "Tell me how to get to Sade," he demanded, "or I'll wring your neck right here!"

Keren remained rigid until he loosened his grasp. Then: "Shut up," she whispered. "I came to help you escape." She didn't look at Dorothy. "I came to help you on one condition. That you take me with you—alone."

Norman hesitated three heart beats. "Let's go," he said. He heard Dorothy gasp behind him but he didn't even look back as Keren opened the door, finger to her lips, and led him out.

Locking the door behind her, she led him down a dim, white-floored corridor. Norman walked carefully, the baggy suit rustling as he moved. Keren halted before a door at the side of the passage. Glancing up and down the vacant hall, she opened the door quickly and went in. Norman followed.

The room was bare with another closed door on the other side. "You don't need that space suit," Keren ordered. "Take it off." Norman peeled the suit off obediently. It was no time for questions. "When I jabbed you with that hypo before Sade found us, it immunized you. It's a vaccination Sade discovered; we're all protected here."

As Norman marveled at this strange woman, understanding now that fact of his own salvation from the powers of Vulcan, she motioned toward the door opposite the one through which they had entered the room. "Sade's—John Gordon's cruiser is outside where we left it, about a hundred yards from his door. It's unguarded but there's a guard in the tower. He'll shoot when he sees you so you must get to the ship quickly. The cruiser's guns are loaded. If you make it, take off and blast this building. I'll run for the woods." Keren's heavy-lashed eyes met his. "When they are dead, Vulcan will be ours."

Norman smiled. "What if I don't come back? What if I pull out and radio Earth for help?"

Keren returned his smile, her eyes like a moonless night. "If you don't come back, I'll kill the Earth girl inside." She threw back her head, hair swirling at her pale



throat like the flow of black oil. "Now kiss me—and go."

It was a choice; Karen's life or Dorothy's. If he got the ship and Keren ran for the woods, his guns would have to find her before they turned on the house. Then he could bargain with Sade by radio. "I'll owe you a thousand kisses," he said, opened the door, and darted out into the sunlight. Then it was raining red heat as liquid fire spurted around his pounding legs.

A bare twenty yards ahead, the cruiser waited, glinting silver in the sun. His pants leg caught fire and he could feel its blistering heat, fanned by the wind, as he streaked across the gravel.

Then he saw it too late. A sheen of crimson in the air. Streaks of red, painted on nothing. *Johnny's blood!* Flame from the guns behind him sizzled on the invisible glass as Norman, unable to check the piston power of his legs, crashed into the invisible wall of what had been Johnny's prison. His forehead hit the glass with a hollow ring. Clutching the wall with both hands, he slid down to the gravel and into darkness for his second failure that afternoon.

Roughly, they dragged him back to the house. But he wasn't out. Through the searing pain in his head he had fought back to consciousness as the patrolmen touched him. His mind limped through the pain, trying to figure out what to do now as they dragged him into the big front room and dropped him on the floor.

"Imbeciles! Careless fools!"

The voice opened Norman's eyes, banished the throbbing in his head as he struggled to his feet. But the two patrolmen locked his arms behind him.

"How did he get out!" The fat man glared from Norman to the patrolmen. Swart stood beside him.

"There were only two keys to that room," Swart suggested.

Sade's florid face paled, then his button eyes flickered with the cold cruelty of a wild animal. "Find Keren," he said softly. "Bring her to my laboratory."

Rick's eyes showed helpless fury as his arms tightened in the patrolmen's grasp. "Keren had nothing to do with it," he said. "I picked the lock."

Sade reached out and slapped his face repeatedly with his open palm. Hands clamped behind him, Norman took it, barely

feeling the stinging blows, their impact light under the impact of what he saw.

"Yes! It's real!" Sade halted his slapping and, laughing like a fiend, rolled up his sleeves. He held his hands up close before Norman's eyes. Norman shuddered, staring at Sade's right hand. Slightly smaller, ghastly white but firm, where the stump of Sade's right arm had been was now flesh. Blood coursed through the bulging veins, a pale hand extended pudgy fingers.

Sade howled with laughter as Norman drew back from the thing as from a snake. "It's real!" Sade shouted, gleefully. "Flesh and blood! I have two hands now!" Exultantly, he held his clenched fists before Norman's white face. "In these hands I shall hold the pulse of the universe, to let it throb or halt at my will. I shall be neither king nor dictator—I shall be a god! The power of life and death in the universe is mine!"

Lifting his gaze from the hands, Norman met the fat man's eyes coldly. "How'd you do this, Sade?"

Sade's laughter dwindled to a greasy smile. "After seeing what the power of Vulcan did to your friend, perhaps it is fitting that you should see this power in reverse." He nodded at the patrolmen. "Bring him along."

In an arm-lock on both sides, Norman was dragged down the same corridor where he had followed Keren in his futile attempt to escape. They halted at a door at its far end. Sade opened the door and Norman was shoved in.

The place was white-walled and bare, like a hospital room but without the usual furniture. On a four-legged platform in the center of the room lay a large porcelain cylinder, like a chamber used for sterilizing surgical instruments, but the surface of the cylinder was smooth, without gadgets, only a heavily bolted cap at one end. Sade patted the cylinder as a sculptor might admire the work of his chisel. "This holds what John Gordon sought and what you seek now to save his life," he smirked. "This container holds fluid from Vulcan's Fountains of Youth!"

Standing before the cylinder, Norman's mind's eye searched the situation for some chance of escape. Here was what he had



come so far to obtain and he was powerless to take it. But perhaps it wasn't time; there was much he needed to know.

"Vulcan's power is a radiation," Sade said, "but not from the Sun. It's a liquid under the ground, like Earthian oil—a radioactive element such as science has only found traces of in the cosmic rays. More powerful than radium, it exudes an exciter to growth—a living force."

"How'd you discover it without being affected by it?" Norman asked.

"Your friend Gordon was the guinea pig," the Mercurian said. Norman kept still. "After we took him and his cruiser when he entered the Protection Zone, we came here immediately. Working in space suits until my technicians on Mercury discovered an immunization, we brought Vulcan's strange liquid in like an oil gusher. The effect of the pure liquid is instantaneous; its effects on the surface of the ground outside are greatly diluted. While we built this house round the well, we watched Vulcan's milder effects on your friend in the glass cage."

Norman's jaw paled, but he kept his head. "How did Johnny get off the planet after he escaped?"

"Fool!" Sade laughed. "He didn't escape. We could stay and watch him every minute—that's why we left the automatic camera to record his reactions. He did contrive to get out of the cage but when we found him in the jungle we simply took him off the planet and dropped him in space in a life boat where he'd be picked up." Sade laughed again. "Did you think I didn't know he built two ships with counteractives! John Gordon's return was merely a message to you—to come here in that other ship. Now we have the only counteractives in existence. Vulcan is an utterly impregnable fortress. No army in the universe can interrupt my plans."

Norman realized that everything Sade said was true. No power could approach Vulcan without a counteractive. "What are your plans, Sade?"

The fat man held up his new right arm, his small eyes glowing. "My technicians obtained for me the hand-bud of an unborn child. It was embedded in the stump of my right arm." He stared at his hand stretched its white fingers, his thick lips smiling. "With but a brief exposure of

my arm to a spray of Vulcan's liquid in full strength, I grew the hand of a thirty-year-old man!" He banged the cylinder with his fist. "What would happen if I sprayed this life-death fluid in a city street! It can be placed in a shell and fired from a gun. I have here a *Force* that can cause the most horrible of wounds—quick decay. It can utterly destroy or immediately heal. How I use this power depends upon how quickly the governments of the universe submit to my wishes in a new stellar order."

But Norman had a question stronger than his hopelessness at what he'd just heard. "Could this liquid help John Gordon now?"

Instead of replying, Sade smiled. He stepped over to one of the room's blank walls and pressed a small button. A wide panel slid back revealing several tiers of wire cages containing monkeys, rabbits, and white rats. Sade scooped a plump slick rat out of its cage and closed the panel again. Walking back to the cylinder, he slapped the helpless creature's head against his wrist and stunned it. Then, drawing a flat shelf from the cylinder's platform, he dropped the unconscious rat on it and threw the heavy bolts on the cylinder's cap.

**I**NSIDE the thick-walled container, Norman discovered, were neatly coiled tubes hanging on pegs. Sade grabbed one of the small hoses, pulled it out and squeezed a button on the little nozzle. A fine, blood-red spray hissed from the nozzle and he directed the red mist upon the limp body of the white rat. The damp liquid had barely touched the rat's fur when instantly its small face wrinkled, its fur grew coarse and thin and it assumed the appearance of a very old animal.

Still smiling, Sade glanced at Norman's troubled gaze, then shut off the hose, stuck it back in the cylinder and drew out another. The spray that dampened the rat this time was light pink. The rat's coarse coat thickened, its sides swelled before Norman's eyes and youth was born anew in the little animal's very brain as it leaped to its feet and scurried around the shelf with all the energy of fresh strength.

"It's like many poisons," Sade said. "Full strength, its effect is death. Greatly diluted—with mere water—its miracles make it an elixir supreme. . . ."



The door opened to Keren, followed by Dorothy and Swart. Keren's poise little hinted she'd plotted Sade's death less than an hour ago. Dorothy had removed her space suit; her eyes were red from crying. Keren took a cigarette from her loose blouse. "You sent for me, Sade?"

The Mercurian's eyes were like a rattlesnake's as he held out his two hands for her to see. "I have these now," he said softly. "Soon I shall have every world at my command. Will you marry me?"

The dark-haired woman lit her cigarette calmly, her hand steady. "Yes," she answered simply.

Sade laughed. "You say yes now because your life is at stake—because you tried to aid the Earthman. But for that you won't lose your life, Keren. You will lose something you value more than your life, Keren. You will lose—your beauty. Get a rope, Swart."

Keren flicked her cigarette into Sade's face. Quick as a whip, her hand entered the throat of her blouse. Norman saw the glint of naked metal flash in an arc toward Sade's chest. Dorothy gasped.

The silver dagger sank into Sade's chest just over his heart. The fat man staggered back. But before he could fall, Swart acted, as quick as a ferret, clipped Keren's chin, and as she crumpled silently to the floor, he caught the gasping Mercurian and eased him down.

From Sade's chest blood spurted higher than the dagger's hilt as Swart yanked one of the hoses from the cylinder and directed its crimson spray on Sade's wound. Slowly, Swart drew out the dagger's sticky blade in the spray. When the dagger was out of Sade's chest there was no visible sign of a wound. Sade opened his eyes and looked up at them.

"What shall I do with her?" Swart said.

Sade got to his feet. He stood there, panting a moment. "The rope," he said. Swart pushed a wall button, extracted a length of cord from a panel compartment and returned. "Tie her to the cylinder," Sade hissed, "and tie the nozzle of the hose in her hair."

In a moment, the unconscious Keren was hanging by her backward-bent arms from the cylinder. The cord was tight from her wrists, around the cylinder and under to her slim ankles. In her hair was fixed

the slowly oozing hose. A rivulet of red trickled down her smooth cheek.

"What about these two?" Swart said, motioning toward Norman and Dorothy.

"While we go to repair the new counter-active ship which Mr. Norman so kindly brought us," Sade said, "we can leave him and his girl in the glass cage."

As they were marched across the field, Norman remembered Johnny's face on the hospital pillow—tragic, old. Now, in the green beauty of this time-thundering world, this same fate reached for them as it was caressing Keren's cheek in the white-walled room in the tower. Norman put his arm around Dorothy's shoulder.

She drew away. "You deserted me for Keren once. Worry about her now, not me."

Swart grinned. "You can argue that out while you grow old together," he said. The patrolman who had come out with them picked up a metal ladder beside the invisible wall and leaned it against the rim of the glass. Then, smiling, he walked back and grabbed the collar of Dorothy's coveralls. "We sealed up the chinks to keep 'em from pulling the same trick Gordon did but hadn't we better strip 'em to make sure?"

Norman's fists tightened but he felt the barrel of Swart's pistol dig into his side. Then, on a quick thought, he drew a half-empty pack of cigarettes from his pocket. "Leave her alone, Swart. We haven't anything to escape with. Take these cigarettes for our clothes."

The dark man's hand snatched them greedily. "I don't know why I don't take both." But he stepped away from the ladder and waved his pistol at them. "All right. Get in there. In ten seconds I'm shooting."

**N**ORMAN followed Dorothy up the rungs of the ladder, climbed around her and—as Swart raised his gun menacingly—hung on the rim of the glass and dropped the twenty feet to the gravel inside their prison. Dorothy climbed over and dropped into his waiting arms.

As the patrolman took the ladder down, Sade and the other red-uniformed gorilla left the house and walked toward them across the field. They came up and halted before the glass, staring in at them and



laughing. Dorothy stood beside Norman and he took her hand tightly.

"When we leave we'll start to work," he whispered. "We've got to get you out of here quick."

"Why only me?"

He told her about Keren's hypodermic work. "But first you've got to believe me," he said. "I didn't desert you when I left with Keren. It was our only chance to escape. I was coming back for you. You've got to believe me." He turned and took her shoulders in his hands, looking into her blue eyes.

She bit her lips, staring at him. Then "I don't want to believe anything else."

Norman squeezed her shoulders, then glanced up to see Sade and his men walking toward the cruiser, leaving the house deserted except for Keren chained to a doom of unspeakable horror inside. The cruiser leaped from the field and floated past them over the jungle. Eying the high rim of the glass wall, Norman waited until the ship disappeared over the horizon, then backed against the glass quickly and held out his hand.

"Quick!" he told Dorothy. "Stand on my shoulders and try jumping!"

Dorothy placed one small foot into his hand and swung up to his shoulders. Norman raised to his tiptoes—every inch counted. "Jump! High!"

Her fingertips missed the rim of the glass two full feet and clawing the slick surface, she slid back down into Norman's arms. "Try again! We've got to get you out of here!"

Again and again she placed her foot in Norman's hand, swung up, leaped high—and fell back again, her forehead bruised from bumping the glass, her fingernails broken.

"You'll never make it," Norman said wearily. "We've got to think of something else." Hammering his fist into his palm, he started pacing the wall. Suddenly he dropped to his knees and started clawing the gravel. But he hadn't dug six inches when he scraped against concrete. Several different holes proved the ring of glass rested on what had been a refueling platform. "Sade would have thought of that."

He started pacing the wall again, running his hand around the smooth glass. There *had* to be a way out! The glass had been

the pilot-room shell of a ship, its tapering nose sliced off. He thought of trying to rock it back and forth to turn it over. But the glass weighed tons.

He turned and stared at Dorothy helplessly. She had scratched her finger in one of her falls. Proving again that only her body had grown, she immediately stuck her finger in her mouth upon the discovery of the scratch. Norman's brain seethed. He couldn't let this girl die here.

Now, he realized, he faced the same problem that had been Johnny's. And he knew what withering shadow would claim Dorothy's lips if he failed. Vulcan was a hell of priceless, fleeing moments; each heartbeat a drum sounding a sickening doom of decay. Each tick of his watch was the footfall of death one step closer. The invisible terror that hovered over Vulcan was beyond the grasp of imagination—but it was real! As real as Keren's pale face under that trickle of red horror, as real as Dorothy's fresh loveliness which would soon be eaten away—unless he could get her away from here.

Neither he nor Dorothy had any metal with which he might attempt Johnny's mad feat. Standing there, looking about the enclosure, Norman's heart beat quicker with each second as each second took its unseen toll upon the girl who was his responsibility. Looking at her golden hair glinting in the sunlight, Norman suddenly realized she was more than a responsibility . . . Quickly he turned away.

#### IV

**T**HE GLASS was thick, perfectly clear. Only its glimmer in the sun said they were imprisoned. Beyond the field, the ever dying and growing jungle undulated like a green sea. Just outside the glass, the ladder lay on the gravel where the patrolman had dropped it—within arm's reach and it might as well have been light years away.

"Look!" Dorothy cried. "The scratch on my finger's already healed." She held up her finger and there was no mark on it. Vulcan's power was working, building a life then to tear it down. Each soul-wringing second created beauty, clear blue-eyed, honey-haired beauty—to transform it as swiftly into ugliness. . . .



It was the first time in Norman's eventful life that he had ever stared defeat in the face. He had met death before and he had been in some pretty tight spots but always there had been some way out. Not here. There was no possible way to climb a twenty-foot wall of perpendicular oil-slick glass.

"I'm afraid I've failed you, Dorothy," he said. In his mind now was only the thought of something he must *not* do. He couldn't allow her to go through the horror he had seen on Johnny's gray face. After two hours, when he saw the first gray hair—he looked down at his hands. They were his only weapons against a longer torture. Could he kill Dorothy with his own hands . . . ?

"Well," Dorothy broke in on his thoughts. "Sade wins; and when we go, the whole universe is next." Her voice was a full octave lower than Norman had first heard it when she appeared at his galley door.

Norman walked over and stood before her. "Whatever happens," he said, "I want you to know this—that I've fallen in love with you. You're the bravest woman I've ever known and the most beautiful. That combination usually doesn't go together."

She looked up at him with very blue and serious eyes. "I've been in love with you for a long time," she said. "Ever since I first saw your picture in the paper. That's why I came with you."

Her words were cut off by Norman's lips. Then quickly he left her and walked back to the glass, staring out at the wind-whipped jungle. Why wait? Why go through this torture any longer? Get it over with now!

"Gods of the universe, forgive me," he whispered and turned to take her throat in his hands.

Light flashed across his face. It was Dorothy's mirror. She held it, smoothing her sun-burnished hair. A thought burst into his consciousness like a butterfly from a cocoon.

He jumped over and snatched the mirror from her hand, ripped his watch from his wrist and flipped off the crystal with his thumbnail, letting the watch drop to the ground.

"What're you doing!"

He didn't bother to answer. His pulse was liquid fire as he held the watch crystal close to the glass wall with one hand and focused the rays of the sun into it with the mirror. A thin curl of smoke rose from the jungle across the field. Then where the smoke had been an orange flame licked up from the dry grass. He dropped the mirror and the watch crystal and grabbed Dorothy close to him in the center of their prison, holding her tightly.

"Why! Why!"

"You'll see!"

LASHED by the wind, the fire spread like a flood. A blast of smoke engulfed the glass obscuring their view with its swirling whiteness. Then bits of flaming ashes dotted the smoke as the flames found new fuel in the rotted trees. Standing there, holding Dorothy in his arms, Norman saw the glass around them slowly darken. Quickly, as the wind brought the increasing heat upon them, the glass turned black and all he could see was the wild smoke rolling across the hole at the top of their stifling cage. He felt Dorothy coughing. Heat swam in the blackness about them.

Then almost as suddenly as it had begun, the wind swept the smoke away and Norman tore himself away from Dorothy and sprang to the glass wall. Without waiting till the glass lightened, he ran his hand across its blistering surface. When the thermal quality of the glass permitted the passage of light and the sight of the smoldering forest across the field, Norman was half way up the slick side, climbing like a ladder the bulging ridges that encircled the glass at its invisible seams.

As Dorothy stared at him, unbelieving, he vaulted over the rim and jolted with stinging feet to the hot gravel outside. The metal ladder was like a live coal in his hands but he barely felt it as he threw it against the wall and ran up it like a squirrel. Sitting on the cooling rim, he drew the ladder up after him and dropped it inside for Dorothy.

Soon they were streaking across the steaming gravel toward the house, Dorothy's hair streaming in the smoky wind.

Norman burst into the big front room with Dorothy behind him. Their running feet were loud in the silent house as they



sped down the corridor, Norman dreading what he would find tied to the cylinder where they had left Keren. "You don't want to see this," he said, halting at the closed door. "Try these other doors and find a gun. Sade may be back any moment!"

Dorothy obediently turned away as he went in and the sight that met his eyes was to figure in many a future nightmare. Half way between the door and the cylinder, Keren lay on the floor, more like some hideous reptile than a human being, staring up at him, her eyes two black holes, hate alive in them, the only life in what was left of her face.

Norman stepped over and picked her up, his fingers recoiling from the touch of leathern skin and bone. Her luxurious hair had vanished leaving a skull, cracked skin tight across her cheek bones. The rope that had held her to the cylinder had slipped from her shrunken wrists and how she had crawled this far, Norman couldn't tell.

He carried her to the cylinder, opened the heavy cap and drew out the small hose that Sade had used to restore to youth the white rat. Quickly, he sprayed the pink liquid upon her face and body—a treatment that was to rewrite all of medical science. Her cheeks swelled again to the form of a living face and like a trick of superimposed motion picture work, before his eyes Keren's skeletal structure became covered again with firm, rounded flesh, and on her head wispy black threads appeared and extended again into a silken sable mass.

To save the spark of life that remained with Johnny, Norman knew he had to get this material back to Earth now; which meant a finish fight for a space ship. "Are you strong enough now? We've got to ambush Sade."

It was an effort for Keren to reorganize her forgotten coordinations which enabled her to speak. Her lips moved soundlessly as he carried her to the door and down the passage. He explained quickly how he and Dorothy had escaped.

"There are guns in the tower," she managed to whisper as they entered the front room.

Dorothy stood at the door with two jet rifles, peering out at the still deserted field. "I found these in their bedroom," she said,

handing Norman one of the guns. "Is she all right? I thought—"

Norman told her what he had done to revive Keren. "But here's what we do," he said, lowering Keren to a sofa. "Sade will see the empty cage and know there's something wrong when he comes in to land. He will probably attack the house. We've got to get back in the cage. Keren can vaccinate you," he nodded to Dorothy, allaying her hesitation. "When they land, I'll jump out and take care of as many as I can. Keren can get the rest from the tower."

"There's a glass cutter in the store room," Keren said, nodding her approval of the plan. Her cheeks were white as paper but she got up and walked unsteadily from the room.

"The liquid brought her back from the grave," Norman whispered to Dorothy, watching Keren walk up the hall.

**K**EREN returned immediately, and gave Norman the glass-cutter, which was an instrument shaped like a small riveting hammer. "One promise," she asked. "Sade's mine. I'll be in the tower. You've got to save him for me."

Keren took her hypodermic from her pocket and, at Norman's smile, Dorothy permitted the needle to enter her arm. "All right. Let's go."

With the cutter in one hand and the rifle in the other, Norman left the house again with Dorothy running beside him.

At the glass cage again, it was short work to cut a narrow door at the base of the smooth wall. With an eye on the horizon, Norman quickly covered the cutter with gravel, then motioned Dorothy into the invisible enclosure that had been their prison and so nearly their mausoleum. "We'll play dead," he explained, stretching out on the gravel with the two rifles hidden under him. Dorothy lay down beside him. "When they leave the ship and come over here, I'll jump out. You stay inside in case they get a chance to shoot back."

Suddenly the air hummed with the flow of rockets. "Here they are!" But the sound told Norman that his job was doubled in danger. There were two ships now, the other, his own. They'd repaired it.

Rockets idling, they hovered over the field and slowly settled. Sade's group was



now split in two parties—he couldn't surprise them both. . . .

"Don't move!" Norman whispered, feeling Dorothy's soft hair against his cheek. His fingers tightened on the guns under his body. His pulse was loud in his ears. If they suspected something? But it was too late for worry now. He heard footsteps on the gravel as the sound of the rockets sputtered and died away.

**T**HE NEXT second was a lifetime. Then suddenly he was on his feet. He whirled, ducked out through the hole in the glass. The guns in his hands were spitting their red streams, before his eyes found the men before him, and he played the guns like two garden hoses, spraying death. The two patrolmen fell, charred and black. But the two groups had ruined his ambush. Swart sprang aside, behind the glass wall as the flame streaked past him. Norman saw Sade standing the door of the ship, staring at the wild scene. The door was slammed shut as Norman's guns splattered the hull with fire. Then the fight was between him and Swart alone.

On the opposite sides of the ring of glass, Dorothy standing there horrified between them, it was one of the strangest situations in Norman's experience. The glass was impervious to jet fire. Dorothy was perfectly safe. But as Norman moved around the wall to get a shot at Swart, the dark little man also moved, keeping the arc of glass between them. It couldn't continue. A sudden sheet of flame rushed past one side of the glass, Sade firing from the ship. Swart was not slow to take advantage of the opportunity. Quickly he slid around the wall to corner Norman against Sade's fire.

Norman stood waiting, rifles poised to blast Swart's gun barrel as it nosed past the curve of glass. But Swart was no fool. He was playing for time. Norman heard the throbbing as Sade started his rockets. Sade was moving the ship to trap him between their guns.

Norman started to jump back through the hole in the glass. But that would be suicide; while Swart guarded the door, Sade could pick them off from above in the ship. Then an idea whispered in Norman's mind. If he could lure Swart from the protection of the glass into Keren's

sights in the the tower—if he could trust Keren—but there was nothing else to do. He ducked into the enclosure beside Dorothy.

Swart laughed. Norman could hear it inside the glass. Quickly, Swart stepped to the edge of the hole, his pistol covering their exit, smiling at them through the wall. "You ain't very bright, Norman." It was the last breath that ever passed his lips, for a long, thin line of flame suddenly stretched from the tower to the small of his back. Swart dropped without a sound, surprise on his dead face.

But Sade's ship was already in the air. "He'll come and strafe us!" Norman shouted to Dorothy above the roar of the rockets. He took her hand, dragged her out of the cage past Swart's body. They had to get to the cruiser; their only hope was a fight with Sade in the air. But the sound of Sade's rockets stopped Norman in his tracks as he started to dash for the cruiser. Sade's ship was skimming the field, twenty feet off the ground, his rockets sputtering like a gasoline engine with a broken piston.

The ship was headed directly toward the house, apparently unable to rise. Then Norman saw what had happened. Keren's rifle had hit the rise rocket tube. The heavily repaired solder work had burned through. Unable to gain altitude, the ship hurtled into the house like a freight plane gone wild. The plastic walls ripped like tinfoil as the ship's heavy nose plowed into the building just below the tower.

There was no explosion. The impact killed the rockets. Dust plumed up like a geyser, disappeared swiftly in the wind, leaving the ship hanging there tail out, stuck in the building like an arrow.

Norman and Dorothy were at the door before the debris stopped falling. The front room was choked with dust and bits of torn plastic rained from the ceiling as they ran down the shadowy corridor. The door leading to the tower stairs hung on its hinges, admitting a beam of sunlight from the demolished upper story. They ran up the broken stairs, swaying precariously. The cracked hull of the ship lay in the debris of what remained of the tower. The wall had been sheared off level with the floor on one side and swaying out from the foundation below a misty



rainbow sparkled its colors in the sunlight, hissing softly as the red fluid escaped from a pipe hidden in the wreckage. Sade's well around which the house was built had split in the crash.

Leaving Dorothy at the top of the stairs, Norman climbed over the chunks of plastic into the tower room. Then he realized his foolhardiness. Too late. A chill tingled the back of his neck as he saw the ship's port hanging open.

He heard Dorothy's warning cry behind him as he turned around slowly.

Sade's grimy bulk stood beside a chunk of plastic at the edge of the littered floor. The sunlight glistened on the pistol in his hand, as it squirted a stream of red flame upon the barrel of Norman's rifle. The gun dropped from Norman's blistered fingers.

"You thought you could escape what Vulcan and I can do," Sade said. "None can escape us, for Vulcan and I control the universe from now on." He pointed his pistol to the floor at Norman's feet and pulled the trigger. Norman stepped back as the flame licked up around his shoes. "Keep walking until you fall into that rainbow down there!"

"Wait, Sade!" Norman stepped back again as the line of fire followed him. "There's no time for this. That pipe's going to burst wide open any moment!" He shifted from one foot to another, the soles of his shoes burning.

"Jump," Sade said quietly. He raised the gun higher.

**N**ORMAN retreated another step. Two feet lay between him and the edge of the sheared wall, the end of the floor, and then the misty lethal colors hissing ten feet below.

Dorothy scrambled over the plastic wreckage and threw herself at Sade, but the flat of his palm met her face and hurled her aside. The line of fire moved to Norman's toes again, and he stepped back his last step. Like a cobra wavering before its prey, the flame swept back and forth across the floor, inches from Norman's toes, scorching the floor under his feet. He glanced down at the crimson mist, leaping like a fountain under the splinters of plastic jutting out over it. Then he

realized that fate had given him his chance—for a price.

He had come to Vulcan to find something to save Johnny's life. In the tank in the cruiser out on the field was the fluid that could do that. On the broken wall below him, just over the fountain of death, a piece of the wreckage jutted outward two feet—he could leap to that, swing clear of the mist and reach the ship and be free. He could save Johnny—by leaving Dorothy behind.

There could be no compromise. He had no doubt that Sade would kill her the instant he realized the trick.

Norman glanced back into Sade's triumphant smile. Suddenly he returned the smile and laughed out loud. "When'd you take your last vaccination, Sade!" he laughed. "Did you know your hair had turned white?"

Sade held his smile as steady as his gun. "I'm not leaving you and look for a mirror," he said. "No tricks will save you this time. Those shots are good for 24 hours."

"Not with all this raw stuff in the air," Norman laughed. "Look how your hands have withered."

"What matter," Sade said, "my Fountain of Youth can restore me again." But his smile loosened, and quick as light his glance dropped to his hands. Norman's knees straightened like steel springs. The length of flame seared his hip as he sprang. Then his fist piled into Sade's heavy jaw.

The gun flew out and down into the mist. Sade hit the floor rolling and struggled to his feet as Norman was on him like a hurricane. He crossed jabs into his face with both fists then stepped back and swung a long arc that crushed the big man's nose. Sade stumbled backward, screamed, arms flailing the air wildly, and fell backward off the edge of the floor.

Norman stepped over and looked down. Deep in the eery rainbow mist that swirled around him, Sade scrambled to his feet and looked around frantically, confused with the colors. His hair turned snow white, his round cheeks tightened across the bones of his face and his big belly vanished in his baggy clothes. He held his face and hands up before his face and forgot Norman to stare at his skeleton-like fingers. Then, his hands still raised



before his eyes, he sank to the ground as his legs collapsed. The shoes fell off his bony feet as he lay there writhing.

Norman shook his head, rubbed his eyes. Sade wasn't writhing. It was the wind rustling his clothes.

Norman found Dorothy's sunlit head pressed against his shoulder as she cried like a baby. He touched her hair gently, then turned to the wreckage of the tower.

A moment's search in the debris disclosed Keren's broken form. He lifted her dead weight in his arms and with Dorothy behind him went quickly down the stairs. In the front room, he laid Keren on the sofa and, risking one moment more, jerked a tapestry from the wall and gently covered her body. Then they ran out of the house and across the field to the cruiser.

As he helped Dorothy through the port he heard a cyclone roar from the house. He shoved Dorothy in, jumped in after her and slammed the door. Through the glass, they watched the house fly to pieces like a bursting bomb as a giant flower of red spouted high over the field. Then, where the house had been, stood a wavering red column, feet thick, towering above the green jungle. It sprayed down upon the cruiser like a scarlet rain.

They stared at the vivid scene until the red film covered the cabin windows. Then Norman thumped the tank around the cabin wall, heard its dull fullness, and walked into the pilot room and sat down at the controls. "There's plenty in the tank for Johnny," he said, "and there's plenty on Vulcan for the Universe."

"What shall we name it?" Dorothy said.

As they soared away from the planet and their increasing speed washed the red

film from the glass. Norman looked at the dwindling green globe that was Vulcan and lived again, swiftly, all that had happened there. And strangely, now that it was over, one phrase whispered in his mind. *I'll owe you a thousand kisses. . . .*

"Let's name it 'Kerine,'" he said. "We owe her more than we can ever repay."

THE WORD "Kerine" was being shouted in every street and across every backyard fence in the universe two days later and it was a tense moment outside a closed white door in a hospital in New York City. Although the surgery was on the fifteenth floor, Norman and Dorothy could hear the clamor in the street below as thousands halted traffic for blocks around and the policemen stood by with folded arms, smiling. Downstairs, the lobby was packed with photographers and reporters, waiting.

As the white door opened, Norman and Dorothy jumped to their feet. Norman could hear his heart thumping above the noise from the street as he looked down at the sheet-covered stretcher the nurses rolled out the door. As the stretcher rolled into the hall, the face appeared and deep within his pounding heart, Norman yelled his joy. Johnny's face was pale and thin, as if recently recovered from a long illness, but it was Johnny's face, his barber-shy black hair tousled on his forehead.

"Hello, chum," Johnny said. "The doc told me all about it." Then he glanced at Dorothy. "So that's her."

"She's got exclusive rights to the story," Norman grinned.

"I can't wait to get back in a full dress suit," Johnny said. "For the wedding."

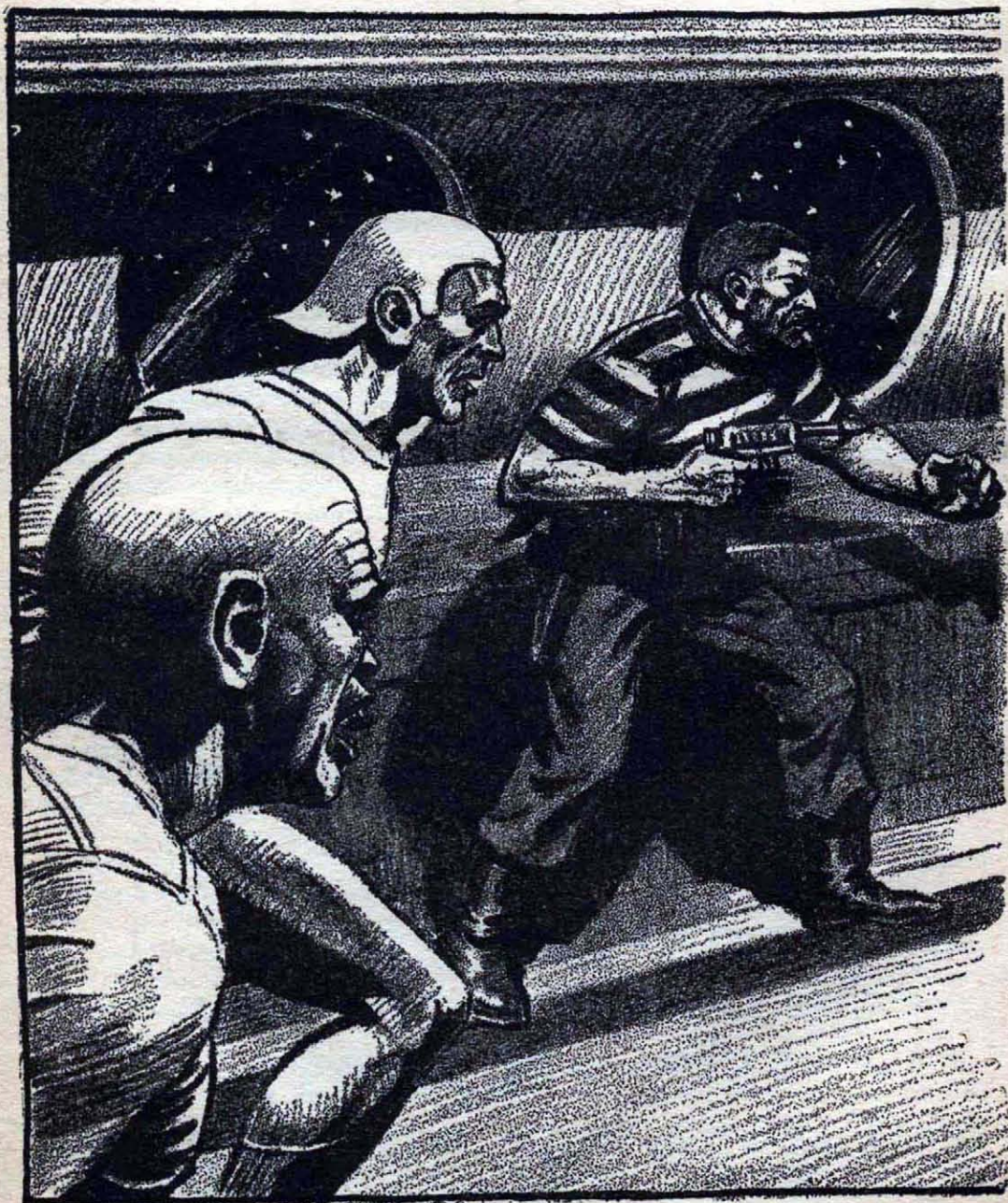
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# Highwayman Of The Void

By DIRK WYLIE

**Ironic destiny had brought outlaw Steve Nolan across the star lanes to icy Pluto and tangled his life again with the man he had sworn to kill. Once more he was trapped in a maze of Galactic intrigue that reached far back into his past — and forward to his death.**





**S**TEVE NOLAN was three years dead, pyro-burned in the black space off Luna when a prison break failed. But Nolan had a job to do. Nolan came back.

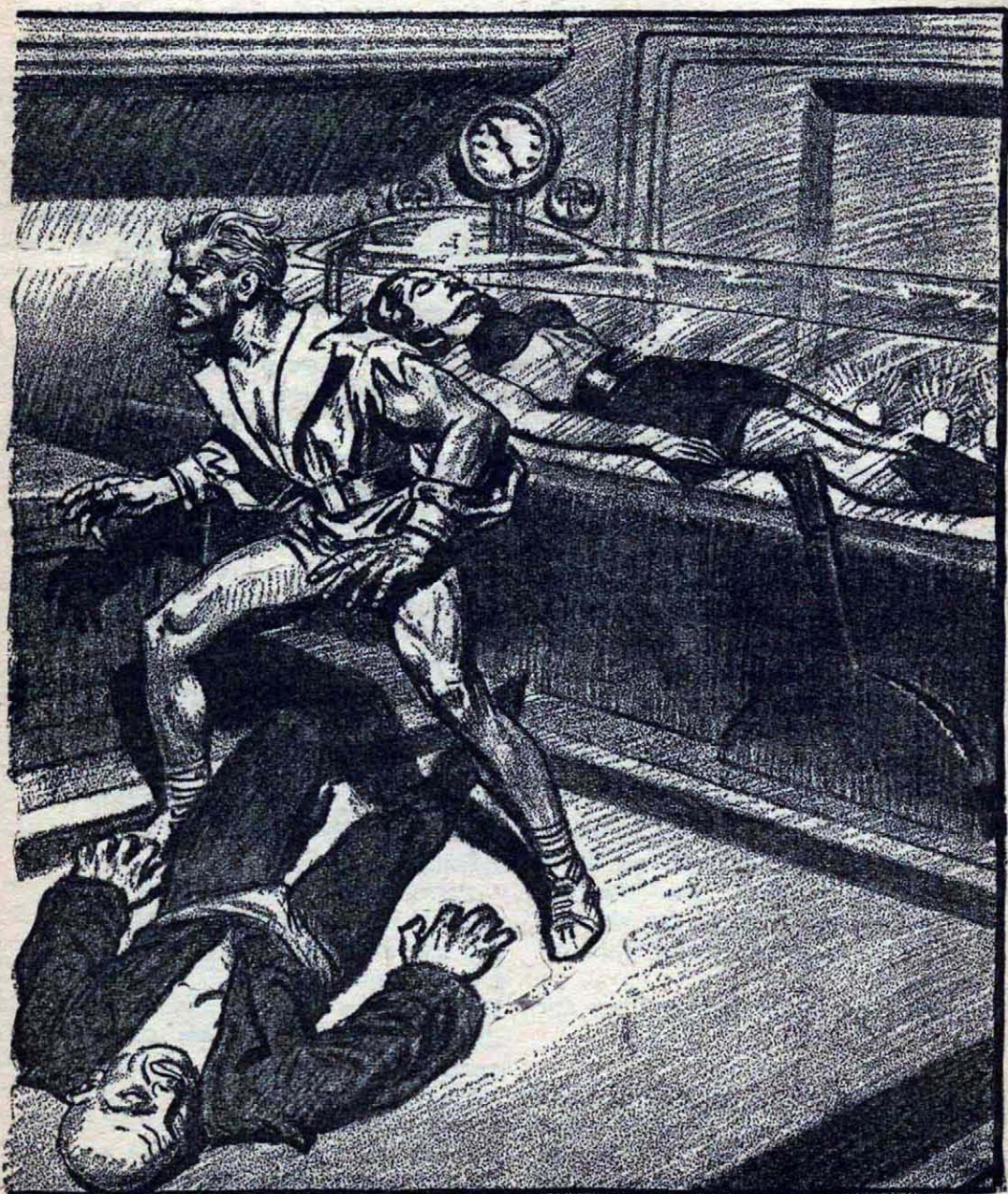
Where the Avalon Trail bends across Annihilation Range, a thousand icy miles from Pluto's northern stem, Nolan stopped and closed the intake valve of his helmet. Count five seconds, and he unhooked the exhausted tank of oxygen; count ten more and it was spinning away, end over end

over Pluto's frozen surface, and a new tank was already in place. He slipped the pressure valve and inhaled deeply of the new air.

He'd come ten miles by the phosphorescent figures on the nightstone markers beside the trail. Fifteen more miles to go.

His cold black eyes stared absently at the east, where the pseudo-life of the great Plutonian crystals rolled in a shifting, tinkling sea. He noted the water-avid crystals, and noted the three crablike

*Illustration by DOOLIN*





crawlers that munched a solitary clump of metallic grass. You don't walk, talk and breathe after a Tri-planet Lawman has declared you dead unless you note everything around you and react to what may be dangerous.

But he was looking beyond the familiar Plutonian drear, to the eastern horizon where faint lights gleamed in the dark. That was Port Avalon. That was where Steve Nolan was bound.

Woller was in Avalon. The Alan Woller who had made him an outlaw, roaming the star trails from Pluto to the Satellites, never daring to return to the inner worlds where Tri-planet kept order.

There was a slow pulse mounting in Nolan's throat as he walked on, savagely kicking a crab-shelled crawler from his path. He'd seen the newsheet, months old, in a rickety old port on one of the Satellites—Io? Ganymede?—when he was down to forty credits and a friendly bartender. It hadn't been much of an item. The kind a country editor throws into his finance column when he unexpectedly loses an ad and has to fill space.

"The new shipping company, which expects to do much for improving commercial relations with the outer planets, is headed by Alan Woller, formerly with the Interplanetary Telenews Company. Woller is remembered as the prosecution's star witness in the trial of Steve Nolan, the Junta agent indicted for treason three years ago. Nolan, sentenced to life imprisonment in Luna Cave, was killed while attempting to escape.

The new company is capitalized at over a billion dollars, and has already taken options on bases in. . . ."

The drink had drained out of Steve Nolan when he saw that. And the bartender had been too friendly for his own good. He'd been a soft touch for five hundred credits.

That had been rocket fare to Pluto for Nolan.

**H**E FELT the drumming with the soles of his feet, a hard, grinding sensation against his metal boots. He jumped off the trail quickly and whirled to watch for the approaching skid.

It was moving slowly, chugging along on a single jet.

*Clogged feeders*, Nolan thought as he felt the uneven vibrations. *If he doesn't watch out he'll have a backblast.*

The skid faltered past him, no faster than he could run. He looked away from the incandescent flare of the one tail jet, then that stopped too. Tall as a man, a dozen feet long, the skid lay waiting on the trail.

Waiting for Steve Nolan?

Anything was better than walking. Nolan walked up to the skid, not fast, and kicked solidly at the entrance. It slid open with a creaking noise and he was in the tank, sealing the outer door behind him.

The inner door didn't open. A female voice from a speaker said, "Who are you?"

Steve waited till he saw the pressure and temperature gauges shoot up to normal, then swung open his faceplate. "Matthews is the name," he lied easily, out of three long years of practice. "I thought you were waiting for me. Say the word and I'll get out again if I was wrong."

"Oh, no." The girl's voice hesitated a second. "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm on my way to Avalon, out of Aylette. A skid bus took me across the Ice Plains, then I caught a lift on a prospector's skid. He turned off ten miles back and I decided to walk the rest of the way."

"Do you know anything about skids? Mine isn't working very well. I'll pay you if you can—"

"I'm not a mechanic," Nolan said wearily.

"Oh. Then you can't fix it."

"I didn't say that. You can't pay me for it. I'll take a lift to Avalon, though."

"A lift? But I don't know you from Adam."

Nolan sighed. "Lady, I don't know you either. Believe me, all I want is a ride. It'll take me four hours to walk to Avalon. I can't spare the time if I can help it." He waited a second. No answer. He shrugged and finished his speech. "I'll make you a proposition. Let me in and I'll fix your jets. We'll be in Avalon in twenty minutes, I'll get out and we'll never see each other again. Don't let me in and I'll tear these ignition wires right out of the lock. Then we'll both hitchhike."



The girl's voice came with controlled anger. "You win," she said. "Come in." There was a soft click, and the inner door yielded under Nolan's hand. He stepped in.

"No hard feelings," he said mildly. "I really wanted the ride. One thing you might remember in the future, though—there are no ignition wires in an air lock."

**S**HE WAS pretty, she was small, she was blue-eyed and brunette. But she didn't say a word to him. She kept to her seat at the controls, watching him lift the top off the distributing chamber, prod around in the gummy mess inside for a second, then replace it and nod.

"You can start it up now, lady," he said. He glanced over her shoulder through the plastic panel, to where Avalon's lights were glowing. Where Woller was. "And the quicker," he said, "the better."

The girl looked at him curiously but said nothing. She turned and fingered the controls. The song of power that came out of the skid's jets brought a quick, slight smile to her lips. Nolan caught a glimpse of her eyes reflected back at him from the plastic panel. Appreciative eyes.

He averted his look. Would there be another time when he could meet the gaze of a decent girl and answer it?

*When Woller's dead, his subconscious answered him. Until then you're not a man, Nolan. You're a weapon!*

The skid was climbing, hugging the side of one of the vast foothills to Annihilation Range itself, a hundred-foot chasm on one side and the cliff on the other. Nolan watched the girl's hands for a sharp second, then relaxed. She knew what she was doing. Unerringly the skid split the center of the trail, following its many turns as though on a track. But—

A sudden high sound escaped her lips. Her foot trod hard on the back-jet pedal. The skid slewed crazily, its side crunching against the cliff as it halted.

"What the—" snarled Nolan, hand leaping to the concealed pyro he wore under his shirt. Then he saw.

Ahead of them was an immense rounded bulk, dome-shaped, black as the frozen night. A crawler . . . but what a crawler! Its horny shell was half again the height

of a man, filling the trail from cliff to chasm brink. There was no passing that beast. No wonder there had been no traffic from Avalon!

Mutely the girl turned to Nolan. He grinned sourly, then clambered into the heat suit he'd just put off.

He eyed the girl for a second. "I'm going to have to trust you. I have to get to Avalon, so I have to get this misbegotten monstrosity out of my way. And I have to leave the skid to do it. That gives you a fair, clear chance."

The girl shook her head. "I'll take you to Avalon. I owe you that much. But—but how—"

"Watch," Nolan said curtly, and climbed into the tank. Before he closed the door a thought struck him.

He poked his head out at her. "If anything should go wrong," he said, "and I find myself scattered all over that valley down there, you'd better stay put. Keep the crawler away with the brake jet. And wait for someone to come along. You're not the skidster to back this crate all the way down the trail, with just a brake jet."

Then he slammed the inner door, sealed his helmet, pushed his way out.

The crawler was even bigger than he'd thought. Standing within ten feet of it, he felt tiny and weak, a toy before this massive brute. Like ancient Earth dinosaurs, the crawlers kept growing as long as they lived. Tiny as the palm of a man's hand, foot-high creatures like those Nolan had kicked out of his way an hour before or monstrosities like the one before him—all three types existed side by side. Only seldom did they grow as great as this. Invulnerable though they were, they perished of starvation, when their bulk grew too much for their thousands of tiny legs to carry.

Out of the ebon hulk of the thing came poking a minute head, goggle-eyed, with a luminous halo of green tendrils surrounding it. It blinked weakly at Nolan. He waited patiently. If the thing was convinced he was harmless.

It was. Recovering from the shock of the skid's arrival it began to prepare for motion again. The head poked out toward the skid on a long, scrawny neck, examined it minutely. The big carapace shivered and rose slightly off the ground



as the multitude of tiny legs took up the task of carrying it forward.

Nolan stood motionless. The creature moved ponderously toward him, ignoring him. In the dull mind of the creature an object as tiny as a man was nothing. Even the skid was merely another sort of boulder, against which it could lean, send it hurtling over to destruction, out of its way.

It moved forward till the hard horn almost touched him. Then Nolan leaped.

This was the moment of decision. He circled the long neck with one lashing arm, clamped on it all the pressure he could bring to bear. It was the one sensitive spot the creature had—and protected, normally, by armor battleship-thick.

Nolan strained the muscles of his arm, cursing the cushion of air inside his suit that made a pillow for the beast. The slippery flesh coiled and writhed in his grip; the beast exhaled a great, whistling screech of agony and the snakelike neck curved around. The popeyed head darted in at him, tiny mouth distended to show raw, red flesh inside. It battered ineffectually against the heavy plastic faceplate of his suit.

The crawler vented its whistling sigh again and staggered drunkenly away. Away from the remorseless pressure on its sore spot, away from the agonizing weight of him. Its tiny legs carried it rocking sidewise.

Then abruptly they tried to halt it, gave sharp warning to the tiny brain. It was too late.

The scrambling legs flailed for a foothold and found vacuum. Nolan gave a final heave, felt the thing slide away from him, leaped back. Just in time. He himself was teetering on the brink of the chasm as the crawler, tiny head darting frantically, soundlessly around, slid over and disappeared.

He didn't look down. The clattering and crashing vibrations from below told what happened. He turned, shook himself and headed for the skid.

The girl was waiting for him. Nolan was mildly surprised. She looked at him curiously as he entered.

"A dirty job," she offered tentatively.

He shrugged. "Yes," he said. "Let's get moving."

She turned without a word. All the way back to Avalon, her back was a silent reproach. Friendship, it said, had been offered—and rebuffed.

Nolan had his private thoughts, and dwelt in them. Except for the muffled blast of the rockets there was no sound in the skid until they'd jetted into the great cargo lock in Avalon's crystal dome and the handlers had come to slide the skid into a parking space.

Then, as they got out, she smiled suddenly.

She said, "I guess I misjudged you, Mr. Matthews. I'm sorry I was discourteous, but a girl can't be too careful. Let me take you to dinner for an apology."

Nolan paused and stared at her soberly. Then, "No, thanks," he said. "I meant it when I said I wasn't interested in you. I have things on my mind already." He ignored her outstretched hand, turned to leave, then stopped. "Oh, yes," he said. "Thanks for the ride."

He walked cumbrously over to a storage cubicle without looking back. He stripped off his heat suit and checked it with a stout man in Pluto-city green.

It was time to plan his next move. There was a pilot's hangout, he remembered, a saloon called the Golden Ray. He took a worn notebook from his shirt pocket, thumbed it to the forgotten address and held the page up for the checking attendant to see.

"How do I get there?"

The man's eyes widened a fraction as he took the address in. He shrugged imperceptibly. "Any sidewalk going north," he said. "Get off at the Hub and you'll be within a couple blocks of it."

NOLAN nodded and headed for a moving sidewalk. The notebook went back into the pocket of his open-necked black shirt, and the hand that put it there paused a second to touch reassuringly the weight of a slim-barreled pyro that swung beneath his armpit, out of sight. It was nice to know it was there, even though he didn't need it—yet.

He paused in a robot restaurant to eat. Saloons like the Golden Ray don't sell much food—particularly to those who have tasted it once. It was getting on toward night.



The slidewalks were fast, and the first man he stopped at the Hub told him all he needed to know to find the saloon. Once he got within a block of it, it all began to come back. It had been years since he'd been there, but the place hadn't changed.

A blast of sound struck him as he clawed his way through thick tobacco smoke and sweet Martian hop-incense fumes to the bar. He nodded his head, and the short motion yanked a fat bartender to him.

The man's slitted eyes peeped surprisedly through the surrounding tallow.

"Gunner!" he whispered, amiable but hoarse. "Thought you were somewhere around Jupe. What'll it be?"

"It'll be nothing right now," Nolan said. "I thought Petersen might be here. I want to see him."

"Oh, sure," the bartender said. "He's dealin' red-dog at one o' the tables in the back."

Nolan was called "Gunner" by those who knew him by his alias— He'd never taken the trouble to think up a first name for "Matthews." He nodded and stepped away.

It wasn't hard to find Petersen when you knew his habits. The wrinkled little man always sat in the noisiest spot he could find. This time it was a table right behind the four-piece orchestra, pride of the proprietor's heart.

Nolan stood silently for a moment behind the little man's chair to watch the play. He marveled at the ease with which Petersen's gnarled fingers handled the flying pasteboards. As usual, Petersen's pile of chips was low, and the set of his back was discouraged.

Nolan grinned. It was part of Petersen's stock-in-trade to look like the tail end of a losing streak. The sucker trade stays away from a winning gambler. But they flocked to Petersen—and his pockets were always clinking.

Petersen's gambler's sixth sense was functioning. He twitched his shoulders uncomfortably, then turned around, glaring up. "Say," he began, "who the hell are— Oh, Gunner!"

Nolan nodded. "Hey there, Peter," he said.

Petersen grinned and blinked. He looked with regret at his top card, then at Nolan. "No?" he asked wistfully.

Nolan shook his head. "No."

The little man shrugged and flipped his cards away. "Okay," he said cheerfully, shoveling his chips into his clanking pockets. "Lead on, Gunner."

Nolan led on, to a more secluded corner where the clamor of the alleged orchestra was less deafening. He sent a waiter off for a bottle of sealed Terrestrial Scotch, then turned to Petersen.

"Where's Woller?" he asked.

Petersen scowled. "Listen, Steve," he begged, "stay out of trouble. Woller's big here."

"Don't call me Steve," Nolan said mildly. Two living men knew that Nolan and Matthews were the same. Petersen was one of them—Nolan himself the other. "I manage my own affairs. I want to see Woller."

"Okay," Petersen groaned. "He's at the Elena. The big hotel near South Lock."

Nolan nodded. "Good enough," he said. "I'll take care of my business with him right away."

The greasy-aproned waiter came back with the Scotch. Nolan inspected the seal critically, then broke it and poured two generous slugs. "How!" he said. "What've you been doing with yourself, Pete?"

Petersen swallowed his Scotch, grimaced non-committally. "Following the prospectors," he said. "Making money and losing it. It's been a long time since you were here."

Nolan ignored the implied question. "Pretty long," he agreed. "I wasn't figuring on coming, but I heard Woller was here."

Petersen nodded his head sadly. "You're aching for trouble," he observed. "Woller's no man to buck up against. He's got money behind him."

"Whose money?"

"I dunno. Some Martian syndicate, they say. He's come a long way since he was your boss at Telenews."

"Not so long I couldn't follow him."

Petersen cocked an eyebrow, then poured another round. "You followed him into a bad spot," he said slowly. "This whole town is be-jittered. He's doing about what he likes and nobody says boo."

"Why?"

Petersen frowned. "'Cause they're scared, it looks. Scared of the Junta.



Talk is there are Junta men around. I wouldn't have to remind you, I guess, of what Woller can say about you if he sees you."

Nolan nodded. "He won't see me—in time for it to do him any good."

Petersen shivered. "You're building up trouble," he repeated. "Woller's pretty near running this place."

"'A louse,'" Nolan quoted, "'enthroned in luxury, will still a loathsome insect be.' That's Woller."

Petersen's wizened little troll-face gaped at him. "Lice bite," he said succinctly.

Nolan said soberly, "Live ones do. After tonight Woller may not be able to bite anybody. Dead lice have no friends."

## II

**S**TEVE NOLAN was deceptively slender in his open-necked, black military shirt and trim khaki slacks. In the half-hearted illumination thrown by Avalon's old gasglow lights, he looked almost boyish.

But he didn't look like the pale youth he'd been three years before. The good-natured roundness of his face had contracted to show the hard bone underneath. There was the ghost of a scar close to an eye, and the seared mark of pyro burn where neck joined his right shoulder. The long fingers that once had twirled the toggles of a field newscaster's walky-talky now were better acquainted with the groves of a pyro butt.

"For the last time," he said, "you're better off home in bed. I think there may be trouble."

Petersen looked sour. "Good thinking," he said. "I have a hunch that way, too. I'm going to stick around."

Nolan shrugged. He eyed the Hotel Elena, towering almost up to the crystal dome, directly across the street from him. "It's your neck," he said. "You can catch me when I fly out." He glanced quickly at a wrist-chrono. "A quarter after four," he said. "If I'm not out in half an hour don't wait up. I may be detained."

Before Petersen could answer he was crossing the street, entering the hotel. The Elena was large, and the night clerk couldn't be expected to know every guest.

He glanced up as Nolan entered, then went back to nodding over his magazine. Nolan walked to the grav-well and stepped in.

Nolan let the curiously soothing grav-currents flow over him, carrying him up till he'd ascended twelve floors. That was where Woller was, by the best information Petersen had been able to give him. He reached out a hand and swung himself out of the flow, into a silent corridor.

Not quite silent. Nolan listened and smiled. There was a party somewhere overhead; a vise-box blared briefly in one of the rooms on this corridor as a sleepless guest hunted music. From the grav-well came the low humming of the generators.

That was fine. If it were necessary to make any noise it might be confused with the vise-box, or the singing from overhead.

Woller's door was locked, of course. Nolan bent over the keyhole for a second. There was a tinny, springy *click*, and the door drifted open under the slow pressure of his hand.

The room was large and empty. A library, perhaps, as well as he could judge by the intermittent blood-tinted light that filtered in from an advertising stereolume across the street. Nolan flipped his cigarette lighter out, held it aloft and pressed the button. In the dim glow it shed he saw twin doors. After a moment's hesitation, he chose one, opened it gently, slipped through into a bedroom.

A night light glowed softly on the wall, revealing nothing. Nolan sniffed the air curiously, then wrinkled his nose. Perfume! Woller had added a new vice to his character. Nolan grimaced contemptuously, then moved toward the indistinct figure on the bed. His right hand dipped inside his shirt, came away with the slim pyro protruding from his fist.

"Woller," he said. "Wake up. You've got company."

**T**HERE WAS A rustle from the bed, a gasp, a metallic click. Nolan jumped back, cursing. He flung an arm over his head as the overhead lumes burst into blinding light. But he'd caught a quick, stunning glimpse of what was on the bed and, quicker than starflight, his pyro jutted toward the lumes, flared



wickedly. All lights died as the blast shorted the wires.

It had been a girl in the bed, blinking up sleepily, mouth a taut line of surprise. The girl—the one from the skid, the one he'd encountered in Annihilation Range! She had no more of a look at him than he at her, and she had been sleep-dazed, staring up at the light. Perhaps she hadn't recognized him—

"Hold still," he hissed—there is no personality to a whisper. "Where's Alan Woller?"

"Who are you?" the girl's voice came, a trifle unsteady. Good—she hadn't recognized him!

Nolan laughed voicelessly. "I'm the man with the gun," he replied. "I ask the questions. Where's Woller?"

"None of your business," the girl said. There was a note of confidence in her voice, and suddenly Nolan felt a furtive movement from the bed. Was there an alarm—a bell to summon servants?

"Hold it!" he whispered sharply. "One wrong move and I'll kill you. I mean business—and I want an answer."

The girl's voice was even now. "I won't give one."

Nolan's brows drew down over his eyes. What was this girl to Woller? Whatever the connection was, by rights he should take no chances. The girl was a danger to him—and the life of no woman on Woller's string should be permitted to stand between him and the chance for vengeance on the man who had framed him.

"I'll give you ten seconds," he whispered harshly.

But already he was stepping silently backward, concealed in the abyss-black gloom of the chamber. He reached noiselessly behind him for the knob of the door. He was being a fool and he knew it. But he had seen honesty in her eyes, back on the skid, and even the yearning for revenge couldn't make him blot that out with pyro-flame.

He opened the door, slid out, closed it softly behind him. The girl said nothing, perhaps had not known he had gone. Nolan cast a quick longing glance at the other door, but there was no time. In seconds the girl would discover she was alone. There would be an alarm, surely.

A dim thread of light showed him the

door to the hall. Catlike he crossed to it, then halted, petrified. Men were coming down the hall, several of them by the voices. He caught a snatch of a rasping complaint: "*Old man Woller's tin soldiers, that's us. Who the hell does he—*"

Nolan swore lividly under his breath. The end of the trail had come.

But he stepped back a pace and stood there, pyro up-tilted and ready. He would have a split-second's advantage. If only there were no more than two or three of them—

AND THEN the sound was drowned out. A sharp, moaning screech came from outside. A harsh metallic wail that climbed for the frigid heavens above, louder than the screaming trumpets of Ragnarök.

The alarm sirens! There was a break in the crystal dome that held the life of Avalon!

Meteorite, accident or simple fatigue—the dome had cracked. Air and heat would vanish. Death would tenant the city.

There was a sudden, sharp babble from the men outside, then the pounding of footsteps, halting as they dove into the grav-shaft. Nolan's chance! But he froze in his tracks, then whirled. He ran to the door behind him and wrenched it open.

"Get a heat suit!" he bawled to the girl on the bed. "Dome's cracked! You've got maybe twenty minutes—less, if it's a bad break!"

His voice was a bellow—there was no time for whispers. No time, and perhaps no need. If the dome had gone, Avalon might be a city of corpses, heat suits or none, before help could arrive with fresh oxygen tanks from far-away Aylette. Disguise would hardly matter then.

But he wasted no time in thought. He was out the door, down the hall and dropping into the cushioning grav-web of the descending shaft in seconds. Guests were waking in their rooms. The corridors were filling with shouting men and women. The shriek of emergency trucks filtered in from the street, and the hoarse bellow of the alarm sirens multiplied the havoc done to the peace of the night.



If he could get to a ship—?

But the slidewalks would be jammed with panicky humans, all with the same thought. A heat suit was his only chance. And the nearest ones he knew of were at South Lock, at the base of the dome itself!

He swung himself out of the shaft, raced across the lobby, which was already beginning to fill with people intent on escape. He was out the door with the van of them, racing across a still empty street toward South Lock.

A slim, pale figure darted across in front of him. He moved to dodge past, then slowed momentarily as he saw who it was.

"Steve!" Only one man knew that name—Petersen!

"Pete! What are you waiting for? Come on—get a suit!"

Petersen sighed, touched Nolan's shoulder to halt him. "There's no hurry, pal," he said mildly.

"No hurry! The dome alarm—"

Petersen shook his head. "Forget it," he said. "I turned the alarm in myself."

**T**OWARD what passed for morning in Avalon, the confusion died down. The emergency cars were off the streets, the sirens had long since stopped wailing and the last irate citizen had retired for what remained of a night's sleep.

Petersen came back from the window of his shabby little one-room apartment and reported on progress to Nolan.

"All quiet," he said. "Sure you won't change your mind and lie down for a while? You'll be needing sleep pretty soon."

Nolan swallowed the rest of his coffee, stubbed out a cigarette and shook his head. "No time," he said. He glanced at his chrono. "I figure on leaving in twenty minutes. You're sure Woller's going to be on that ship?"

Petersen grinned. "Pretty sure," he said. "I have my ways."

"You looked good on the deal last night," Nolan said. "You and your hammy ideas. I would have got out without all that."

Petersen was serious. "Not alive, no. When I saw those apes coming down the street I was pretty sure something was up. So I got on a phone—I got a friend

works for Woller's company, and he reads the boss' mail—and that's what he told me. Woller has to get back to the Inner Planets in a hurry. He's sent a bunch of his company guards to pick up some stuff at his apartment. The only thing I could think of was to turn in the alarm and hope you'd get out in the confusion. You're a smart boy, but you ain't Dead-eye Dick, friend. You couldn't of fought it out with five of Woller's finest."

Nolan inclined his head. "Maybe you're right. You say something big seems to be up?"

"What else? He gets a red-hot sealed teleflash from Aylette. Sealed, mind you—my friend can't listen in. He cancels the orders of the only ship his new company has in Avalon—cancels all the cargo contracts—and takes off in it in the middle of the night for Aylette. He'll be back here this morning, they say, to pick up those papers. Then they're off again, deep space, this time. The clearance says Mars."

Nolan nodded. His face was impassive, but a slight crinkling of the lines around his lean nose showed thought. What was Woller up to?

It was curiously difficult to concentrate on Woller. Absently, he found himself saying, "And you don't know who the girl was?"

"My information don't go that far," Petersen admitted. "He has a daughter some place, but she ain't supposed to be here now. But what's your guess about this she?"

"My guess is you're right," Nolan agreed reluctantly. There was something about soft blue eyes and silk-fine black hair that did not fit in the same picture with Woller.

Petersen was looking at him shrewdly, with a dim light of understanding glowing in his eyes and a hint of pity. As Nolan looked at him, Petersen looked away, began fumbling inside his waistband.

"What're you doing?" Nolan asked curiously.

"You'll need money," said Petersen. He finished unbuckling and dragged out an oiled-silk money belt. Without opening it, he tossed it to Nolan. "Here. You'll have to bid high to get passage



on Woller's ship. This'll help."

Nolan nodded. "Thanks," he said. "Look, I—"

Petersen waved a hand airily. "Forget it. As long as there's enough radium on Pluto for prospectors to find, I'll have plenty money."

"Sure," said Nolan. "But the thanks still goes." He closed his eyes for a second, rubbed them. Then he blinked rapidly, took out his pyro and checked it. Full clip, save the one shell he'd used on the light last night. Twenty-three shots. He deftly slipped another cartridge in to make the full two dozen, then replaced the gun in its shoulder holster.

"You're going to get into trouble with that thing," Petersen prophesied.

Nolan shrugged. "I've got a name to live up to. A gunner has to have a gun—and I kind of think I'm going to need this one." He glanced at the chrono again and stood up, stretching.

"Well, good-by," he said casually. "I owe you a bunch of favors. You won't have to remind me."

"Course not," Petersen agreed. "Wouldn't do much good. But I'll sort of mention it to your heirs."

AT THE Operations lock of the Avalon spaceport Nolan opened the money belt Petersen had given him for the first time. He peered inside and whistled.

The cards had been with Petersen, all right. The little man had carried a young fortune around with him. He tucked the belt in a pocket with a mental resolve to pay it back some day, if he lived long enough, and went into the observation room.

Through the crystal dome he could see the ship, the only one on the field. It was a beauty—brand-new and glistening. By the look of her, she was the latest type. Pure gravity drive, the rocket jets used only for landing. It had a name, limned phosphorescent on a dark panel in the glittering hull: *Dragonfly*.

He turned and walked over to the port clearance officer. "I have to get to Mars," he said. "I hear this ship's bound there. Who do I see about booking passage?"

The port official scratched his bony head. "It's an unscheduled run," he said, "and

I dunno if they're taking any passengers. But over there—" he waved a hand—"is the second mate. He might help you."

"Thanks." Nolan walked over, eyeing the pallid, short-bodied Venusian indicated. The man was staring glumly out of the observation panel.

"You the second on the ship out there?" Nolan asked.

The man turned slowly and looked him up and down. "Yeah," he said finally. "What about it?"

Nolan allowed his eyes to narrow conspiratorially. "I hear you're bound for Mars," he said, lowering his voice. "Any chance of taking a passenger?"

"No."

Nolan tapped a pocket. "Listen," he said, "it isn't just that I want a ride. I have to get to Mars. I'll pay."

The Venusian laughed sharply and Nolan thought, not for the first time, how superior environment is to heredity. The Venusians, like most of the System's intelligent life, were descended from Earthmen all right, but the adjective that described them best was "fishy."

The second said, "Pay? You haven't got enough money to get you into the lock of that ship."

"Oh, I don't know," Nolan said easily. He took the money belt out of his pocket, flashed the contents for a second. "I meant it," he said. "I have to get to Mars. Name your price—I've got it."

The Venusian's eyes widened. Nolan saw, from the corner of his eye, a skid rocketing across the field. It halted by the *Dragonfly*, and the ship's lock opened. Two bulky, heat-suited figures hurried out of the skid, into the ship.

"What do you say?" Nolan persisted, accelerated by the sight of the figures. One of them would be Woller's thug with the apparently vital papers. That would be the big one—the smaller might be a clerk from his office.

"Okay," the mate capitulated. "Tell you what. It'll cost you ten thousand credits. If it's worth that to you, all right."

Nolan shrugged wryly. "It's worth my neck," he grinned confidentially.

The Venusian grinned moistly back. "Payable in advance," he specified. "Now.



Give it to me and I'll go out and arrange the deal with the captain."

Keeping a percentage of course, Nolan thought; but he only nodded and silently counted out the money. The Venusian grabbed it without checking the count. He said, "Okay, I'll be back in a minute," and left.

Nolan watched him struggle into his suit and clamber across the frigid soil of the field. The lock opened for him, then closed again. Nolan sensed a sudden uneasiness. He almost jumped when the port officer came up behind him and said:

"Wouldn't take you, huh?"

Nolan turned. "Sure," he said. "He had to go arrange it with the captain. I'll go out with him when he comes back for his clearance papers."

"Clearance papers!" the official barked. "Good Lord, man, they've had those for hours. That man isn't coming back!"

### III

NOLAN, swearing incandescently, flung his heat-suit voucher at the officer, grabbed the first suit in the rack and was in the main lock, waiting for the inner door to close, before he put it on. He had already sealed the suit and stepped out on the field when he noticed what the excited hammering of the port official on the lock door should have told him.

The suit had only a single oxygen tank in its clip—and the gauge showed "empty"!

He hesitated only a moment. His eye caught a glimpse of the *Dragonfly*, etched sharply against the black horizon by the field's blazing floodlights. Its smooth lines were suddenly blurred and indistinct. The grav-web was building up around it. In a moment it would be gone!

"Damn!" yelled Nolan, to the sole detriment of his own eardrums. Already the slight amount of air in his suit was nearly used up. But as soon as the web reached full focus the *Dragonfly* would blast off and Woller would be beyond reach for a long time!

Nolan swore fervently, then sealed his writhing lips to save air. He set off in a slow, heavy trot for the shimmering spaceship. He was breathing pure carbon dioxide and staggering nicely by the time

he pushed his way through the thickening resistance of the grav-web to the massive outer door of the lock.

His bulging eyes caught the lever that opened the lock, guarded by a scoop-shaped streamshield. He yanked it blindly, saw the heavy panel roll aside, stumbled in.

Some member of the crew must have been watching—someone with compassion, unexpected enough in a ship of Woller's. The lock door clanged shut behind him and clean air hissed in. Nolan tore frantically at his faceplate and gulped deeply, dizzily.

The metal flooring shuddered. He felt an intolerable weight drag at his water-weak body as the ship took off. He hadn't made it by much, at that. A couple of seconds more and he would have been left.

"Boy!" Nolan gasped. "Somebody sure doesn't want me along on this ride."

The inner door was sliding open. Nolan stepped out into a well lit corridor, almost colliding with the flabby bulk of the Venusian.

The mate glared at him darkly, the hand on his waist poised suggestively above the butt of a pyro.

Before he could speak, Nolan said mildly, "You're a thieving louse. But I'm on the ship, and I won't hold it against you. Only—don't try that again."

The mate flushed. "The captain didn't want to take you," he mumbled. "I was going to send your dough back soon's we touched ground."

"Sure," Nolan agreed. "Having my full name and address the way you do, it'd be easy. Well, skip it. Where's my cabin?"

You wouldn't call it exactly hospitable, the way the mate stalled as long as he could, obviously trying to cudgel his feeble Venusian brain into some plan for getting rid of the unwanted passenger. But Nolan finally got his cabin.

IT WAS the smallest and worst on the ship, of course, but the ship was a beauty. Nolan smiled in real appreciation when he saw the room. The furniture was glow-tinted plastic; the bed was covered with Earth silk.

"Beat it," he told the mate, and watched



the door close behind him. Then he sat down to chart a course.

Woller might recognize him.

That was the first danger. True, Nolan had been reported dead and Woller knew nothing to the contrary. It was only a miracle that Nolan wasn't dead, in fact. Only the incredible chance of his being picked up in midspace, where he floated helplessly, one shoulder brutally pyro-scarred and half the air gone from his suit, had saved him then.

That had been one miracle, for even the ranging, avid patrol boats hadn't been able to find him after his mad leap from a lock of the ship that was carrying him to the Moon.

But that miracle had occurred. And the second miracle was that the pleasure craft that saved him was piloted by a man who lived outside the law but had an iron-clad code of honesty—who wouldn't turn Nolan in for the bounty money on fugitives. Pete Petersen's scrawny shoulders bore no wings, but he'd seemed like an angel to Nolan that desolate day, when he'd seen the flare of Nolan's desperate signal rocket and swung round in a wide arc to pick him up, eventually to take him to the lawless safety of the Belt.

To everyone but Petersen, Steve Nolan was dead. And the little shots of gray now running through Nolan's dark hair, the scar that crossed one tanned cheek, gave him a new personality. He looked slender and dangerous as a lunging rapier, and every bit as cold.

But Woller would have good cause to remember Nolan. Woller had sat there in the courtroom, back on Earth. He'd sat there the whole dragging week of the trial, with Nolan's eyes on him every minute. He looked directly at Nolan, even while he was in the chair, telling the lies that linked Nolan with the Junta—the secret, revolutionary group of outer-planet malcontents that sought to overthrow Tri-planet Law's peace and order.

Nolan's lips contorted savagely as he recalled that. A traitor! His sole crime had been that he knew too much about Woller, his boss!

Woller had been clever about it. The law itself had removed Nolan, a menace to his lawless schemes. When Nolan, on his own initiative, had talked and bribed

his way into seeing a confessed and condemned saboteur of the Junta for an interview, he'd found to his sick astonishment that the man was one he had seen in Woller's own office, not two months before.

He'd been childishly simple about it, had confronted Woller and demanded an explanation. Woller had put on his friendliest face and promised one—later. . . .

And then Woller had turned the dogs loose.

Within an hour Nolan was in jail for the bribery of the prison officials. The next morning came the incredible indictment: Sabotage for the Junta!

Nolan grimaced, recalled the careful, hideous network of lies and forgeries, the distorted evidence, the perjuries. But he had been one man, and Woller represented vast power.

Then abruptly there was a knock on the door. Jolted out of his thoughts, Nolan started, then called: "Just a minute."

This was the moment—and he had no plan. His pyro slid out into his hand. He broke it, stared at the twenty-four potent heat charges. They would be plan enough for him, if he got a clear shot at Woller. But if he should be disarmed, if Woller should suspect.

A moment later, the pyro hidden beneath his shirt again, he opened the door. It was the Venusian second, as before.

"Captain wants to see you," he growled. "Come on."

The *Dragonfly* was a single-deck craft, the captain's cabin located topside of the deck and amidships. Nolan looked around curiously, despite his internal tension, as he followed the Venusian along. The plastic keel panel underfoot showed an infinity of stars. There was one, large and bright, outstanding among the lesser stars. Nolan recognized it—the Sun, parent star to the farflung planet they'd just left. Now it was dim and feeble, but by the time they got within sight of the Inner Worlds it would be a ravenous thing, reaching out to destroy them with lethal radiations.

Out of curiosity, he asked. "When are you going to opaque?"

"Huh?" The Venusian looked startled for a second; then his blubber-drowned



little eyes became shrewd. "Oh, about Orbit Saturn, I guess."

NOLAN suppressed a sudden frown. He asked carefully, "Say, how do you do it on these new-type ships anyhow? All the ones I've been on, you had to have the panels filter-shuttered before they lifted gravs."

"Paint," the mate said curtly. "Okay, here we are."

He stood aside, pointed to a door with a glowing golden star embossed on it. Nolan nodded and entered, but his thoughts were racing.

Paint the panels! It would take the whole crew, and they'd never get it off. If they opaqued with paint the ship would be blind for weeks. The filter shutters—great strips of polarized colloid—were the only solution to the problem of keeping out the worst of the sun's dread radiations, but admitting enough light to guide the ship. But they had to be put on externally, before the ship took off. Mars? This ship, ports transparent as they were, would never dare approach the sun's blinding energies closer than Jupiter!

*No wonder they didn't want me, Nolan thought grimly. They're not going within a hundred million miles of Mars!*

The thought froze in Nolan's mind as he entered the captain's cabin. First he saw the captain, a tall, demon-black Martio-Terrestrial, standing before his own desk. Then his eyes flicked past, toward the florid-faced man who sat behind the desk, fumbling with a cigarette lighter.

And then, for the first time in three years, he was face to face with Alan Woller.

Nolan might have showed a flicker of emotion in his face. Heaven knows, the blast of iron hatred that surged up through his body was powerful enough. But Woller was lighting a cigarette. The second that it took him to finish it and look up was time enough for Nolan to freeze.

"Vincennes is my name," the captain was saying. "What's yours?"

"Matthews. I'm sorry to have forced my way onto your ship, but I had to get to Mars."

Woller looked up then, and a sudden trace of consternation flashed into his eyes. It died away, but a doubt remained.

He stared intently at Nolan, then said: "Why?"

Nolan smiled easily. "A lot of reasons—all of them personal. Who are you?"

Woller stood up. "I own this ship," he said coldly. "I didn't ask you aboard. Now that you're here, you'll answer my question or get off."

The time for a showdown had arrived. *Well*, Nolan thought, *it had to come some time*. He was strangely relaxed.

He shrugged. "You've got a point there," he admitted. "Well—"

He frowned and raised his hand as though to scratch his head, changed the motion in mid-air. And with the speed of a hopped-up *narcophene* smoker, the thin-snouted pyro was in his fist, slowly traversing a lethal arc that covered both men.

His voice was taut as he spoke. "It's your ship, Woller, but I'm taking it over. Woller—Alan Woller—look at me. *Do you know who I am?*"

Woller stared deep into the icy eyes confronting him. The doubt flared again in his own. His jaw dropped slack. His brows lifted and he whispered, "Nolan!"

Nolan didn't bother to nod. He said grimly, "Your hands—hold them where they are. You, too, Vincennes. I've come a long way for this and I don't mind killing. You taught me that, Woller. A man's life is nothing. Mine was nothing to you, when it endangered the dirty little treacheries you were working."

The life seemed to have gone out of Woller and left only a hulking, pallid carcass, propped up by the internal pressure of its own fear. There was murky horror crawling in his eyes.

STEVE NOLAN looked at him and his thin lips curled into a snarling grin. But those were only his lips. Strangely, there was no triumph in his heart, none of the fierce pleasure he'd dreamed of all those dreary years. There was only dull disgust, and the hint of a long-dead hope for rest again. Rest, and the common things of life on the Earth which was forbidden to him.

Woller could die before him now, and



he would be avenged. But Woller alive could say the words that would wipe out the banishment, would return him to the green star that was home. Woller could be made to confess—

"I ought to blast you now," he said in a soft, chill tone that was like a whip to Woller, jerking him upright. "I ought to, and I will if I must. But you can live if you want to."

Woller was licking his lips, his face a mask, only his panic-stricken eyes alive.

"You can live," Nolan repeated. "A full statement about the Junta frame, in writing. Write it out and thumbprint it, and we'll telestat it to the nearest TPL station. Then you can have the lifeboat, Woller, and as much of a start as TPL gives you. Are you willing to pay that much for your life, Woller?"

Woller's lips were stiff but he forced the words through. "Go to hell."

Nolan nodded, and the deadly weariness settled down over him again. "I see your point, of course," he said slowly. "Tri-planet doesn't come out here much and a man is reasonably safe from them. But you, Woller—power's your life blood. And a man on the run can't have much power. I know."

His finger curled on the trigger of the pyro and Woller, staring avidly, desperately, whitened at the mouth. His lips moved as though about to form words—

Nolan's trigger-sharp senses caught a hint of movement behind him. *Fool!* he thought desperately. *The door!* He tried to hurl his body aside, out of the way of the door that opened behind him. But he couldn't do that and keep the pyro leveled on the two men at the desk. He saw Woller, exultant hatred leaping into his purpled face, plunging for a drawer of the desk; saw the door opening and someone stepping through. Then, just as he was leveling the gun on Woller again, he saw the flashing swing of the other man in the room. Forgotten Vincennes—with a heavy nightstone paperweight held bludgeon-like in his hand, leaping in at him! He had no chance even to try to turn. The weight was coming down on the side of his head. All he could do was try to roll with it.

But the momentum was immense and the heavy weight struck him down to

the floor, drove him headlong into unconsciousness. . . .

SOMEbody was kicking him. Nolan groaned once, then compressed his lips as he remembered where he was.

He opened his eyes and rolled over. The blubbery Venusian second was standing over him, face sullen but eyes glinting with perverse pleasure. He raised his heavy spaceman's boot again—

"Hold it," said Woller from the desk. They were still in the cabin.

Woller got up, came over, looking down at Nolan. His bearing was confident again; he exuded an aura of brutal power.

"You should have killed me, Nolan," he said. "You only get the one chance, you see."

Nolan silently pushed himself erect. His ribs were agonized where the second had booted them, and a blinding throb in the skull reminded him of the captain's blow. He was conscious that his armpit holster hung light. The pyro was gone.

Vincennes had left. Only Woller and the Venusian second were in the cabin with him. "My only doubt," Woller was saying, "is whether to blast you now or save you for a little later, when I'll have more time."

"Sure," said Nolan tonelessly. "If you want my vote, it's for now. Get it over with."

Woller nodded. "That would be much pleasanter for you. I think I'll save you." He nodded slowly. Then, to the mate, "Take him below!"

Back down the corridor, the mocking stars still bright through the crystal underfoot. Back and down, till they came to the grav room, where the pulsing, whining generators spun their web of anti-gravitational power.

"We don't have a brig," the mate apologized. "But I think this will hold you in."

Eyes warily on Nolan, he circled him and opened a round metal door. It was an unused storeroom, bare except for rows of vacant metal shelves.

"In you go," said the Venusian, and Nolan complied. The door slammed behind him and was bolted.

There was a whine in the air, he noticed. The singing of the grav-generators It



was not unpleasant . . . at least, not unbearable, he corrected himself. But how it persisted! It was constant as the keening of a jammed frequency-modulator, high as the wail of a banshee.

He let his aching body slip to the floor, lay there without even trying to think. He raised his head for a searching second, but there was nothing to see. Bare walls, bare shelves.

He was helpless. His chance might come when the second let him out. Till then, he would sleep.

When had he slept last? Save for the few minutes of unconsciousness, it was easily thirty hours. He pillowed his head on his arm. . . .

He moved his head uncomfortably, burrowed his ear deeper into his biceps. That damned keening! He shifted restlessly, stopped his exposed ear with his other hand. That movement racked the beaten ribs, but the shrilling, soft and remorseless, kept on. It was enough to drive a man mad! It was—

He sat bolt upright, eyes flaring angrily. That was what Woller had planned!

It was torture—subtle, undramatic, simple. But pure, horrid torture.

Nolan's face was gray with strain. It was incredible that a sound, a noise, could become a threat. He'd heard the same sound a million times before, though never at such close range, or from such titanic generators. But now—

He began trying to fill his mind with other things, but there was no room for thought in a brain that was brimming with naked sound. Snatches of school-days poetry, long columns of multiplication tables— They jumbled in his brain. The lines ran together and muddled, were drowned out by the wail of the generators. He gave up and sat there, forcing himself to be still, while the sound hovered in the atmosphere all around him, his jaw muscles taut enough to bite through steel, a great pulse pounding in his temples. . . .

Flesh could stand only so much. After a while—he didn't know when—he was mercifully unconscious.

**A** VOLCANO erupted under him and awoke. His whole body was a mass of flame now, head throbbing like the jets of a twenty-ton freight skid, chest

and ribs as sore as though they were flayed. A sickening weight held him crushed against the metal floor.

The roaring from without was the sound of the rockets, loud enough to drown out the whine that had nearly killed him. The ship was landing. And at once there was a gentle jar, then a dizzying vertigo as the grav-web was cut off abruptly. The rockets died down and were silent.

Everything was silent. The change was fantastic, a dream. Nolan, lying there, thought the silence was the finest thing he had ever heard.

It didn't last. There were footsteps outside, and the Venusian second mate entered. "On your feet," he said curtly. "The boss is ready for you."

Nolan stood up cautiously. His feet were shaky, but he could use them. He stepped over the rounded sill and followed the Venusian's directions. There were men in the corridor, some of them in heat suits. Nolan wondered where they were. Neptune was on the other side of the sun—could they be as far in as Uranus? How long had he been unconscious!

"Get moving," repeated the second, and Nolan moved.

The blessed stillness! He was grinning to himself as he walked along the corridor, listening for the lethal whine that wasn't there any more. When they got to where Woller, space-suited and bloated, was directing a crew of men in the moving of a bulky object, Woller noted the grin. He was not pleased.

"Enjoying yourself, Nolan?" he asked, unsmiling. "That will have to stop."

A grin stayed on Nolan's face, but it was not the same one. It was a savage threat. Woller looked at it, and looked hastily away.

"Stand him over in the corner," he said to the Venusian second. "I'll attend to him right away. Business first."

The second jerked a thumb at the corner formed by the airlock door and the wall of the corridor. Nolan looked in the direction indicated, and a sudden tic in his brows showed a thought that had come to him. The red signal light winked out as he watched; the inner door had closed.

He stared through the transparency at what was beyond. Darkness was all he could see—darkness, and the light-dotted



outline of buildings in the distance. Just beyond the lock was something that looked like a skid, with men's figures around it. His forehead puckered, and his eyes returned to the signal light, now dark—

The Venusian second watched Nolan limp slowly over to the indicated position. His eyes narrowed. "Hey, what's the matter?" he asked surlily.

Nolan shook his head. "Something in my shoe," he said. He halted and balanced himself on one foot, poking into the offending footgear. "A button, I guess," he said as drew out, concealed, something that he knew quite well was *not* a button.

He breathed a silent prayer, and it was answered. The Venusian grunted and turned away. Nolan walked quickly over to the wall, by the lock light, turned and stood surveying the scene without interest. His hands apparently were linked idly behind him—but behind his back they were moving swiftly, dexterously. A *clink* of glass sounded, and Nolan winced as a sharp sliver cut his thumb. Then he stood motionless, waiting.

The men were shock-wrapping a long, casket-like object. To judge by the care they were using, the contents were delicate and the handling would be rough, Nolan noted absently. Explosives, perhaps?

The last loop of elastic webbing went around it, and the Venusian second pulled it taut. "All right," he grunted. "Take it away."

"Lock!" bawled Woller as the men picked up the bundle. That was Nolan's signal.

As slowly as he could manage he stepped idly away from the lock, away from the signal light, hugging the wall.

A deckhand, not troubling to look at the warning light across the corridor—Nolan mentally thanked his gods—touched the release that opened the lock door. And—

Ravenous flame lashed out from the wall.

#### IV

NOLAN was in motion before the incandescent gases had died. The half-dozen men who had been in the corridor were either down on the floor or

blindly reeling about. Even without a proton-reflector behind it to focus its fierce energies, a pyro charge exploded on unarmored men can do a lot of damage.

Nolan blessed the hunch that had warned of trouble, the remembrance of an old spacer's trick that had led him to hide a pyro charge in his shoe, back there in the stateroom. Still it had been luck, pure and simple, that gave him the chance to open the signal light socket, take out the lume and put the pyro pellet between the contacts. When he'd got out of range and the automatic warning as the lock opened had touched it off—

Catastrophe. He'd known when to close his eyes, where to stand for safety. The others hadn't. And so the others were blind.

He grabbed a pyro from a writhing wretch on the floor—there was horror in him as he saw the seared face that had once been that of the Venusian second. He picked a heat suit out of the cubby, and was into it and in the lock before the blinded men who had escaped the full flare could recover themselves.

The lock doors took an eternity to work, but at last he was out in the cold, black open. A hasty glance at the landscape told him nothing. Uranus or Pluto—it had to be one of them. That was all.

A man was just coming out of the skid, perhaps twenty feet away. Nolan clicked on his radio, waited for the inevitable question—but it didn't come. The man's transparent faceplate merely turned incuriously to Nolan for a second, then bent to examination of the fastenings of the skid's lock. Nolan turned calmly and strode off along the side of the ship. When he rounded the stern he broke into a run, heading straight out across charred earth to a chain of hummocks that promised shelter.

How long would pursuit be delayed? Late or soon, it would come. Nolan realized that he had no plan. But he had life, and freedom.

He topped the first of the hummocks, scrambled down into the trough behind it. He was relatively safe there, as he cautiously elevated his head to examine the ship and what lay behind it.

Already—it had been scant minutes since the carnage in the lock corridor—the



search for him had begun. He saw a perfectly round spot of brilliance fall on the side of the ship, then dance away. Through the ice-clear Plutonian night he could make out the figure of a man with a hand light scanning the belly of the ship, looking to see if Nolan had hidden himself there. They would quickly learn the answer to that—and know what he had done.

Beyond the ship were a few dim lights, distorted by a crystal dome. It was another city—or not quite a city, but a domed settlement out here in the wilderness.

Without warning a sun blossomed on the side of the ship. Nolan stood frozen for a split second, then dropped, cursing. They'd seen him, somehow, had turned the ship's powerful landing beam on him. But how?

A soundless bolt of lightning that splashed against a higher hill behind him drove speculation out of his mind. Nolan frowned. The ship was armed—he hadn't known that. Installation of pyros in interplanetary craft was the most forbidden thing of the starways. But there was no time for wonder.

As another blast sheared off the crest of a hill, Nolan, keeping low, scuttled away behind the shelter of the hummocks. His only safety was in flight. Armor he had none. The frozen gases that comprised the hummocks would never stop the dread thrust of a properly-aimed pyro.

He fled a hundred yards, then waited. Silence. He risked a quick look, saw nothing, retired behind the shelter of the hill to consider. They'd suspended fire—did they think him dead? Did they know he had escaped?

Or was there a hidden danger in this? It might be a ruse. They could be waiting for him to move, to show himself. . . .

Nolan shivered, and absently turned up the heat control of his suit. He felt suddenly hopeless. One man against—what? His thoughts, unbidden, reverted to the girl he had left in Avalon, and to the sordid fear that she might be what she seemed. Nolan's cheek muscles drew tight, and his face hardened. Woller, partly protected by his heat suit, undoubtedly had lived through the instant inferno when the pyro charge went off. That

was one more thing against him—the girl. Nolan sighed.

And a faint reverberation on the soles of his feet brought him stark upright, staring frantically over the sheltering mound of ice. A skid was racing down on him.

Before he could move its light flared out, spotted him.

And a tiny voice within his helmet said, "Don't move, Nolan. You can't get away now. You'll die if you try. Next time you play hide-and-seek with me, Nolan—don't leave your helmet radio on!"

**I**F WOLLER had burned with rage before, now he was frozen. He was a blind man there before Nolan, his eyes swathed in thick white bandages. But the hulking Earthman with the pyro who stood by his side, and lean black Captain Vincennes at the controls, were eyes enough for him.

"But I wish I could see you myself," Woller said softly, his fingers drumming idly against the wide fabric arm of his cushioned passenger's chair. "The ship's surgeon says it may be weeks before I see again. If I could afford to keep you alive that long—" He sighed regretfully. "No, I can't afford it," he concluded. "There are more important things, though nothing—" his voice shook but kept its chill calm—"that would give me more pleasure than to see you die."

"We could save him, Woller," Vincennes said. "Pickle him in a sleep-box like—"

"Be still, Vincennes!" Woller's voice was sharp. "I'll ask for advice when I want it!"

A sleep-box—Nolan remembered suddenly what they were. Small coffins, large enough for a man, equipped with an atomic-powered generator that kept the occupant in a sort of half-death, not breathing or able to move, but capable of existing almost indefinitely without food.

Nolan wondered absently what they were doing with sleep-boxes, then gave it up. It didn't matter. He cursed the carelessness that had led him to leave the radio on in his suit. It had been simple for the *Dragonfly's* radio-man to tune in



on its carrier wave, get a radio fix on his position.

The skid swerved abruptly in a sloppy turn, and the surly earth man at the controls halted it and looked around. "Okay," he grunted. "Here we are."

Woller nodded. "Take me out," he ordered. "Nolan, too."

Nolan peered out the window. Absorbed in self-recrimination, he hadn't paid attention to their trip. He was surprised to find gleaming metal all around the skid. They were in a heat lock—they had come to the domed settlement.

The Martian Vincennes went first. As soon as the pressure gauge showed he was safely outside the Earthman gestured to Nolan. He wedged himself wearily into the air chamber, closed the door. He was ready for a break when the outer portal opened . . . but there was no break. Not with Vincennes and his ready pyro there.

Woller, stumbling and cursing, followed, and the Earthman. Vincennes opened the main lock and they went into the dome.

There were two great ships inside, dimly lighted by a string of pale lumes overhead. Nolan looked at the mass of them, at the rodlike projections clustered around the nose, and knew them for what they were Warships!

Scaffolding was still around them. They were not yet ready for launching, not ready for whatever mission of treason Woller had planned them for. But by the look of them the day was close. And Nolan was—awaiting execution.

One look at Woller's iron countenance under the tape showed that. Vincennes' hand, tight-knuckled around the butt of his gun, was ample confirmation.

But the moment had not yet come. Woller said, "Are they waiting?"

Vincennes' glance sped to a lighted door at the far side of the hangar. "Looks that way," he said. "Shall I attend to Nolan first? He's tricky—"

Woller laughed softly. "He's used up all his tricks. We'll take him with us, alive. He might come in handy. He's been out of sight for three years now. I'm just a bit curious where he's been. Perhaps it's somewhere we should know about."

He groped for Vincennes' arm, found

it. "Let's go," he said. "We can't keep the chief waiting."

NOLAN was first through the door. He was in a small room where four or five ordinary-looking people were sitting around at ease. One was in uniform, the others the perfect example of quite successful businessmen.

"Is he here yet?" whispered Woller. The Martian looked around the room before he answered.

"Not yet. Cafferty—Lieutenant Brie—Searle—Vremczyk. That's all."

The dumpling-shaped soldier in the gray-green of Pluto's militia stared at Woller. "What the devil's the matter with your face?" he spluttered.

Woller answered before Vincennes could. "I had an accident, Brie," he snapped. "Keep your fat nose out of it."

The dumpling turned purple. But he said nothing, and Nolan realized Woller's importance in this gathering. This gathering of—what?

Nolan looked around quickly, and the answer raced to his brain. An officer of Pluto's defense forces—two or three well-dressed men, apparently wealthy, with something about them that shrieked "politico"—and Woller, once overlord of the System's greatest news-dissemination agency, still a man of vast influence. It looked like the back room of a political convention—or the gathering of a cabal.

#### *The Junta!*

It had to be the Junta.

What they were saying began to make sense. A tall man in dove gray was speaking.

"We're not satisfied, candidly," he was saying. "Woller, you've had more money than our resources can afford. Everything you've asked for you got. And what have you to show for it? Three ships—not one of them fit to fly."

Woller laughed contemptuously. "Candidly, Cafferty," he mimicked, "I don't care how you feel. My money's gone right along with yours. Warships cost money."

"So do thousand-acre Martian estates," shot the little lieutenant. "How much of your money is in these ships—and how much of ours is in your pockets?"

Woller turned his blind eyes toward the



lieutenant and stood motionless for a second. Then, softly, "Once again, Brie—keep your fat face shut. You are not indispensable."

The pudgy soldier glared and opened his mouth to speak—but an interruption halted the quarrel. The door opened without warning, and another man entered.

What he looked like Nolan could not guess. He wore a heat suit with the helmet down. The polar-plastic faceplate was set for one-way vision. Even his voice was muffled and distorted as he spoke.

"Are we all here?" he asked. The others seemed to note nothing odd about his incognito—did he always disguise himself, Nolan wondered? "Where's Orlando?"

Brie answered. "He was on Mars, on the other side of the sun. He's on his way."

The mirror-faced helmet bobbed as its owner nodded. Then it turned toward Nolan. "What's this?" he asked, advancing.

Vincennes gestured with the pyro. "His name is Nolan," he said. "He tried to get rough with Mr. Woller. He's dangerous."

"Dangerous!" The blurred voice was angry. "Then why is he here? We have enough danger as it is. Give me that pyro!"

This was it, Nolan knew, and he tensed his body for the leap he had to attempt, though he knew it was useless. The man in the heat suit reached for Vincennes' pyro. In the moment while the gun was passing from hand to hand there might be a chance. . . .

There were shouts from outside, and the sound of running feet. The man in the heat suit whirled. "Bolt that door!" he shouted. "Bolt it! Now!"

Brie, dazed for a second, sprang to obey. Then he turned, his plump, pale face damp with sudden sweat. "What is this, Chief?" he asked. "Are we—is there trouble?"

Chief! thought Nolan. So this hooded stranger was the leader of the conspiracy. Masked, disguised like the bandit chief of a flamboyant operetta.

The Chief was laughing. "Lots of trouble," he answered. The dull shouting from outside continued, rising to a cres-

cendo as whoever was without pounded against the door and found it locked. Then abruptly it subsided. The huge telescreen on the desk buzzed sharply. The solid little man seated beside it automatically clicked the switch that turned it on.

"Turn it off!" bellowed the man in the heat suit. But it was already working. The prismatic flare on the screen showed no vision impulses were coming in, showed that whoever was calling was using a sound transmitter only—a portable set like those in a heat suit. A voice said sharply:

"Attention, Junta! The man who claims to be the Chief is a masquerader. Kill him! This is the Chief speaking now!"

## V

**D**OUBT sprang into the eyes of every man present. It lasted only a second—for the masquerader's action proved the charge against him.

He grappled the pyro from dazed Vincennes, sprang back, fired a warning blast that smashed the telescreen.

"Don't move, anybody!" he ordered. "Nolan—take their guns!"

Nolan threw questions to the winds, sped to obey. He found a business-like little heat pencil in the inner pockets of the chunky man, a pearl-handled burlesque of the service pyro in the gaudy gemmed holster Lieutenant Brie dangled from his belt. Nothing else—and his search was thorough.

"All set," he reported.

"Good enough. Searle—are there heat suits in this room?"

The chunky man looked stricken. He nodded. "In that locker," he said dizzily, pointing to the wall.

"Get them out, Nolan. Give one to every man and put one on yourself. Those outside will take their chances."

Nolan raced to comply. The stillness outside the door was menacing. While he was dragging the suits out, throwing them at the men, while they were putting them on, the man called Searle was staring at the masquerader with dawning comprehension.

"What are you going to do?" he whispered. "Are you—"



The man in the heat suit laughed sharply. "Get your suit on," he said. "You know what I'm going to do. All set?" Every man was garbed, helmets down. "Ten seconds to seal them. One, two, three—"

He counted slowly and Nolan watched him with fascination. At *five* the gauntlet left hand came up to the butt of the pyro, worked the tiny chambering lever half a dozen times. Nolan gasped in spite of himself. There were seven lethal pyro charges in the chamber of that gun—enough to blast down a mountain!

The count was finished. Through Nolan's helmet radio, automatically turned on, the man's calm voice ordered, "All right, Nolan. Open the door and let them in!"

Nolan moved. As his hand was on the lock, just as it turned and the door swung loosely inward—

*Blam!* the impostor swung and fired the massive charge in his pyro at the thin wall that kept air and life in the dome?

They were running over icy ground. At most there was a minute or so of advantage—less, if the men they'd left in the room had other weapons concealed somewhere. And still Nolan didn't know who his savior was.

"All right, now," he panted over the helmet phone. "Give. Who are you?"

The answer was a chuckle, mixed with gasping as the smaller man strove to match his speed. "Tell you later," he panted.

"Hold it!" Nolan broke in, suddenly recalling the oversight that had been so disastrous before. "Don't tell me. Show me—and turn off your radio. They've got tracers."

**T**HERE was a snort of sudden comprehension from the phone, then silence. Nolan looked to see the figure spurt into the lead, gesture ahead. They were rounding the dome. The bulk of the *Dragonfly* appeared, with a big cargo skid drawn up beside it. The gesticulating arm of the other man pointed directly at it.

Nolan glanced around. There was no one following—yet.

The men hadn't had weapons, then—and those who had been outside would not be pursuing anybody. He tried to thrust

from his mind the recollection of what had happened when the sucking rush of escaping air had thrown wide open the door he had unlocked, and the tug of naked vacuum gripped the men behind it. A dozen of them there had been, hulking brutes from the flight sheds of a system's blowsiest ports, and one man in a heat suit, faceplate mirrored like that of the man Nolan ran beside. It is not pleasant to see a strong man try to shriek in agony, and fail because the air has bubbled from his lungs.

The outer door of the skid was open, and the impostor trotted in. When Nolan was beside him he leaned on the lock control. Ever so slowly, the outer door closed; slowly the inner opened.

They burst into a chamber where a man was just rising from a telescreen, face contorted with consternation and hate, hand bringing up a pyro from a drawer in the chart table.

The pseudo-chief's gun spoke first, and the head and shoulders of the other disappeared in a burst of flame and sickening smoke. There was no time for delicacy. Ruthlessly shoving the seared corpse away, the stranger dove for the controls, touched the jet keys.

The ungainly skid shuddered, then drove forward. The stranger opened all jets to the limits of their power. Creaking and groaning, the skid responded. The dial of the speed indicator showed mounting acceleration, far beyond what the ship was designed for.

Nolan, clinging with one arm to a floor-bolted chair, threw back his helmet and yelled: "I'm ready any time! What's the story? Who the devil are you?"

The impostor waved a hand impatiently. His muffled voice came: "Take a look in there. There may be more aboard!"

Nolan grimaced and nodded. He picked his way over the jolting floor, blaster out, to the threshold. His groping hand encountered the lume switch, flooded the cargo hatch with light. It was almost empty. A few crates, the long casket-like object he had seen in the ship. Nothing behind which a man could hide.

Nolan turned to see the masquerader unzipping the folds of his heat suit with one hand while he guided the careening skid with the other. He brought out a



tiny black box, opened it to show a key and a lever. He thumbed the lever open, braced the box between his knees, began tapping the key rhythmically. A curious shrill staccato came from the box. *Dee dideedeedit didideedit deedeedit deedeedeedidee didididit—*

After a second he stopped, waited. Then faintly an answer came back from the box. *Deedeedeedideedit—*

And silence. Satisfied, the man closed the box, slowed the skid to a point where its guidance no longer required complete attention. They had reached the ring of ice hummocks that surrounded Woller's dome. The skid bounded over the first rise, zoomed through that trough and the next; then the man kicked the rudder jets. It spun along the trough to where the hummocks were highest; then he cut the jets.

He turned to Nolan, threw back his helmet.

"My God," gasped Nolan. "Pete!"

PETERSEN grinned. "You called it, boy," he admitted. "Don't I get around though?"

Nolan closed his eyes and tightened his grip on the back of his chair. "The story," he said. "Quick."

Petersen shrugged. "How can I tell it quick? It's long. . . . Maybe if I tell you one thing you can fill in the details."

"What's the one thing?"

"I work for TPL."

TPL—Tri-planet Law! That explained—

Nolan exhaled slowly. "I begin to see," he said. "I always did think you knew too much for a guy that made his living at cards."

Petersen laughed. "My biggest trouble," he said wryly. "I can't win at cards. Whatever I do. It's been quite a drawback to my career. You can see how people would get suspicious of a professional gambler who always loses. I had to keep on the move."

Nolan's brain was beginning to work again. "But listen," he said. "How come you didn't turn me in when you picked me up—right after I escaped? If you worked for the Law—"

Petersen's face grew serious. "Boy," he said, "you gave us a lot of trouble.

You and your escapes. We weren't planning to keep you in jail, Steve. Any fool could see you were being framed—fixed court, semi-pro witnesses. But TPL couldn't step in, out in the open. We didn't know enough for a showdown. So you were going to be summoned to Mars for further questioning. When we found out all you knew you were to be taken care of some way or other. Given a new identity, kept undercover until we were ready to move."

"And I jumped the gun."

Petersen nodded. "I was in the neighborhood, heading for Earth. The TPL man on the ship called Earth Base; they called me. The ship had you spotted, but they decided not to pick you up. Base figured that if you thought you were being hunted you'd keep yourself under cover and we wouldn't have to bother. And if I picked you up I could pump you myself."

Nolan grinned. "How did you do?"

"Fine. You talked more than a ventriloquist with a two-tongued dummy. . . . Then you turn up on Pluto, just when things are getting hot."

"After three years of hiding in third-grade ratholes for fear of the law." There was no bitterness in Nolan's voice. Just a calm statement of an unpleasant fact.

Petersen's voice was level, too, but his eyes were alert as he watched Nolan. "That couldn't be helped, Steve. You know what was at stake."

Abruptly the grin returned. "The whole damned System, that's all," Nolan said a little proudly. "Well . . . go ahead with your story."

Petersen shrugged. He looked a little relieved as he spoke. "You know most of it. Oh—one part you don't know. Woller's daughter—her name's Ailse—knew about what he was doing. She just found out about it. We had a maid working in her home in Aylette—she didn't generally stay with Woller; they didn't get along."

Nolan's brows lifted. "Oh?"

"Yep. Ailse was worried silly. She even talked to the maid—not much, just enough that we could figure out what was happening. It seemed she was going to confront Woller with what she knew, try to talk him out of treason."

"A real good idea," Nolan remarked. "Knowing Woller—"



"That's how we knew where this base was. She told the maid. Oh, you do know where you are, don't you? On Pluto. The wildest section there is, north of Annihilation Range."

"How about this cockeyed disguise of yours? Who is this Chief you were supposed to be?"

PETERSEN frowned. "Don't know, exactly," he admitted. "There are three men it could be—they're all connected with the Junta, we're pretty sure. They're all on Saturn, and we got word that they were rendezvousing here. We knew the boss kept his identity hidden by wearing this get-up, so I was detailed to cut in."

Nolan nodded. Then, his thoughts reverting, he said. "Where's the—where's Ailse now?"

Petersen looked unhappy. "Uh—I don't know. After you left we sent for her, just to see what she knew that might help. The maid went after her—and couldn't find her. She'd gone out of town, wasn't expected back for some time. We couldn't wait. All the leaders of the Junta meeting here—it was too big a chance."

Nolan said, "Well, what are we doing about it? They're all there, and they're warned. And we're out here, parked on the edge of nowhere, waiting for them to get up a scout party and grab us."

Petersen turned to look out the window in the direction of the dome. He scanned the skies carefully, then pursed his lips.

"Well, no, Steve," he said, pointing. "Take a look."

Arrowing lines of fire were swooping down from far into the blackness. Three trails of white flame showed where three ships were plummeting to the surface. Nolan turned to Petersen with a startled question in his eyes.

"Watch," Petersen advised. "This'll be worth seeing!"

Down and down they drove, faster than meteor ever fell. A mile above the ground the jets behind died, and yellow flame burst ahead of them, flaring quickly to white. They slowed, poised, and then, in perfect unison, spun off to one side. They came around in a great circle and dived at the ground again. And repeated the operation, over and over.

And abruptly Nolan saw what was hap-

pening. He was witnessing the systematic annihilation of the domed settlement! Immense bursts of fire from ship-sized pyros were blazing into the ground. The hummocks prevented a clear view, but Nolan could see from the reflected glare on the mountainsides behind that the destruction was frightful.

"I called them," Petersen said softly. "You saw me call them. That black box—it's a telesonde."

Nolan didn't turn, fascinated by the sight. "What's a telesonde?" he asked absently.

"A radio that carries neither voice nor vision. Only one note short or long depending on how long the key is held down. Your great-great-grandfather knew about it. It was the first method of wireless communication. Now it's so completely forgotten that when TPL researchers dug it up it was adopted as the most secret method of communication available."

Nolan nodded his head. The ships came around again, and down. This time the forward jets were delayed. When they flared out they persisted, while the ships dropped gently out of sight. They were landing.

The destruction of the dome was complete.

Nolan turned away. "Quite a sight," he said slowly. "They deserved to die, of course. . . ."

"Steve."

Nolan's eyes narrowed suddenly. He looked at Petersen. "Yes?"

PETERSEN, for once, seemed almost at a loss for words. He licked his lips before he spoke. "Steve—there are one or two other things. Did you know that Ailse wasn't Woller's daughter by blood?"

Nolan looked at him unbelievably. "Not his daughter?"

Petersen shook his head. "Woller married a widow. A wealthy one, with a daughter. They didn't get along too well. The woman died. Some people thought it might be suicide."

The quick joy flooded up in Nolan. Petersen saw it and his face grew somber. "That's one of the things, Steve," he said. "The other one— Hell, this is hard to say."

Nolan stood up and the joy was gone



from his face. "Damn you, Pete," he said emotionlessly. "Don't break things gently to me."

Petersen shrugged. "Ailse wasn't anywhere we could find her—and we know a lot of places to look in. The ship left to come here. She was at Woller's home till just before then. Woller sent men to bring something from his apartment to the ship. I thought it was papers at the time—but it could have been a girl. So—where does that leave Ailse?"

Where? Nolan stood rocklike as the thought trickled through the automatic barrier his mind had set up. Where did it leave Ailse?

A charred fragment of what had once been beauty. A castoff target for TPL's searching pyros.

"I'll say it again, Steve. You know what was at stake. If the Junta had time—Well, we didn't know what kind of weapons they had there. That was one reason why I was sent ahead in that crazy disguise. If I had had time to scout around it might have been possible to do things less bloodily. I didn't have time. We couldn't take chances."

There was no anger in Nolan, no room for it. He sat there, waiting for Petersen to start the jets and send them back to the dome. He knew how he would scour the ashes, hoping against hope. And he knew what he would find.

It would have been better, he thought, almost to have died under Woller's pyro, or the TPL ships'. If he'd stayed behind

—if Woller had put him in the sleep-box as Vincennes had suggested, and he had shared obliteration with her. . . .

The sleep-box! The casket!

IT TOOK Petersen a full second to recover from his surprise when the frozen face of Nolan suddenly glowed with hope, when he leaped up and dashed into the cargo hatch. It took him minutes to follow him. Minutes spent in making the difficult decision of whether or not he should prevent a man from taking his own life.

The decision was wasted, he found. Behind the scattered boxes of pyro shells, wedged into a corner of the hold, Nolan knelt beside a long, narrow casket. Fiber shock-wrapping was scattered about. Nolan's fumbling fingers were working the latch of the casket, lifting the lid. . . .

The shout that left his lips was deafening in the small hold. Petersen looked closer, tiptoed up—

And all the way back to the waiting ships of the TPL Petersen was grinning to himself. Though his hands guided the ship skillfully as ever, though his gaze was outward at the flowing terrain beneath, he saw but one thing.

The tableau as he had approached the casket and seen Nolan, face indescribably tender, shutting off the sleep currents, reaching for the ampoule of stimulant that would revive the unconscious dark-haired girl within.

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# YOU BUY WAR BONDS

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WORKERS KEEP THE SOLDIERS FIGHTING

THE SOLDIERS FIGHT FOR YOUR FREEDOM

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## THE VIZIGRAPH

So here it is, Fall again, and the newest issue of **PLANET STORIES** in your hands. We think you'll like the cream we've skimmed from the science-fiction milk bottle this time; and we're pretty darned certain that your imaginations will be fat and happy by the time everything is assimilated.

Following are some of the better letters received by this department in the past weeks; have some fun with them. Get mad, be amused, or just read. But—when you are finished, get out the old typewriter and knock out one of your own for the Vizigraph, for this is the one place in the world where even bald-headed people can let down their hair.

However, we've got a new rule. Some of youse guys are a bit hoggish—so beginning with this issue, the maximum limit of any letter is two double-spaced typewritten pages. Pen and pencil are not barred, but legibility is necessary, and double spacing (for proper editing) is mandatory. Typewritten missives will have precedence over all others, for they can be edited and set into type more easily.

We have some original illustrations kicking around the office; and if the next crop of letters are exceptionally good, we might declare a bonus to those who have letters in the Winter issue. One warning, though; books go to press so close together, your letters must almost of a necessity be sent to us within a day or so after you read any issue. Help us and we'll help you.

As to the winners of the originals, who should drop a card indicating their choices, from the Spring issue, they are:

1—A. E. Kinkade 2—Dick Hetschel 3—Virginia L. Shawl

We'll be looking forward to your letters, so don't think this department is for the other men and women—this is *yours*, so tell us what you like or dislike or just plain want. We'll try to fulfill your desires.

### FIRST ATTEMPT!

San Angelo, Texas

DEAR EDITOR:

Although I've been a reader of science fiction and fantasy for nearly fourteen years this is my first attempt at a fan letter to any of them. Everyone seems to give their reasons for reading **PLANET** so I might as well bore you with mine. I believe in the time I've been reading this type of magazine I have read at least three times every one of them to appear on the market. So naturally when I first saw good old **PLANET** I bought a copy to see what it was like. As you've been told numerous times before your first issues were not so hot. And the only reason, at first, that I continued to purchase it was due entirely to the Vizigraph. Now it is as much for the stories as the Viz. that I get every copy I can.

Enough preliminaries have been indulged in for me to come to the meat of the matter. Mainly to what you owe this great honor? It's this guy, E. F. Buchanon. On a couple of points I believe he is right referring to his bit concerning the artists,





which, as I know nothing about art other than I either like or dislike, I won't take up much time with. But to say that none of them (Vizi fans) know nothing about art is, I believe, a grave error. After all there are some people who have studied art, but do not make a living at it, and others who make a hobby of art. And, to me, it doesn't seem at all illogical for some of them to read fiction. Or even to write fan letters. Now to the second point on which I agree (slightly). That is his paragraph on hack. But then not everyone can write stories. Still, active criticism has a tendency (no matter how it's delivered) to increase an author's efforts to increase the quality of his stories to an extent that the word "hack" shall not be applied to any work of his.

Now for his panning the fans. After all isn't that what the Viz. and similar departments in other mags are for? To procure the reader's opinion of the material he has to read? And if they get a kick out of ribbing each other and having a little innocent fun, let them. It does no harm and I, for one, enjoy reading them. E. F. B. must have had a disagreeable experience with fans to have such a sour and near-sighted opinion of them. Also from the sound of his letter he must have come off second best. Maybe that's why he no longer edits that magazine he seems so proud of.

This ish of PS was really superb. Let's have more stories like Leigh Brackett's "Jewel of Bas." For some strange reason I have a liking for this type of novel. I always enjoy Bond. Enough said. Two shorts "And the Gods Laughed" by Fredric Brown and "The Avenger" by Stuart Fleming make a photo finish for third. They were both well written and interesting right up to the last paragraph. I won't attempt to rate the illustrations. As I said before they don't affect me outside of like or dislike. For those who do value them, however, give No. 1 to Bill Watson. He has lots of sound ideas better expressed than the majority. No. 2 goes to Guy Trucano, Jr. (But why the Lone Loco?) No. 3 to Joe Kennedy for a swell try. You didn't do so badly either, ed. Show that to E. F. B.

Sincerely,

Pvt. J. C. NEWSTEAD,  
"Black Jack"

## BLESS YOU, KATIE!

939 Eighth Avenue,  
New York, N. Y.

Ye Editor:

Feeling in a journalistic mood this fine day I pen another letter for you to read. To be fair with you I must tell you right off that I think seventy per cent of your stories are terrible.

But now don't go getting me wrong. Fundamentally, you have a fine magazine although you are spoiling it with all the putrid trash you are putting into it.

Take the Spring Issue for example. There is a sample of what I mean. The only story that is worth the paper it is printed on is Nelson S. Bond's novel *Wanderers of the Wolf Moon* and even that could have been better. Miss Brackett's novel was a disappointment to say the least. And the shorts! Well, suffice to say that they were, unfortunately, horrible. Therefore, I shall say no more about them.

The cover? It was the sloppiest looking thing I've ever seen on any magazine. Please give us something that resembles a good picture.

On the other hand, Bond's story somewhat redeemed the issue, but only to a slight degree. Therefore I shall change the verdict from poor to fair for that reason only.

That the Winter Issue was very good would be a gross overstatement. Not that it was too bad. A fair cover. Usual fair stories. Nothing exceptional.

Ah, but the Fall number. That I must concede was very good with these successful stories:

1. *Thralls of the Endless Night.*
2. *Prey of the Space Falcon.*
3. *Phantom Out of Time.*

And the cover. Well that was something after my own heart.

Now I want you to understand. The fact is, I would like to see PLANET STORIES up in the world of science-fiction. So I have deigned to give a few suggestions. Behold!

1. How about a backcover illustration on every issue. For instance, you could have artists give their versions of people of other worlds or even illustrate one of the other stories in the magazine.

2. Use some good authors, not these amateurs as you have been doing. By good authors I mean: Bond, Brackett, Binder, Repp, Ayre, Williams, Rocklynne, and Kummer. Of course many amateurs do turn out good stories too, but let's not have too many.

3. Print a special big issue of perhaps 200 pages or more every once in a while. What if it costs a few cents more. (No paper. Ed.)

4. Go bi-monthly. (Ditto. Ed.)

5. Use Lynch, Paul, Morey, Ingels and Leyden-frost frequently. Maybe a little of Bok.

6. How about a two part serial by Bond or Williams?

7. Let's have more inside illustrations. We want to see what we're reading about looks like on paper.

8. On the contents page give the name of the artist who painted the story and tell what story it is portraying.

9. Use some character like the Space Falcon as Gene Hunter suggested to build up a series.

10. Make the pictures and stories correspond with the stories. On the newsstand, for instance, our eye is caught by the picture of the beautiful heroine struggling in the grasp of some terrible monster while the big, brave, handsome hero comes battling to the rescue. So we buy the magazine mainly to see what happens. Then, what do we do? We hunt through the book and come out sadly disillusioned because we found nothing that even hinted anything of the dashing cover.

11. Have more love interest in your stories. That's what makes them more enjoyable. I don't mean the silly mushy kind, but the decent readable type.

12. Keep some of the far-fetched junk out. All that complicated stuff that doesn't make an iota of sense isn't worth reading.

I hope that after all this work you will at least make use of some of my criticisms and put them to some purpose.

In closing, I must again repeat that there is certainly room for improvement. To console you, I will add that there is still some hope and if I see even a little improvement I may continue to read your periodical.

Sincerely yours,

KATHLEEN MAUNSBACH.



## CRUSADING LESSER!

2302 Avenue O,  
Brooklyn, New York.

Dear Editor:

Not since Loyal M. Sanford, a gremlin out of the dim and distant past, wrote you his thoroughly nauseating (yes, that's the only word I can see fit to use) note, has a letter within the pages of *Le Viz* aroused any real amount of anger within me. Or, that was the case until I glanced into the works of one e. f. buchanon. As you can see, the first slur against his humble personage is the usage of lower case letters. They, sir, are far and away too big to represent his character (as viewed through the offspring of his mental efforts, that letter in the Spring Issue.

In a way, I shall feel hurt if this letter does not see print. In the past, it was I, and I alone (all modesty aside) who took up the crusade against the bitter caustic creature that was Sanford. 'Twas I who openly denounced him. Yes, through my efforts, Sanford was put in his place.

"A bunch of childish, school age brats whose training and mental processes certainly do not warrant the assured air of knowledge which they try to flaunt . . ."—Quite Buchanon. Assuming that a good deal of you readers are under fourteen or fifteen (by a bit of a margin, I am *not* one of them)—assuming that they are, buchanon, what is wrong with that?

"Their essential stupidity is reflected in their very words—" Now look, buchanon—that is a bit too far. I've read many a letter by many a fan—and there have been a good deal of them that I have personally known to have come from the pens of youngsters. I definitely feel that their selection of words, their formation of sentences—was extremely superior to your crude, petty mouthings.

"They gain a certain amount of notoriety by having their letters printed . . ."—Here, creature, I think I have found the real angle behind your letter. In your tottering dotage, you just *had* to get a letter printed.

"In their opinionated assishness. . . ."—Stooping to such word formations, buchanon, is only proof that you have tried to attract attention by your foolish sensationalism. Creature, you have failed. We of fandom are, as you apparently are not, rational beings. We see through your cheap tricks of phoney sincerity, we know that you are nothing but a . . . Ah, well, if my thoughts had gone in where those dots are, this letter would have been slashed to nothingness.

"Smug conceit of those writers"—and then we skip a few lines—"Egotistical little fools"—That, I suppose, was the smashing climax to your letter. You poor, misguided fool. (Pardon, ed.—I do hope you are not deleting this too much.) (We are. Ed.)

In conclusion, let me say, half in jest, half in seriousness, if I were one to form a "purge list" in a country where purging was a popular activity, and you, sir, were a citizen of that nation, you would head the list.

Wilbur, I've never said a thing like this before—but, well—I sorta want you to print this letter. I won't feel right if it remains unseen by the fans. For I must know what they think.

Sincerely,

MILT LESSER,  
*The Happy Genius.*

## DRAGON NO. 2

Denver, Colorado.

Dear Editor:

First, my thanks for giving me the opportunity at a rebuttal by mailing me copies of the letters received by you in regard to my first letter. As to the letters—and their writers.

What a nice little hornet's nest I stirred. Rather refreshing to see the children, bless them, rise to the defense of their little droolings.

However, they seem to be more concerned with their little wounded egos, than with the statements I made. Milt Lesser, in particular, seems to be the child whose vanity is the most bruised.

Tell the infant (who is not quite fourteen or fifteen) that he displays no super intelligence in his missive; rather he is the perfect example of the egotistical prattlings I mentioned some time back.

Modestly, he admits that he cornered and thrashed one Sanford, all alone and unaided, his attitude reflecting the beliefs of all readers of your magazine. Quite a crusade. By the way, Lester, what grade *are* you in, in school?

So conceding that Lesser is a Knight ready to pluck the gauntlet and flap it in the dragon's face, he still has proved nothing but his o'erweening ego, placing himself as he did as representative of his fellow fanatics.

And my statement of stupidity still goes as written. Despite Master Lesser's remarks, he again is the perfect example of what I mean. Tsk, tsk—nothing was said about English usage or the lack of it. Dig a bit deeper, sonny.

Notoriety? Please. Glass house people, etc. . . .

So Master Lesser is not an opinionated ass? Well, could be. But I reflect *my* viewpoint, while this boy is the mirror that reflects the opinions of all the others. *He says.*

Smug conceit? Perish the thought. . . . And of course I am a fool—but I dealt in facts, while this boy deals in personalities.

As to Master Lesser's "purge" list. The child is not only egocentric, but a menace to all the things that the men of the United Nations are fighting for. It is talk such as that which brought about this war, and talk such as that which will bring on another.

And supporting my contention; so the little dear begs to have his letter published. Good clean fun, eh! Letter all full of facts and figures, eh! No egotism displayed . . . ha.

I still think that your Vizifanners are, with notable exceptions, a bunch of moronic, self-praising, egotistical little brats. They do not know the difference between plots and situations; they have a smaller conception of art; they act as self-appointed judges and critics of works which they cannot do themselves—yet which they can tear down with the criticisms of masters of the writing and artistic fields. Their science knowledge has been culled from pseudo-scientific magazines, and they could not begin to explain the workings of a cyclotron, much less any of the other fields of science.

Finally, because I am tired of this tempest in a teapot, I desire to say but one thing. If you must gnaw at my throat, then do it on the basis of the things I stated; do not be the children you claim not to be and pound your chests because your sweet feelings have been hurt. You are nice immature brats; go back to your toys and Algebra I.

Sincerely,

E. F. BUCHANON.



## SPEAK UP, ROSE!

345 W. 4th St.  
New York, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

I have been reading science fiction since I was six. I am now sixteen.

Today I was reading the Vizigraph and I came across a letter from a certain Mr. Buchanon. He panned us adolescents unmercifully. I don't think he was quite fair in his criticism. He underrated our intelligence, and overrated his own.

We do not write to this Mag. to inflate our egos (as he called it) but to give sincere criticism.

But don't misunderstand me. There are plenty of people who write into your Mag, who do not grasp or appreciate science, and I do not necessarily mean adolescents.

What I take exception to is the fact that he implies that adolescents do not understand science and would not understand it if it were crammed down their throats. That is not true.

Most of the young readers of science fiction belong to some sort of scientific club, or at least are interested in science.

If your Mr. Buchanon can give opinions, then suppose you let us give ours.

Sincerely,

ROSE M. RIEWALD.

## QUIETLY!!

2711 S. Franklin St.,  
Muncie, Indiana.

Dear Editor:

I have never written to PLANET STORIES in the past, but will try to remedy the situation in the future.

I am writing on the Winter Issue 1943. You may quote me, suh. (We shall. Ed.)

First on the list is the Vizigraph. This is one thing that is getting to be more interesting than the fiction. Mainly because some of the letter are more fantastic. I really do enjoy reading it, though, so keep it up.

Second is the stories. In first place is *Castaways of Eros*. I liked this story better than the novels (though I prefer novels), mainly for the fact that it was a different type than the average run of science fiction. It is more on the order of what can happen in the future. Give us more of this kind please.

Second place in the fiction is *The Star Guardsman*. It was well told with plenty of action and dialogue. The rest follow in their places:

No. 3. *Crypt-City of the Deathless One*.

No. 4. *Conspiracy on Callisto*.

No. 5. *Destination—Death*.

No. 6. *Blackout*.

Gifford's Ringer family is pretty good. I remember when his first letter telling you of his creation appeared in P.S.

The artwork is- - - - - Aw \* \* \* \* \*  
I haven't any gripes. Just keep the good work up and you don't have to worry whether or not your readers are satisfied. A lot of those gripes that you do hear are mostly just a way some readers get their two cents' worth in.

I have no suggestions. Now you can unquote me.

A quiet reader,

ROBERT MURPHY.

## SOLID PLANET!

3469 Opal St.  
Los Angeles, Calif.

DEAR ED.:

After reading the Spring issue of the Vizigraph, I decided I could hold my own against any of your full grown men. I am only a 15 year old female but I have more sense of good stories and pics than any of your feeble minded Zwiwnik, Dgxxgmfpet, The Happy Genius, The Fizical Rek, or any other queer minded Jerks.

Now on to my opinion of the cover. It is shot, it is out of proportions, and does not look like any of the stories I read in the book. Perhaps it belongs to some future issue, or some past issue which possibly I missed. Where is the past artist, Rozen? He was solid. No matter what any one says.

Now a list of the stories as I would rate them:

1. *Wanderers of the Wolf Moon* took first place by a long shot. Yes, it is really good. I became so interested in it that I stayed up until 2:00 one morning just so I could finish it. I was just a little disappointed in the ending, as I wanted Gregg to get Crystal, but I guess Tina will do for him.

2. *The Avenger*, what a luscious beginning, and ending. Those stories with the gore are the ones that usually interest me mostly. How about more of these reet stories by Fleming?

3. *The Jewel of Bas*, rather interesting, could have been better. Did not make much sense. Kind of fuddled up. Brackett has done far better.

4. *And the Gods Laughed* took fourth because it was a little different than most of the P. S. stories. I like this Brown, guy, also the artist Clyne, more of him and less of Ingels would have helped this edition ever so much.

The rest just came, and I won't rate them, because I consider them just stories, not worth the everlasting comments they will probably get.

I still like Doolin, better than any of your artists, he has something that some of these artists will never get, a neat style that can never be touched. It is jivie.

Where is Kuttner? I was shocked to see another issue of P. S. without Kuttner. This little baby is really hep. And that is good. How about more than just one joke by this guy, Guy Clifford? The joke in this issue is praiseworthy. Why not have him illustrate a couple of stories some time? Just to add a slight comedy touch. Say Ed, no letter should be this long, but I just had so many comments to make I had to use this much room.

So long till next time,

BUNNY EMERY,

*Jive Jerk.*

## SEMI-SOLID EDITOR!!

DEAR BUNNY:

You're really sending there, babe, beating your chops in an alreet way. We can see you're hep to the Planet jive, and we're all for a bit of literary rug-cutting with you. So maul your molars, and dig those digits. We'll be sweating out a round, until you slop some more joy-juice out our way. Notch that groove, 'cause you're solid!

Jitterbuggily,

THE EDITOR.



## PERFECTION? HA!

2721 16th Street,  
Everett, Washington.

Dear Editor:

Okay, awright, so you win. Unintentionally you and your blasted magazine have been challenging me to write you a letter ever since its infamous first ish, and you've beaten me! You are the victor, and I the vanquished! Wot, doesn't that strike a respondent chord? No? Oh, well, I at least have tasted of the bitter wine of humiliation and I shall brood over my weak-willedness for many weeks to come, but you have goaded me to the breaking point when you pop up, after such a long string of successful issues, with this Spring offering. When I first saw the cover, nestled snugly in with Dime Detective, Gory Mysteries and Bloody Bushwa I was startled to say the least. "A new mag?" I thought, not suspecting for a moment it was my old friend PLANET, and after gazing over my shoulder to make sure no one was watching me, plucked it gingerly from the rack, winced as I caught the eye of some prudent customer, and laid twenty cents on the counter. With a scream that caused the whole store to stare, the sickening truth was vividly brought home to me. "This fugitive from Minsky's," I thought, "How in Ematkhtila did she find her way to P.S.? And Ye Gods, the BEMS! The BEMS!" Oh, Ishtar, could this be a science fiction mag? Dazedly I searched for the name and sure enough, as big as pie "G. I. Ingels" on the bottom, as though he were proud of the painting. Hah! "G. I." is right. These P.S. babes you continually sport always seem to be able to rip and tear their clothing everywhere but the right places. All joking and Ackerpunning aside, it was by far your worse cover, including Drake, and that's really getting bad! My Ghu, can't you have just one cover without a rocket ship, skirt, handsome hero, BEMS and terrific dilemma? That's one thing that makes an otherwise pretty fair mag appear so ultimately cheap appearing; that makes one actually ashamed to buy it. You claim to cater to us fans, and I'll admit you're the friendliest Pub on the market, but such goings on will never increase your circulation with *real* fans, take it from me.

Stories:

*The Jewel of Bas.* Brackett has not once rung the bell with me, and perhaps I am doing her a great injustice, but always have I been prejudiced as to the female of the species and always will I be thus. But far be it from me—a small minority, if even that—to ask the editor to purge P.S. free of such dyed-in-the-wool hack artists.

*The Monster Maker.* Ray, it seems, has crashed every mag in the biz. Yep, the boy deserves respect, also he turns out a good tale. \*\*\*\*

*And the Gods Laughed.* Not as much power as Brown usually carries, yet made immediately entertaining by the only good pic in the issue. \*\*\*

*Bond.* Just what the name implies, BOND. What I mean is, Bond is Bond. Clear enuf? \*\*\*\*

It would be w'uth the twenty cents to read Vizi alone, but a few letters griped me somewhat this ish, namely Buchanon's (Oh, of course) and Watson's. Mr. Buchanon proves conclusively that he, not the fans, is the adolescent. One of the dictionary's definitions is "youth" and one can be youthful in mind and in body, Mr. B. occupying the former category. If he had only taken a minute's time to find out a few things before

embarking upon his supposedly adultly-critical letter he would have been mighty surprised. One thing of the many, he is obviously so confused upon is the average age of the fan which is around twenty. Of course we will find followers eleven and twelve but also of fifty and sixty and all both intelligent and perhaps more so since they, or rather we have the foresight lacking in Mr. B's psychological make-up. Then our blustering critic, if you will pardon my candor, states that we know nothing about science.

Well, unnotables by Willy Ley, Henry Bott and Ray Cummings are stfans, and doubtless they could outtalk him, walk over him and make quite a bumpkin out of Mr. B. There are others, but I am not one to haggle. Sure, *The Falcon* was partly science and Bond's *Chaos* was adventure, but Mr. Adult apparently gives no one credit for any sense whatever, something that will do him no little harm in future years. (That is if he will have any after the fans tear him apart.) However, I'm no criterion of the fans so will let the matter drop, to be more ably handled by Tucker or 4sj or Warner (if he's still alive). Before leaving Mr. Buchanon, I'd like to warn him beforehand about receiving any square boxes for Xmas that make an odd ticking sound. Not that he deserves it, but I'm naturally a peaceful soul. (Shut up, Lucifer.)

Next on the docket is Bill's epistle. I've always been rather fond of B. W., but I must say he is being unduly cruel to V. R. Heiner, who is far more patriarchal than he. Mayhap he personally dislikes Vaughn, but that's no way to settle a petty (or major, for that matter) argument; attempting to deface him publicly. Of course his endeavor will only cause weathered fans to ignore his next three or four letters, but that's his biz. Yes, this is to defend Vaughn, because I think his correspondence, both personal and otherwise is intelligent and should be treated as such. Sorry, Bill, but that was downright injustice. How do you think you would feel if such a thing were written falsely about you, eh?

On the whole P.S. retains its only-average standard in fiction and art, and its superior department section, so cheer up, we all can't be perfect.

A Dashing Good Day to You,

CHAS. McNUTT.

## WAR BULLETIN!

Park Lane Hotel  
Denver, Colo.

DEAR ED AND MR. BUCHANON:

Taking up my literary cudgel once again, I wade into battle warring against these smug, self-set-up-demigods who tear into us ordinary fans every now and then. If Buchanon will reread his paragraphs I am sure that he will be able to find quite a few words to apply to himself. Read your letter over again, my enemy. Are swear words needed, my friend? Are they to impress us with your *knowledge*?

In the first place, I admit I write just to get my name in print and to tear down your ideas. In the second place, if you are so perfect why don't you do us one better and show us what our letters should be like? Wouldn't that be the best way to prove your superiority and improve our lot? Or are you unable to do this due to your own inferiority?

Please let us keep up this verbal war.

Yours,

S. T. BROWN, III.



## BLOOD AND THUNDER!

2652 Ewing Avenue,  
Evanston, Illinois.

Dear Mr. Peacock:

I feel signally honored by Miss Brackett's indirect reference to my last letter in PLANET. However, if she "gaped" at my reactions to her novel, I no less gaped at her interpretation of my appraisal. To give a word socio-political connotations, is more imaginative than science-fiction. Personally I fail to find any radical or Nazi tags to such perfectly good English words as "fumigating" and "liquidation," one of which was written by me, and the other by Mr. Elosegui, of Los Angeles. However, the pages of PLANET STORIES are hardly a medium for a discussion on Political Philosophy.

There are two schools of readers and fans for PLANET, as there are for the majority of science fiction magazines. One school is devoted to the "ray gun" slam bang adventure, with strange beasts and villains in space. The other school wants credibility, the approach to scientific logic, psychological characterizations and good writing. But it seems that the powers that be at PLANET, beginning with Mr. Peacock, favor the "blood and thunder" school, as witness Mr. Peacock's own *Prey of the Space Falcon* which although well written and readable, was out and out "formula." I can enjoy this type of story, but not when it degenerates into a farrago of incidents masquerading under the title of a story. If I have hurt Miss Brackett's sensibilities, a gentleman always apologizes to a lady, futile as apologies are. But I hope it has the desired effect. (Our feelings are hurt, too! Ye'll apologize to us, sir. Ed.)

The Winter issue of PLANET has recently reached my hands (at this late date). The name Henry Kuttner was a delightful surprise. I opened the magazine and sat back for an interlude of enchantment. Well . . . lest I be accused of being impossible of satisfying, I will simply leave *Crypt City of the Deathless One* to the devotees of "blood and thunder," complete with invulnerable men, cannibal plants and plagues, et al. (A plague upon it!)

To me (and there is no kindness in art) the present volume of PLANET would have been less enjoyable, were it not for the short novel I found way in the back of the book, prefaced by a not too good illustration. I refer to *The Star Guardsman*, by Albert De Pina. This seems to be the first time that this author has appeared in PLANET by himself, and he comes up to my expectations of him after reading *Star of Panadur* and *Alcatraz of the Starways*. Although by no stretch of the imagination could he be said to use a lot of action and strife, he has done something else. He has in *The Star Guardsman* really accomplished a psychological novel, which is something far too rare in science fiction. The author has the gift of drawing his characters with such precision, that they walk right out of the pages of PLANET STORIES. His vivid descriptions are so fresh and original that they match his grasp of narrative. Now that I have read two of his stories in collaboration, and this novel of his own, I can say that as a fiction writer of "other world" stories he is unquestionably "GOOD." From now on I won't be too fussy what else you put in our mag.

I find that I began this letter with a rather acid diatribe, so may I finish with the suggestion that the majority of fans who hitherto have been preoccupied with winning Pics, pay a little more

attention to the problem of which way PLANET is to go, and less to their own selfish motives? Every magazine, and PLANET is no exception, is launched at first with a policy predicated upon what the editors believe will most appeal to the readers and so will more quickly boost the circulation, thereby increasing the advertising. But time passes, and a magazine like everything else begins to *evolve*. Old readers drop by the way-side, new ones become part of the reading group, new fans are added. And the policy must perforce begin to change in accordance with the "readers'" desires, else the magazine *gets into a rut*. Time and again, many fans and readers have begged for more science and less plain adventure translated into other worlds—less hacky "blood and thunder." Yet the editorial guidance has not heeded the general outcry. Perhaps the pressure has not been sufficient to effect the change, although *The Star Guardsman* seems to be a feeler to gauge the readers' and fans' reaction. Just as Mr. William Conover's suggestion for off-trail stories has been left up to the fans. Come now, fellers, GIVE! Stop trying to write *clever* letters and devote at least one to give Mr. Peacock a final and incontrovertible idea of what *you really want*. As for me, I want more science and more psychological characterizations. More fine writing and credible adventure. And, no hacky westerns with a science fiction varnish.

In view of Miss Brackett's reply to my last letter may I add a final paragraph in order to clear the atmosphere of any misconceptions about so-called totalitarian ideas? I have done and will continue to do, everything that I can to help the war effort. My family are all also busily engaged in doing what they can. At present one brother is serving as an Ensign in the Navy. Another brother after two years of active service, which included the harrowing experience of the two torpedoings, was given a medical discharge after convalescence in two hospitals. Others in the family serve regularly by selling bonds, doing Red Cross work and Civilian Defense. I have myself visited camps and posts of the various branches of the service in many parts of the country, helping to bring entertainment to the Service Men. I am happy and proud to do so, deeming it a privilege to help with the furthering of this gigantic war effort. That in the words of the Great Emancipator, *this government of the people, by the people and for the people, may not perish from the earth*.

May I close with the suggestions that the readers of PLANET take their copies to the nearest Service Men's center when they have finished reading them. The boys enjoy them always.

A final word to you, our Vizi-Ed. The next time I write I am going to be all sweetness and light, so help me! No high horses and no acid comments to plague your patience.

Sincerely,

WILMS HERBERT.

Dear Sweetness and Light:

One of the curious facts about youse guys is that you class all fantasy mags by the same name. PLANET never has claimed to be science fiction. It is adventure laid in the future, primarily, and the emphasis is upon people and their reactions. We think people are more important anyway, and so we publish stories with that idea in mind.

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.



## SCIENCE-FICTION IN WARTIME

What is a Science-Fiction fan? Just someone who has a taste for odd reading material? No, the true S-F fan has vision, daring vision he believes that what *will be* is better than what *has been*. He sees the world as a place bursting with raw materials, and the people who will work with them and will transform this world into a better place wherein to live. He has faith in Humanity's bright destiny!

We fans have read of ultra-solar battles, in our imaginations we have colonized the planets, we have thrown off the handcuffs of Time and Space and have roamed in a wider world, where all good things can be accomplished by the application of man's creativeness to the materials at hand. We're that kind of people; we believe that a better world can and will be made.

Dictators are no "news" to us; we have met them in every guise. The lesser ones have tried only to seize the struggling Earth-colonies on some minor satellite somewhere . . . and the boldest of them have tried to wrest control of Earth herself, and all her commerce with her far-flung colonies throughout the explored universe. But they have all worked according to one pattern; they have, as their aim, the "good of the few" at the expense of the "good of all"! Even reading of them has aroused our ire, because we recognize that their aims are counter to all we believe in. For we do believe that the principles of Democracy are just and right; and that it is right and just for a few of us to "sacrifice" some comforts so that all our fellow-humans may have the so-called "economic necessities" and a chance to dream of better things. And we are right.

Miracles do not happen only in Science Fiction. They are happening all around us, all of the time. Man has become a "space-eater" . . . and a "time-eater." Once in our history, San Francisco was four long weary months distant from New York; now it is an overnight hop in a huge air-liner. We have "collapsed time" by our inventiveness, which is only the application of creative imagination to the materials at hand.

Once upon a time, what happened in the interior of China was of little interest to us in America, and that interest was largely academic. It took months of even years for "news" of such events to reach us. How different it is today! Through the miracle of Radio we follow the exploits of our own Flying Tigers with greater concern than we do the actions of the people in the house next to our own. Time and Space have *shrunk*; we've conquered them.

And what is the result of this "shrinking" of Time and Space? How does it affect our daily lives? And what is our proper relationship in this "new world" where China is only a *fraction of a second* distant by radio, and only a handful of hours distant by plane? These miracles, these children of our own human creativeness, are forcing us to the realization that the world is a small place after all. And what is more to the

point, they are showing us that all of humanity is one family. Not just "one big happy family" as yet; but that too will come. *It will have to come.* The world has become so small that mankind cannot live happily unless he is at peace with his neighbor, even though that neighbor is half-a-world away. Isn't that the ultimate ideal of Democracy . . . a whole world self-governed, where the good of all is our ultimate measuring-rod?

We Science-Fiction fans believe that such a world can be brought into being. It's not a new idea with us; we've read about it, thought about it, and we *believe* that it can become living truth. And we don't want to be left out; we want to *help* bring it into being. There's the matter of "How?"

Some of us work on farms, some in offices, some of us keep the homes which are so dear to us, and where "freedom" is a fact in our daily lives. More of us work in factories, where the materials of this war for Democracy are being made; still more of us are in the fighting forces; Army, Navy, Marines, WAC's, WAVES, SPARS, etc. But wherever we are we've got to defend our own precious ideal of a world-wide democracy . . . WE HAVE GOT TO FIGHT!!

There is one way we can all fight together. This is a very costly war; it has cost billions of dollars already, and it will cost billions more. And it is up to us to produce those billions; we've got to dig down and dig 'em up! If we do not, there won't be any more dream of a world united in Liberty and Justice . . . there won't be any world worth living in, and the only "free" people will be the dead. That must not happen; and it is up to us. As Science-Fiction fans we have a dream; we believe in that dream, and we are going to do our damndest to make it come true.

It may take some "sacrifices" . . . it should, for anything worth living for is worth sacrificing for. We've done our "bit" . . . but we must do more, we must do everything possible, and some things which are "impossible." Most of us have been fans too long to believe that the word "impossible" is anything more than a label which means something we haven't yet got around to doing. But we're going to get around to it now!

We're going to buy MORE stamps, and MORE bonds. We're going to work harder, and longer, and more efficiently, because we realize that every job is part of the big job on our hands. We S-F fans are fortunate, because this whole frightful business doesn't take us by surprise. We've read about it, and thought about it, and we know that nothing less than an "all out" effort will possibly bring our world-dream out into the daylight of reality.

So let's go, S-F fans. Let's show the world that WE know what it is all about . . . we've got a dream to concretize, and we're going to do it! We're going to work harder, fight harder, and buy more stamps and bonds, and we're going to make that dream come alive, right here and now!

ALAN MANNION.

★ WILL THEY BE "MISSING IN ACTION" THERE ★  
BECAUSE YOU FAILED IN ACTION HERE? ACT NOW!  
**BUY MORE WAR BONDS!**



## GENERALLY SPEAKING!

130 West 183 Street  
New York 53, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

In general, this last issue of PLANET STORIES was good.

The cover was—as seems to be customary—very inaccurate. Ingels isn't a bad artist, but he doesn't begin to compare with Rozen. Just notice the difference between this cover and the cover for the Fall, 1943, issue; the themes were almost identical, but look at the difference in execution! It's too bad that Rozen has been ill; his work is really excellent.

I am not going to rate the stories numerically; I don't think it's quite fair to do that. Instead, I'll just comment on them.

*The Jewel of Bas* by Leigh Brackett was up to her usual standard—that is, high. The writing was exquisite, but I have one complaint to make. The story was too short. The idea of the tenth planet and the "sunballs" was barely mentioned, and it sounded very interesting; the Androids' plan for conquest was menacing enough, but it seemed only lightly sketched in; the character of Bas himself merited, I think, a much longer description. Ingels' illustration was excellent as to background, but poor as to figures; the people were not clear at all.

Stuart Fleming's *The Avenger* was well-written, but I don't care much for horror stories, especially if they go into detail. With a different sort of plot, I would enjoy his stories greatly. Ingels' picture, although accurate, gave away part of the plot; weren't any other scenes in the story worthy of illustration?

*The Monster Maker* by Ray Bradbury was really interesting. Perhaps the author might write a sequel; his characters were three-dimensional—and human. Doolin's drawing—he uses shadow rather heavily, doesn't he?—neither made nor marred the story.

Robert Abernathy's *Saboteur of Space* was beautifully written, but I couldn't help feeling that the story had been cut—ruthlessly—because the plot, especially near the end, was far from clear. Mr. Abernathy's characterization is excellent. Elias' illustration was finely done—the facial expressions are specially good—why isn't Elias called on to illustrate more often? Incidentally—referring to the story again—was the year 819 a misprint or was it intentional? If it was the latter, I think an explanation is called for. After all, this is 1944.

Basil Wells' *Quest's End* was a good story, but isn't the title a misnomer? I don't see any reason why more of the Orthan Horde couldn't come, just to make sure. And the fact that the Orthans didn't know how to lie, and consequently didn't recognize Thig's lie seemed pulled out of a hat—like a rabbit—to give a happy ending.

*Wanderers of the Wolf-Moon* by Nelson S. Bond—I don't like the title much—was interesting, but—please restrain the caption-writer from giving away the end of a story! To tell the truth, Bond made his characters live—I actually found myself disliking Crystal Andrews. Ingels—you used him a lot this issue—drew the people fairly well, but the picture was inaccurate—again. Perhaps you should adopt J. Franklin Chidsey's suggestion: to have the writers build their stories around the pictures, since the artists seem unable to read. Please excuse my bitterness; this subject happens to be one of my pet peeves.

*And the Gods Laughed* by Fredric Brown almost frightened me—it sounded so plausible. The idea of an entity of some sort taking over a human being isn't new, but Brown's method of presenting it was—to say the least—original. I liked the story, and I think Ronald Clyne's drawing was the best in the issue—why couldn't he do a cover, sometime?

I like the Vizigraph—I think it's the best letter column in any science fiction magazine.

These are my choices for the best letters:

First, E. T. Buchanon. I think the criticism was a little severe, but basically logical.

Second, Alan Mannion. I agree with most of his ideas, but Kattner's *Crypt—City of the Deathless One* really wasn't that bad. It wasn't too good, but it didn't "rattle," and I wasn't at all inspired to give it a "Bronx cheer."

Third, Thomas R. Daniel. Not a bad letter, and the idea of presentation was original—and stuck to the point.

This is the first letter I have ever written to a science fiction magazine, and I suppose it sounds amateurish. Well, I am an amateur, anyhow.

Sincerely,

ROSE JACOBOWITZ.

## B.O. AGAIN! HO HUM!

35 South Waverly Street,  
Brighton, Mass.

Dear Editor:

Let's start with the cover. It stinks. The colors are too lurid and flashy. Ceap looking. I liked those bee-yoo-ti-ful red and white striped nightgowns at the right of the cover. Also, that type of lettering doesn't appeal to me.

The interior art was so-so. I rate them in this order: Ingels for Bond. Warning: If you use him again, keep him on the inside. Elias for Abernathy. This illustrate is quite O.K. Doolin for Wells, Clyne for Brown; Ingels for Fleming, Ingels for Brackett, Doolin for Bradbury. This last is "strictly from funny papers." (I can't remember who said that.) Gifford's cartoon is in a class by itself.

1. *Wanderers of the Wolf-Moon*, by Nelson S. Bond. Good, suspenseful, adventure.

2. *Quest's End*, by Basil Wells. A swell sequel to *Quest of Thig*.

3. *The Monster Makers*, by Ray Bradbury. Humorous, in a way.

4. *The Jewel of Bas*, by Leigh Brackett. If you ask me (I know you wouldn't, but here's my opinion anyway), this one wandered so far off trail, it stayed off. This off-trail idea is good anyway, let's see some more.

5. *Saboteur of Space*, by Robert Abernathy.

6. *The Avenger*, by Stewart Fleming.

7. *And the Gods Laughed*, by Fredric Brown. Oh, no! It couldn't be. The author of *The Star Mouse*, doing this—this—auugh! This was the only fly in an otherwise perfect ointment.

Le Viz rolls smoothly up-hill, with hair and fingernail parings littering the trail. My votes are cast for: 1. The Original Space Falcon, 2. Bill Watson, 3. Harrington, The Fizikal Rek, mainly because of the belly lafs his missive conjured. In view of his comments, I look forward to Heiner's reply in the Summer Ish. Where's Oliver? I never get enough of his interesting, entertaining letters. His autobiog was swell, but it isn't enough. How about it Chad?

Sincerely yours,

BILL TERRIO,  
*The Mad Astronomer.*



## WILKIE SEZ!!

147 E. 12th Street,  
Salisbury, North Carolina.

Dear Mister Peacock:

Well,  
Me and the ole lady  
(That's my wife)  
Wuz sitting at the fire  
Sippin' cold cider  
and talking about the  
Good things of life,  
So naturally the subject  
of PLANET STORIES  
Just popped up,  
Like a dying calf  
In a hail storm.  
The old lady sez,  
"Wilkie, how come you  
Don't write them  
fellers and tell 'em  
That you like their  
Book. Especially  
Swashbuckling tales of  
Space pirates, and  
Stories of  
Blood and thunder,  
Like you used to read  
When that writer feller  
Named Ray Cummings  
Wrote *Girl of Golden Atom*  
and *Spawn of the Comet*, etc?  
Because them wuz the good  
ole daze  
and s-f was just gettin'  
In front of the field  
And making Westerns and  
others look silly.  
Now, PLANET  
Is getting head and  
Shoulders above the  
Rest of the field  
And that's why  
Mister Peacock,  
I'm pesterin' you  
With this mess:  
Just to say  
PLANET (capitals  
intended) is the  
Best damned s-f  
magazine published.

Yours truly,

WILKIE CONNER.

## MACHIAVELLI!

Florence Ave. and Teale St.,  
Culver City, Calif.

Dear Editor Peacock:

Having launched the Spring issue of PLANET with an experiment, and the Vizigraph thereof with a blast from Mr. Buchanon, you should receive most interesting correspondence from your readers.

Having been born with a Machiavellian sense of malice, I am enjoying in anticipation the effects of the Buchanon "Whirlwind" in the serried ranks of perennial "Fans," as well as your discomfiture when your *experiment* is vivisected by the SF confraternity whose dislike of pure fantasy is notorious. However, you have shown an almost God-like disregard for the wishes of your readers in the past, so, let us hope that the same sublime indifference serves you as a cloak now. In any event, you have managed to enliven what was be-

coming a dull routine, and for that, at least, you deserve praise.

The present issue of PLANET is remarkable. I haven't the faintest idea whether or not you edited it with your tongue in your cheek—or, whether in a moment of ennui you decided for once to issue a "number" that corresponded to your ideal. The result however, is admirable! The short stories were so excellent, that they took away the honors from the novels, and the "Non-Fan" letters so well-written that a Show-Girl wrote what was tantamount to a classic. Bond, despite his perennial *Crash-marooned-in-an-alien-Planet* theme, forbore to use "hack" and the off-trail novel written by Miss Brackett is reminiscent of C. L. Moore, and therefore of excellence. The cover was so crude that it reminded one of those shows that are so L - - - they're marvellous, and in conclusion, to finally overturn all norms and precedents, Mr. Mannion wrote a letter in absolute seriousness that in print became such sheer satire it's delicious! Only one thing was missing, a story by that Staff Sergeant De Pina who is so often mentioned in the Vizigraph, and whose work you so seldom print. Since he conforms to no known rules of Science-Fiction that I know of, the overturning of the Apple-Cart would have been complete. Incidentally, is he still writing, or fighting or what? Had one of his stories appeared in this utterly unorthodox issue, it would have been the final touch to have made it *memorable* for me.

If I may, I would nominate for the Hall of Fame, as a real classic, and the best in this issue, the Short-Story *And the Gods Laughed*. Superb craftsmanship and originality easily gives it top honors.

*The Monster Maker*, takes second place. Nelson Bond's *Wanderers of the Wolf Moon*, third, and *The Jewel of Bas*, fourth. Length does not determine merit in my mind, by any means. I appreciate the fact that a novel demands greater work than a short story, but the short story form in itself demands the highest degree of craftsmanship and often is more difficult to achieve than a novel which in its leisurely pace and scope can embody a greater extension of situation and theme. Mind you, I thoroughly enjoyed Bond's *Wanderers*, but no story in this issue left me with such a sense of admiration and complete gratification as did *And the Gods Laughed*.

With very best wishes I am,

Sincerely,

GEORGIA O'NEILL.

## PAGLIACCI!

Dear Georgia:

We resent the crack in your second paragraph, and were we as indifferent as you claim, your letter would have hit the waste basket, along with other critical letters for which we do not care.

Books are strange things; they cannot conform to the whims of a few; they must be edited for the whole. There will always be disagreements upon what makes a book good, and being human, we try to please the majority.

We believe we've been bending over backward to be fair, and we'll take no cracks to the contrary in a personal way. However, this is your department, so you may write what you wish. Have at it, Georgia.

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.



## GUY—GAL AND GOON!

156 S. University St.,  
Blackfoot, Idaho.

Dear Editor:

In the Spring, a young man's fancy turns to PLANET STORIES—but not if the cover is like the one for Spring, 1944. Once again the Guy, the Gal, and the Goons, and such a smeared job that they all resemble Goons of one kind or another. Especially the girl. Do you honestly think she would attract any new readers? That too-heavily made up face, that expression, that—shall we exaggerate and call it *hair*? Arrraagh!

Artwork: Gifford's cartooning ability continues to amaze. Ronald Clyne does a neat job, and your new import—Ingels—has an odd and interesting style that will be quite refreshing if you don't use him too much.

Blatt-column: A lot of fans will quarrel with me for this, but E. F. Buchanon takes first place. There's a great deal of truth in his letter. We, the little egotists, sitting in our remote fastnesses and trying to dictate the policies of a magazine without having had any experience in so doing—there's a lot of truth in that idea, as I shall demonstrate in a moment by attempting, as usual, to criticize the stories. But on the other hand, Mr. Buchanon, please remember that every man has a right to his own opinion and nobody's judgment is perfect. They panned Milton all to hell in his day—look at him now. Ditto Keats, Gibbon, Poe, Emerson, etc., etc. "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

Other awards go to Mannion and Watson, whose remarks on science in fiction, etc., should clear the air a trifle.

And now to the fiction, PLANET'S recent upswing from the mire of last May is still under way, it would seem. Just keep it up, and you'll be up where you used to be.

A lot of fans are going to quarrel with me for this selection, but—number one goes to Bond's *Wanderers of the Wolf-Moon*. All right, so it isn't colnrful, it isn't stf, it isn't "vast," it isn't several things—but it is a very well characterized, leisurely written, human yarn, bringing to mind Barrie's satire *The Admirable Crichton* (in which a party of British aristocracy is shipwrecked on an island and the butler takes command). It is very smoothly done—its very smoothness disguises its worth, and will probably cause a lot of fans to underrate it. Some tales build up to an explosive climax that makes you sink back with a relieved feeling; this, on the contrary, made me think "aw, heck, it would have to end when it did." 'Tain't every story, my dear Watson, that can produce that result. However, I would advise a little rest from the castaway theme, Mr. Bond. We don't want to run the idea into the ground.

*The Jewel of Bas* is a typical Brackett tale—one of the better Brackett tales. That's one of the things you'd been missing in P.S. recently—the weird, fantastic settings which were once PLANET'S trademark. The slackening up of the raw action and the increased use of color have had much to do with the mag's renaissance. Bas, the sun-balls, the machine, et al, were very well done—yet the merely human beings were very real and down-to-earth.

*The Avenger* was a well-knit little yarn with a real punch—but cursed with one of my pet stf peeves, a blurb that gave away the plot. "Like calls to like"—did you *have* to tell us that much,

Mr. Peacock? More of Fleming in the mag, please.

*And the Gods Laughed*. Well, Mr. Brown, you did a nice job here, although the intelligent-parasite lode is about worked out. Still the tale is good, however.

*Saboteur of Space*. Abernathy has an exciting plot here, but there's just something missing somewhere. We want to see this author turn out a good, adventurous time-travel tale.

*Quest's End*. Please, Mr. Peacock, you've been in the game long enough to know how flat most sequels fall. *Quest of Thig* was no world-beater anyway, and this opus practically finished it. No more of Thig and the Orthans, please! Basil Wells has done good stuff, though; let him do one of your "off-trail" yarns sometime. Two years ago they were his specialty.

Last and least—*The Monster Maker*. It hurts to see Ray Bradbury—indisputably the most important author developed in the year 1943—turning out such hack filler as this. Let's just be kind and forget TMM, shall we? He's done some remarkable short stories this past year, and one blotch on his record won't spoil it. Just see that it doesn't happen again.

Keep the mag climbing, boys, and remember—we still want at least one cover sometime without the Guy, Gal, and Goon(s). One space scene wouldn't hurt you at all.

Sincerely,

PAUL CARTER,  
*The Merely Quasi-Human.*

## HALF A LOAF!

119 Jackson Ave.,  
Pen Argyl, Pennsylvania.

Dear Editor:

Did Nelson S. Bond ever complete his science-fiction omnibus, which he mentioned in the Feature Flash in the Fall 1941 issue?

Is it still possible to get a copy of PLANET with Bond's *Ballad of Blaster Bill*? (Yes! Ed.)

I'm just recovering from my fourth and most serious illness in three months and this is the first chance I've had to read my PLANETS. That's how busy I've been!

At least half of the stories are very good, the balance quite interesting, with the exception of *Queen of the Blue World* which is the most confused jumble I have ever read in 15 years. *Vassals of the Master-World* is the best story you have ever published up to and including the Spring 1942 issue. (I'm now ready for the Summer issue, then the rest.)

The rest of the dopes who clutter up the Vizigraph with what they consider letters should be incarcerated in "this" Bug House.

The letters in the Vizigraph deal too much with illustrations and not enough with stories. Otherwise the Vizigraph is tops.

I miss the planets on PLANET'S covers, regardless of what others think.

Anderson's cover for the Winter 1942 PLANET is super but Ingel's cover for the Spring 1944 issue looks too much like cheap jungle-wild west stuff.

Each issue of PLANET STORIES is a pleasant surprise; keep it up! I have every issue except No. 3 and No. 4.

Scincerely,

J. WASSO, JR.



## IMPROVED TRASH?

241 West Olive St.  
Long Beach, Long Island, N. Y.

DEAR MR. PEACOCK:

As you may remember, I sent you a letter some time ago. It was not published. I, on bended knees, thank you for that. (Awright, folks, take it easy; I haven't gone crazy—yet.) It was a disagreeable, nauseating and idiotic piece of trash. This time, I shall try to improve my style.

It is a chief hobby of mine to collect stf. mags. So, after borrowing a pound of tobacco and a bloodhound from Sherlock Holmes, I wished to obtain a few back issues of PS. So, I gave the pup a hefty smell of the Winter 1943 issue. He fainted and I don't blame him. It left me with such a sickening feeling as I have never had before. After I had revived him, he headed directly toward a little book shop on Times Square (Oh, yes, I was in NYC at the time). I went in, tied Fido up and immediately asked an elderly salesman for the location of back issues of PLANET STORIES. Holding his nose, he pointed with a deplorable look in his eyes to a shelf, from which was emanating a thick screen of greenish smoke. Borrowing a gas mask from a soldier, I made my way to the shelf. I found two issues which heretofore were not in my possession. They featured respectively *Black Friar of the Flame* and *War Gods of the Void*. As yet, I have not had time to read them, so you may expect a report on them any day.

By now the gas was starting to come through the mask so I gave the man 20¢ and rushed out. After mailing Fido back to Sherlock Holmes, C. O. D., I jumped on the Long Island Railroad. What happened after that is history. I sat down and wrote you a letter. (Applause.)

Now to get on to things in general around PS.

I notice that, although other magazines are using Finlay to a great extent, your book lacks masterpieces by V. F. How come, Wilbur? Don't tell me he's rationed!

The stories, with of course a few exceptions, are mostly in the department labeled "Hack, or stories by Is-a-hack Asimov, Yuk Yuk." The illustrations in your book rate singularly high with me, though. The covers go, as usual, in the waste basket. Take the Winter cover for instance. It depicts I believe *Crypt-City of the Deathless One*. Except for bright colors, which I adore, it is lousy.

*Castaways of Eros* is a very good story. It opens up, in my opinion, an almost brand new field in stf. *Blackout* had a theme which should have been written into a novel or a novelet, not a short-short *Crypt-City*, etc., was quite good. Complaint: Izzat stf? Nice ending tho'. Now to that paradise of putrefiers, the Vizigraph. The V. is the best readers' department from here to Pluto. True, some of the writers, like Old Faithful Milt Lesser do get corny sometimes. Wuzzat? Why do I call him Old Faithful? Why you silly child. I call him that because he spouts hot air at regular intervals (Joke), namely 3-month intervals between issues of PS. Speaking of hot air, my quarterly ration is almost finished, so I must sign off.

Your Scientifictionally,

ARTHUR OESTERREICHER.

## CHARITY!

Darien, Conn.

DEAR SIR:

I will begin this—my first letter—with an apology; I confess that I sat down to write this epistle with my pet gripes foremost in my mind; which is an unfair approach! The truth is, I buy your excellent magazine regularly because I like the type of stories you specialize in, and find the contents of your "rag" uniformly good.

I am the original imagination guy—and I work nights on a wartime drillpress job—which gives my brain plenty of time for idle exercise—so—I hereby offer to think up plots for any or all of your writers—absolutely free of charge and without any wish for personal publicity of any kind. Incidentally, I have a couple of Lulus stored in my cerebellum which are fantastic but not scientifiction . . . in case any one is interested.

SAMPLE NO. 1

Dr. Whosis is 235 years old, a dilapidated product of science's nearest approach to solution of the secret of eternal life. He is still the original model—after biochemists prolonged his natural span the brilliant surgeons stepped in and kept grafting on new parts as fast as the old ones wore out—he's had several sets of hearts and glands, and is getting mighty tired of the process—although far from tired of life.

So he decides he has to hit on a process to transfer the brain to another body, and spends the next thirty years perfecting an intelligent robot to do the operations. Only a robot can think, move fast enough and in enough directions at once to do this unimaginably complicated operation. So he makes robot and goes to the Moron Colony on some asteroid to get him a nice fresh young body. (The morons have a way of getting excited and bashing in each others' heads.) So he gets young again. He also has it figured so as not to wake up until he is all well again. The robot feeds and exercises him in his sleep.

He goes back to Terra and gets filthy rich fixing up the scientific big shots he figgers should not be lost to the world. But word gets out and he has to get into his flying laboratory (it has a brain of its own and astrogates, repairs itself, etc. without attention except for occasional conferences with the boss) and flies out to the uttermost corners of space for a bit of rest and to keep from getting torn to bits by the mob that wants to remain young.

END OF STORY

So you see I really mean what I say—and of course any writer that subscribes to my unique service needn't use my plots unless he, she or (it-brr!) wishes to do so; and needn't follow the plot unless they want to. So you see the whole business is just too good to be true!

Some of the Vizipanners have hinted that Nelse Bond could use something new—who knows—my next cerebral tempest might actually BE new stuff!

Sincerely,

JACK POTTER.

## FAITH AND HOPE!

DEAR POTTER:

We're humbly grateful for your efforts to help us. We've taken your plan under advisement. How about a couple more of your samples?

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.



## JOE HAS MOVED!!

1106 Carolina Ave.,  
North Augusta, Georgia

DEAR MR. W. S. PEACOCK:

No false hopes please bud, I haven't repossessed the revered Remington. It's still in durance vile.

Notice the change of address, I'm now a Georgia cracker of two months' standing, complete with a Georgia pecan, a Georgia peach (figure it out for yourself W. S.) and a budding southern accent.

W. S. I bet I'm the only jerk in Georgia who's received seven induction notices in two years. It now looks as though the manpower shortage coupled with the shortage of Wacs, and the fact that the local boy scouts have replaced the traffic signals locally (My theory on the foregoing—the lights are being equipped with a new type ray—purpose to pick off any stray Republicans who wander down this way.) may get me in service.

That's a luscious hunk of stuff on the current cover W.S. So help me Robert E. Lee, it reminded me of nothing so much as good old Spicy Detective. I retract everything, you are now far ahead of Flash Gordon. The current crop of illustrations are an improvement which isn't saying much. The boys still aren't in my class, right W.S.

You write and pat my back, I'll reciprocate W.S. old pal. I devised a new rating system of from one to six stars, but the notes are on back of my latest Gov. Communique. So help me, I can't remember whether it's one of six that's good. Anyway that brash outspoken individual in the last issue scared me.

John Campbell in another magazine states few artists are really interested in Science Fiction. Maybe that's true in N.Y. but there are other cities. Why restrict your field? There are many excellent Pro's. scattered over the country. Many probably interested in Science Fiction.

Your fiction's not restricted to the vicinity of N.Y., is it? Why not try an occasional newcomer. You've nothing to lose, believe me.

So long and best wishes,

JOE CONNELL

## LINE FORMS TO RIGHT!

2929 Ordway Street, N.W.  
Washington 8, D. C.

Dear Editor:

Congratulations!! Your Spring 1944 ish was magnificent. *The Jewel of Bas* and *Wanderers of the Wolf Moon* were of course best but the shorts were all good. To my mind your mag is the best on the market now. It is truly a science-fiction magazine. Let's keep it that way. As for the cover I personally prefer a good spaceship or time machine rather than some half nude girl and monsters and a hero to rescue her. Please, let us have some variety at least.

What has happened to Hasse and De Pina. I never will forget *Alcatraz of the Starways*. It will always remain a classic. Incidentally the best story I have ever read (I have mags back to 1926) was Binder's *Vassals of the Master World*. I would like very much to see more such stories in your magazine by him.

I have hoarded five copies of *Moon Pool* by Merritt all in excellent condition and would like to know if any of your readers are interested in them.

Yours for an even better mag.,

FREDERICK I. ORDWAY.

## KENNEDY'S DOUGH!

84 Baker Ave.,  
Dover, N. J.

Dear Editor:

I've just finished *The Jewel of Bas* and consider it a superb piece of fantasy. For my dough, Leigh Brackett can write circles around the vast majority of our modern S-F authors. *Her characters actually seem to live and breathe!* Since the tale was set off separately from the others, I have no kicks coming. But when the fantasy and the science-fiction are mixed up together in a hopeless jumble, I HIT THE ROOF!

In the *Viz*, Kennedy really deserves all three originals, but being a generous soul I'll award first to Raym for his wonderfully wacky bit of phantasy pfiction. Excellent way to take revenge upon an editor who turns down yer stories! Please, General Washington, don't leave us in suspense. Continue it in the next edition of *Le Vizi*. Second place I bestow upon Harrington. Tasty piece of yoomer. Third to Lesser, after much pondering. Don't kid yerselves, fellers—the Genial Genius has one of the finest styles of any letter hack around.

Before going any farther, allow me to heap praise upon Ron Clyné for the best pic of the issue. Doolin is worse than ever. May I suggest that you get Boris Dolgov to do some ills for *PLANET*? He's the most underrated fantasy artist around—I rate him next to Finlay. Altho Dolgov's style is a lot like Bok, he is superior to Hannes in many ways. Much as I admire Bok's skill and imagination, I'll have to admit that he is often inclined to make his figures bunchy and out of proportion. At any rate, take a look at Dolgov. . . .

Now for the main topic. An incredibly narrow-minded gentleman by the name of E. F. Buchanan. Mr. B. is inclined to believe fans are not essential in the least. I disagree for the following reasons:

No. 1. The fan field has produced many of our top-flight authors, artists, and editors.

No. 2. Fans have sponsored HUNDREDS of worthwhile projects for the general advancement of science-fiction. (Exaggerating for effect, huh? Ed.)

No. 3. They write countless letters to the editors full of helpful suggestions which—beyond any doubt—are an invaluable aid to those editors in picking material for publication.

No. 4. Fans buy and back all the fantasy pulps.

No. 5. YOU HAVE TO HAVE A SINCERE AND IMPORTANT INTEREST IN S-F TO WRITE IT WELL!

Oh, sure. STF mags could sell without the fans to buy 'em. *But the quality of the material would be much lower, indeed!* Buchanan says it doesn't matter if the mags are 100% hack. Hmm-m-m. That statement is so thick-headed that it doesn't even require me to contradict it.

Agreed. Most fans are youthful. The younger we are the easier it is for us to appreciate good fantasy. Are fans conceited? GOOD NIGHT, NO! S-F is our hobby. We're in it for the fun it gives us.

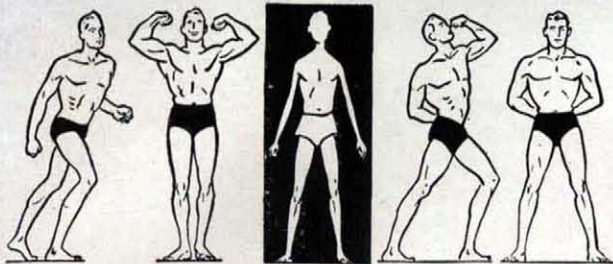
About "entertainment" in stfiction. Personally, I think that a well-written, intelligent story gives infinitely more pleasure than a hunk of fast-action hack. A top-notch tale will be remembered for years. Inside of 24 hours the name of the hack will be forgotten. So let's have less hack—and less Buchanons.

Sincerely,

JOE KENNEDY.



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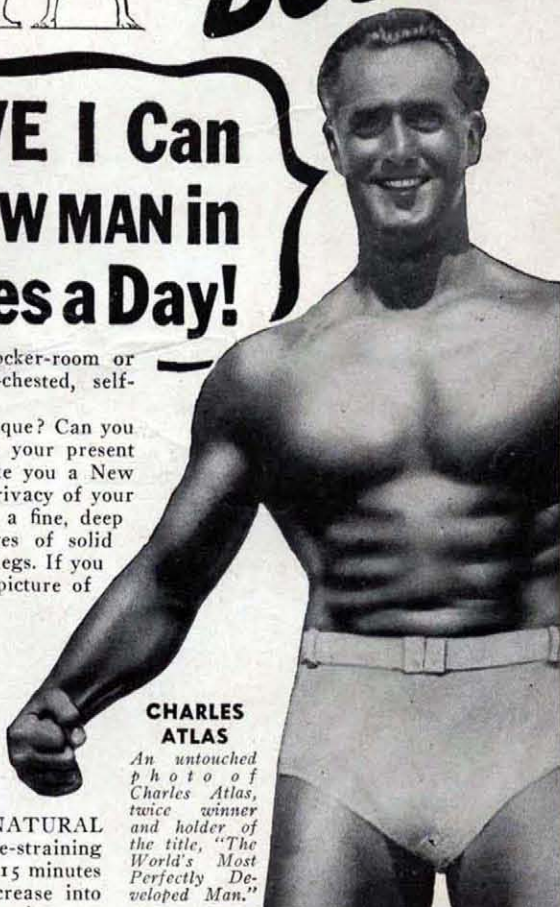
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Keeping old Radios working is booming the Radio Repair business. Think of the new boom in Radio Sales and Servicing that's coming when new Radios are again available—when Frequency Modulation and Electronics can be promoted—when Television starts its postwar expansion!

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The day you enroll for my Course I start sending you EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that help show how to make EXTRA money fixing Radios in spare time while still learning. I send you SIX big kits of Radio parts as part of my Course. You LEARN Radio fundamentals from my illustrated, easy-to-grasp lessons—PRACTICE what you learn by building real Radio Circuits—PROVE what you learn by interesting tests on the circuits you build!

**Find Out What N.R.I. Can Do For You**

MAIL THE COUPON for my FREE 64-page book. It's packed with Radio facts—things you never knew about opportunities in Broadcasting, Radio Servicing, Aviation Radio, other Radio Fields. Read the details about my Course—"50-50 Training Method"—6 Experimental Kits—Extra Money Job Sheets. See the fascinating jobs Radio offers and how you can train at home. Read many letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing, earning. No obligation. Just MAIL COUPON in an envelope or pasted on a penny post!—J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4FG, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

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