

The Golden Journey

by BERTRAM CHANDLER

There's apt to be trouble on a prison ship bound for a penal asteroid. That the officers knew. But they weren't aware that they were also headed in for a dose of double-trouble! And twins can cause identity trouble anywhere.

Illustrated by Orban

It was at the airport that the commander first met Valerie Wayne.

Perhaps it was some dim foreknowledge of this that accounted for the fascination the place had always held for him. Perhaps—and, knowing the man, I prefer this, his own explanation—it was just that he was acutely conscious of the romance of modern transport. If there had been a god of that name, he would have been its high priest.

Be that as it may, he was always there long before the I.C.C. transport was due to take off for Port Revenal, our Saharan landing field. He would sit on the bench under the clock tower, you know, the one with all the faces showing Standard Times for all over the world, ostensibly waiting for the juniors to arrive and report their return from leave.

The airport staff knew him, apart from anything else the black and gold astronaut's uniform made him an object of envy and admiration in any crowd, and on the days when the officers of *Thunderbird* were due to return to their ship the bench was religiously kept clear.

And there he would sit, having caught the early morning plane in from London, a tall, spare figure, hair a little gray at the temples, whose ascetic face suggested the prelate rather than the man of action, savoring the atmosphere of his surroundings with obvious, but quiet, enjoyment.

Any other man with several hours hanging on his hands would have seen more of Paris than this latter day caravansary on its outskirts, would have sampled some, at least, of the pleasures for which that city *is* justly famous. But all the commander asked was the milling crowds, the gesticulating officials in their smart, colorful uniforms, the multilingual loudspeakers blaring arrivals and departures and, over all, the great silver wings of the stratoliners.

And he would rise courteously to return our salutes as we strolled in from the distant corner of the field where the whirling blades of the rising and descending gyro taxis glittered continuously in the sunshine. If, as often was the case, we had brought our girls along to see us off, he would exchange a few words with them in his deep, well-modulated voice, but it was almost as though he was afraid of them. With the married women it was different, but with them he was on surer ground. For they accompanied their husbands to Port Revenal, for a last week together whilst we of the permanent staff took over from our reliefs and insured that *Thunderbird* was ready in all respects for deep space.

I asked Molly, once, what she thought of his attitude toward women.

"He's scared, Peter," she said. "With us safely married matrons he feels he's safe, but unmarried girls, to him, are just mantraps baited with sex appeal. It's a case of once bitten, twice shy. There's a tragedy in his life, somewhere. And he's scared of having to go through it all again."

"It's a pity," she sighed, "he'd make some lucky girl a good husband. I'm not sure that he's safe even from us old married women—"

And I told her that if that was the way she felt I'd never have her down to Port Revenal again.

But it was at the Paris airport, as I said, that he first met Valerie Wayne.

The I.C.C. transport was already on the tarmac, blue wisps of smoke trickling from the ventures as the pilot warmed up his jets. Everybody was aboard, even the cadets. A little to one side, outside the roped-off area, stood a small group of girls, their gay, summer dresses billowing ever so slightly in the light breeze.

Everybody was aboard but Hamilton, the second pilot.

The commander strolled forward along the aisle, had a few brief words with the transport captain. Then he descended to the tarmac to pace up and down by the retractable gangway. One did not have to be psychic to realize that Mr. Hamilton had incurred his extreme displeasure.

Then, drifting down from the blue sky on almost soundless wings, came one of the little gyro taxis. It grounded but a few feet from where the commander was pacing back and forth. Two of the airport officials sprang forward to deal with this violator of the traffic rules, but, at the sight of the I.C.C. black and gold they shrugged, grinned and saluted.

Hamilton climbed down from the taxi, then turned to assist his companion to the ground.

"I wonder who she is?" breathed Molly, sitting beside me. "But how does she do it? Everything so simple, and yet such effect!"

Effect was the word.

The young woman with Hamilton was tall and slim, and was dressed almost with severity. Her hair, black, with vagrant coppery gleams, was brushed smoothly back and was devoid of ornament. And she was like one of those too exquisitely elegant ladies one sees on the illustrated fashion pages of the better-class women's magazines. No, not quite. For, in spite of her poise, there was something warmly human about her.

"Sorry I'm late, sir!" we heard Hamilton say. And then, "Valerie, I'd like you to meet Commander Cartwright, our navigating and executive officer. Commander, this is Miss Valerie Wayne."

Those of us inside the plane could hardly believe our ears. For we heard the commander say, "The pleasure is mine, Miss Wayne. But haven't we met before?"

"He's as bad as all the rest of you after all!" hissed Molly. "I *did* expect something original—"

"No, I don't think so, commander," replied the girl in what, if she hadn't been turning on the refrigeration, would have been a very pleasant contralto. Then her manner softened. "But you may have seen me over the air. I've televised quite a lot recently."

"Valerie is secretary of the Penal Reform League," interjected Hamilton with a proprietorial air. "And she's their star speaker."

"Really?" This time it was the commander's turn to be as unpleasant as possible within the bounds of ordinary politeness. "I'm afraid, Miss Wayne, that I haven't much time for the P.R.L., but then, of course, I have a slight personal bias. But you must excuse us—" He turned to where one of the port officials, obviously a person of some importance, had been standing vainly trying to attract his attention during the exchange of courtesies. "*Mais certainment, Monsieur le Capitane. Nous allons, tres vite.*" Then, to the second pilot, "Come on, Mr. Hamilton. You have caused so much delay that you have disrupted the smooth functioning of the port." He saluted. "I'm very pleased to have met you, Miss Wayne."

"The pleasure was all mine, commander."

"But I, too, have what you call a slight personal bias. And if you had one near and dear to you rotting her life away in the little hell they call Ceres, you, I think, would be one of our most ardent supporters." Then, as Hamilton made to take her hand in farewell, she drew him to her and planted a kiss full on his lips. "Au revoir, Jim," she murmured, "don't be too long away—"

"That was meant for the commander," whispered Molly. "What?"

"Sure. A shade more subtle than the slap in the face he was asking for."

"But why should *he* worry if she kisses my Number Two?"

"How blind men are. Why should he care what she's secretary of—"

Followed by the second pilot, Cartwright climbed into the transport. The glare he cast over us discouraged comment. On the tarmac, the gold-braided airport official glanced anxiously at his watch. The doors shut. The blast turbines woke into screaming life and we fled south and east for Port Reveal.

The week before blasting off was always a busy one.

The relief crew, to be sure, do their work efficiently and well, but their lives don't depend upon it. Then there was cargo to be stowed—the usual outward bound general—with due regard for the center of gravity. This, of course, wouldn't matter in deep space, but it has to be kept as low as possible to facilitate landing.

The passengers, if any, wouldn't be down till the actual sailing day. With them would come plane after plane packed tight with rubbernecks—for the departure of a rocket ship is always a sight to stir the imagination. You know, I have even known people to complain most bitterly that the Rocket Lines have no consideration for the public in that respect—they always have their ports miles from anywhere.

Of course they do. They didn't—once. And then . . . oh, it's years ago, before my time ... Captain Taylor blew a tube, and his ship, *King Charles' Wain*, sat down, hard, bang in the middle of Manchester. The people of that city, at least, would have remembered, but there weren't any left even to pass unfavorable comment on the occurrence.

But for a day or so the little group of buildings to one side of the landing field would become almost a city. Sometimes they've even had to put up tents.

The Old Man usually came down the day before the passengers were due to arrive. Then he, and the commander, and old Captain Jorgen, the routing officer, would go into a huddle about *Thunderbird's* orbit, having due regard to all known navigational dangers and the tracks of any other shipping in space.

So it caused considerable speculation when Captain Wilton returned a full three days before the expiry of his leave. He went at once to his private quarters in the Officers' Hall, and sent for the commander.

News gets around.

Soon everybody—officers, officers' wives, and cadets—was gathered in the comfortable lounge. I don't know why or how, but all of us were convinced that any change from our familiar routine wouldn't be a change for the better.

At last the bell of the telephone from the Old Man's suite jangled insistently. One of the cadets answered. "It's for you, sir," he said.

"What is it?" everybody screamed when I hung up.

"I don't know. But I've been told to stop the loading and start getting the stuff out again. Also, and this will please you all, the sailing's been postponed for a week. But I must go and make myself even more popular with the stevedore—"

It wasn't till after dinner that night that we learned the worst. The Old Man called an officers' conference in his sitting room.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "they've done the dirty on us. Any of you with girl friends in Port Lasalle won't be seeing 'em this trip—"

"Where are they sending us, sir?" blurted somebody.

Captain Wilton raised his hand. "Quiet, gentlemen, please.

"Our Ganymede sailing has been canceled, and we are to replace the rocket that blew a tube just before taking off at Port Curtiss in Arizona. They reckon it'll be some months before they have her spaceworthy again. We shall be taking her cargo and her passengers."

"Not *Charon*, sir?"

"Yes, *Charon*. Regarding the passengers, there are about fifty traveling at the government's expense and one, I think, who is a round-tripper. The others—ten guards and forty incurables."

"Any outward cargo?"

"Yes—general. And homeward. It appears that the . . . er . . . colonists can pile up a little credit on Earth for the purchase of imported luxuries. The usual routine, up till now, has been for *Charon* to disembark her passengers and discharge her outward freight at Port Howard, or, as *they* call it, Port Capone, and then pick up labor to work the indium mines on Number 596. When she is loaded, she returns to Port Capone, disembarks the labor, and carries on home with the ore. The money earned by the miners is credited to them by the government, and forms a fund from which they can buy anything from Earth that they require."

"This passenger, sir?" asked Hamilton.

"The roundtripper, you mean? We've far more important things to worry about than one passenger, Mr. Hamilton. I can't even remember her name."

Her name.

The second pilot looked very pleased with himself.

"Of course, sir. Thank you, sir."

"And now, gentlemen, the commander and I are going to be very busy. All kinds of structural alterations to be planned. Mr. Jones, here's a pile of bumf from the Board. Run through it yourself with the juniors so you have an idea as to what's happening."

Yes, we all got an idea as to what was happening, and what was likely to happen. And we weren't impressed.

Firstly, we couldn't get rid of the idea that *Thunderbird*, through no fault of her own, had come down in the world. You know the kind of thing—once the pride of the Jovian run and now—a *prison ship*. Only for one trip, perhaps, but that was plenty. The smell would linger for years.

And then—all the structural changes and such. All spacemen are, at heart, deeply conservative, and when a ship fits you like a well-worn shoe you object to any uncalled for and unwanted cobbling.

To begin with, the passenger quarters were to be fitted with a door that would stop anything short of a rocket on the Pluto run at maximum acceleration. And this door wasn't to have the kind of lock that had an orthodox key—oh, no, that was too simple. It was to be one of the new-fangled acoustic locks—and only the right word spoken by the right voice would open the door. Only two officers were to know the word, the Old Man and the commander, and the lock would be set to the timbre of their voices only.

Then there were changes in the engine room, too.

A new converter was to be installed — *Thunderbird* was to manufacture her own atomic blasting explosives for use in the indium mines.

But worst of all were the regulations regarding personnel.

To begin with us, all of us were supposed to become crack shots with a variety of hand weapons. This, however, caused very little ill feeling. Some of the juniors were quite pleased, especially Hamilton. But he had always been keen on lethal devices, and hardly a trip passed without his inventing something deadly and unpleasant and passing the working models over the Board. It grieved him that he would never, except, of course, in the unlikely event of invasion from Outside, see his fiendish devices used. But he kept on turning out his little unpleasantries and reading lurid historical novels of the good old days when men were men and would kill you as soon as look at you.

The cruelest blow was the new regulation concerning the treatment of the miners from Ceres. They appeared to have a government of sorts—and this Thieves' Parliament, backed by our old friends the P.R.L., had been getting tough. Somebody in power wanted his brains examined, for it had worked. Henceforth, the convicts were to be allowed to bring along their girl friends—why shouldn't the little dears benefit by a change of scene as well as their protectors?—and their bosses, foremen, or whatever they cared to call themselves, were to be accorded the privileges of first-class passengers. Since the passengers' lounge and dining saloon were in the sealed-off portion of the ship, this entailed their eating with the officers.

This would be sure to please the Old Man. And I could foresee the commander shouting with unrestrained glee at the prospect.

But all of us, I think, were far too busy to worry overmuch about the inevitable unpleasantries of the coming trip. There was cargo to discharge, cargo to reload, pistol training to be carried out daily and the alterations to supervise. In addition to this, I had to allocate the various cadets to their duties for the trip, either as assistants to the various officers or, in the case of seniors, to duties of their own.

Nevertheless, I had time for a heart-to-heart talk with Hamilton. I didn't like doing it, and I had been putting it off until we got out into deep space. But the extra time in port gave me no excuse for avoiding the issue.

Oh, it was just the usual fatherly chat about how the commander had taken a very poor view of his late arrival at the airport, and how we were considering having him transferred to one of the freighters

with nothing in the way of pretty faces to look at the whole trip, and nothing but hairy chested miners and such in such ports as the tramps visited.

And then—for I was rather curious—I worked round to the cause of his tardy return. After all, she wasn't his usual type. How had he met her, and where?

Valerie Wayne, it appeared, was a friend of friends. Her interest in the second pilot seemed to be derived from the fact that she would shortly be making a deep-space trip herself and, naturally, was anxious to learn what it was like from the mouth of a real astronaut. And, where, I asked, did she intend going? I might have guessed it—in fact, I had guessed it—it was Ceres, on P.R.L. business. And as *Charon's* sailing had been canceled she was, obviously, the only lady passenger whom the Old Man had mentioned.

"I suppose you've told the commander?"

"No, Mr. Jones. Why should I? It's of no importance to anybody except, possibly, myself."

He was right, of course. Molly would tell me that it *was* of great importance to Cartwright, but such a flimsy excuse as a woman's intuition wouldn't make an order to Hamilton to tell the commander a lawful command.

I told him myself, just a little item of passing interest thrown into the middle of a long talk about the coming voyage. He was uninterested. Elaborately so.

At last the days of our brief reprieve were over.

The passengers came down—forty hard-faced, sullen men and women, ten guards. They weren't sullen. And there was Valerie, of course, slim and exquisite as ever, with a little group of earnest, middle-aged people to see her aboard the ship.

They were the only visitors. We missed the usual milling hordes of sightseers, but the government has always discouraged overmuch public interest in the departure of its antisocial throwouts.

There was a hitch before sailing.

The chief of the guards made a last-minute inspection of the prisoners' quarters, then hurried, to the control room to see the Old Man.

"Captain," he said, "the injection system has been installed, but there are no cylinders."

There weren't. It was one of those things that everybody had left to everybody else and, in any case, the contractors, who had been flown from Port Curtis, knew more about the job of fitting out prison ships than we did. Our main concern was seeing that *Thunderbird* was spaceworthy.

Captain Wilton wanted to take her out without waiting for the cylinders of sleep smoke to be fitted, but Kayne, the chief guard, was adamant.

"I'm sorry, captain," he said. "Unless you radio right away for the stuff, I'm marching my flock of black sheep down your gangway. Then you can pile on the grays as hard and fast as you please."

It was an awkward situation. The Old Man wasn't used to being ordered about in his own control room, and those of us who were there with him weren't used to seeing it happen. The imminent explosion was averted by the arrival of Cadet Mellish, in charge of communications for the trip, waving a flimsy.

"From London, sir!" he reported, saluting smartly.

"Thank you." The captain's face cleared as he read. "All right, commander. Run up the elements of a fresh orbit, we're delaying our sailing an hour. They've suddenly realized that they haven't supplied the beastly stuff, and are rushing it here by strato-rocket."

"There'll be no time for a test," complained Kayne. "Still, as long as the seals on the cylinder valves are unbroken, that will have to be good enough."

It was sunset when we blasted off.

I could, somehow, imagine how we would look from outside—like some enormous monolith or pillar rising sheer from the desert sand. From the control viewports we could see our enormously elongated shadow, running straight as a bar across the ephemeral hills and valleys of the sandy sea.

Cartwright, in his navigator's chair, was talking softly to himself. In spite of myself, I listened, for such an action was so unlike the man.

It was poetry, and what poetry! Heaven alone knew from what ancient book he had dug it up—for it was never the work of any of our modern apostles of Speed and Steel.

*"Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells
When shadows stride gigantic 'cross the sand,
And softly through the twilight beat the bells
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand. . . ."*

He must have sensed that I was listening, for he turned to me and grinned, rather ruefully.

"This isn't going to be any Golden Journey, Peter," he said. "Don't ask me how I know, but I *do* know. Just as I knew that I should never have sailed with Sorensen on his expedition to Pluto. But I didn't back out then—and there's only myself to worry about now."

He struck a dramatic attitude.

*"For the sunset of life gives me mystical lore
And coming events cast their shadows before—"*

"Commander Cartwright!" The Old Man sounded displeased. "Is all ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then watch your chronometer, and give the order to blast on the split second."

The seconds ticked by.

At last—"Stand by!"

And softly through the twilight—no, hardly. And the warning bells filled the ship with their insistent clamor. The calm, thin face suspended over the chronometer was that of a priest performing some mystical rite of divination. Abruptly, the clangor died in mid beat. That was my executive signal. Roaring up on her main drive, *Thunderbird* was still a pillar—a pillar of fire in the darkling sky.

Well, that was the start of a distinctly unpleasant trip.

The general atmosphere was all wrong.

All of us, I think, were acutely conscious of the cargo of human misery in our passenger quarters, and none of us liked the idea of being instrumental in their exile.

The guards, of course, and also Valerie Wayne, had cabins which had been constructed in what was, in normal times, our compartment for mails and special cargo, adjacent to the officers' accommodation. And, naturally, they had their meals in our mess room.

Think of the feeling of strained politeness at meal times! The Old Man was inclined to regard the guards as being to blame for the indignity that had been put upon his ship, and all of us, to a lesser degree, shared his opinion. Then there was Valerie Wayne, looking upon them as subhuman hunters of their own species, and they regarding her as the kind of silly troublemaking female who should have been drowned at birth.

She tried hard to be allowed to accompany Captain Wilton or the commander on daily inspection—they took it alternately, but, in this case, Kayne found himself in unexpected alliance with the ship's senior officers. Mind you, if he himself had vetoed the idea it would have been a different story. Permission would have been granted as a matter of principle. But he was wise in the ways of his fellow men, was Kayne. He had to be.

And, in his way, the man was an idealist. Perhaps as great an idealist as the starry-eyed supporters of the P.R.L., perhaps greater.

It came out one night at dinner although the word "night," perhaps, is a purely arbitrary term when there are nothing but stars and blackness all around you for twenty-four hours out of the twenty-four.

There were six of us at the captain's table—the Old Man himself, Valerie Wayne, Cartwright, Kayne, the Surgeon, and myself. Seated a short distance away was Hamilton, casting sheep's eyes in our direction and obviously thinking that those in authority had been very unfair in monopolizing the only

woman in the ship. The only woman in circulation, that is. There were plenty in the prisoners' accommodation.

Surprisingly, Kayne had been accepted almost as one of us. Even Valerie had thawed in her manner toward him. She appreciated, I think, somebody who was most definitely on the other side, against whose arguments she could bring her own to a keener edge.

Her thesis, this night, was that the whole business was deliberate degradation of the holy spirit of Man. There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us—and so on. There but for the Grace of God goes—you know the kind of thing. .

"But it's not so, Miss Wayne," said Kayne earnestly. "That was true in the old days, I grant you, when economic motive for crime, both legal and illegal, existed. Murder, perhaps, yes but it is only what you might call habitual, incurable killers who get sent to Ceres. For any man or woman, notwithstanding even the most cruel penalties, could, given the right combination of circumstances, kill. And in the case of the average man or woman who has been pushed too far, it just boils down to psychological treatment for the murderer, and generous compensation to the victim's relatives.

"But there are people who are incapable of going straight. Whether economic motive exists or not, they would far sooner go to endless trouble to steal one credit than earn ten with one quarter the effort. Perhaps they do no very great harm, although, in some cases, they do. In any case—why *should* society be bothered with them? If it were left to me I should practice painless . . . er . . . liquidation, but society is too humane.

"In the old days, they had the penal islands in mid Pacific, but it became too easy, when atomic power put round the world private transport within the reach of everybody, for the friends of the condemned to stage an occasional jail break.

"And those who escaped to resume their degradations weren't improved by their sojourn in the little Paradises that these islands, in actual fact, were. Paradises, that is, from the climatic viewpoint—but the average crook resents being dumped into the middle of a community of his own species, where others can, and will, do unto him as he has been doing to the decent citizen. On his return to the world, his one burning desire was to get his own back on society.

"Interplanetary travel, of course, solved the problem.

"Ceres was taken, and transformed into a little world with every comfort that the hand and brain of Man could devise. Surface life, of course, is impossible, but the labyrinth of caverns beneath the surface have conditioned air, fertile fields, gardens, sunlight. The power plant is entirely self-operating, and is serviced once every ten years by technicians from Earth. Should it fail, the reserve unit will at once take over.

"It is, I tell you, infinitely preferable to the deserts of Mars or the swamps of Venus."

"It is hell!" said the girl.

"Yes, it is. Because there you see, in concentrated form, the evil wrought by the essentially bad men and women. They are like a vile ferment, turning the good things of life sour.

"You know," he said slowly, "I don't like this job. I went into it, I guess, because as a kid I'd stuffed myself full of detective stories. And the vocational tests must have indicated a certain aptitude. And then I found that there was little romance about it . . . it was just sordid.

"But—after all these years the world has been cleaned up and made a fit place for the decent man and woman. And somebody, I guess, has got to sweep up the dirt that still persists in gathering in dark corners."

Valerie appealed to the surgeon.

"But, Dr. Donovan, couldn't the same result be achieved by negative eugenics?"

"No. In all of us, the good and the bad blood is so mixed. It is liable to come out at any time. Of course, anybody found to be an incurable and who has had his two chances is, as a matter of routine, sterilized before being shipped to—"

"I know that. I should. Anyhow, that is the worst part of it—a world without children."

"Now you *are* being foolishly sentimental. Just imagine the results of a world full of criminals, with no

other occupations but crime and family life. I don't deny that these said criminals might be ideal parents—but, apart from questions of heredity, the children would, inevitably, acquire the same warped code of ethics as their parents."

"Couldn't *they* be transferred to Earth?" somebody asked.

"I'm no sentimentalist," averred the guard, "but that would be the very acme of cruelty."

"But suppose," persisted the girl, "that somebody is shipped to Ceres and then found innocent. What then?"

"You should know the answer to that, Miss Wayne, although I have noticed that the P.R.L. has an uncanny genius for ignoring any of the good points of our penal system.

"This sterilization is not irrevocable, although it's not done by surgical means. "It's all a question of radiations and frequencies, I think, although the doctor, here, probably knows more about it than me."

"I don't," said Donovan. "The whole business is a closely guarded secret."

"Oh, well, you'll just have to take my word for it.

"In the unlikely event of anybody being returned from Ceres, he or she will be unsterilized and will receive a handsome compensation from the government. But it's never happened yet. You can take it from me that everybody there is guilty."

"Perhaps. But—"

Well, that's a sample of what we got at every meal.

It was a change from our own shop, and if Kayne and Valerie Wayne didn't mind talking theirs, it was O.K. by us.

The commander never joined in the conversation.

That's why I was surprised when Hamilton told me that Valerie had dropped him like a hot penny. I asked him, half in jest, how his love affair was progressing when he relieved me one night in control.

"It's not," he said. "I'd never have thought that a girl like that would fall for a few more inches of gold braid."

"Rubbish. I know it's not me, and it most certainly isn't the Old Man—"

"No. It's Cartwright."

"What? They hate each other like poison."

"Do they? I see them each night in the lounge when I come off watch. Very earnest conversation. I did try to join in once or twice, but they made it very clear that I was one of life's little redundancies. I just give them a very frigid salute in passing, now, and go straight to my room."

"But Cartwright, of all people. I'd have sworn that he'd never—"

"No, it's not that. I'd be willing to stake my bottom dollar that it's all very virtuous. The pair of 'em are too idealistic." He paused. "That's the trouble. Each is trying, most earnestly, to convert the other. They'll almost certainly get spliced when we get back—possibly by the Old Man before this trip is out—and lead a most dialectical married life."

"I'm sorry, James."

"You needn't be. There are more things in life than women, Number One. And, after all, she was never interested in the things that I am. You should see the one I'm working on now. It's a honey. It'll still hit its target even if it misses it ... it'll chase it, I mean—"

"Please. I'm not in the mood for weapons. It's beggars like you that made wars in the past—turning out all this lethal gadgetry, and then sulking and raising Cain in general till they had a chance to try it out."

Hamilton wanted to argue, but I cut him short. After all, it was his watch, and I failed to see why I should keep him company while he rode his hobby horse on flights of bloodthirsty imagination. When I left him he had already seized a pencil and begun to decorate the scratch pad with sketches of what looked like a sort of torpedo or something.

I didn't intend to eavesdrop on the commander and Valerie Wayne.

After dinner I went to my cabin, but was asked to have a few beers with Kayne and his men. I accepted, and we sat in the lounge—with the tables rigged and the easy chairs stowed away it was the mess room—drinking and talking.

Beer always makes me drowsy.

I must have fallen asleep.

Something woke me—I don't know what—and I wondered, for a few seconds, where I was. The stewards had turned out most of the lights, and my chair must have been in deep shadow. Just behind it was a sofa, and from this came voices.

"You see, Valerie, I just can't raise any sympathy for the incurable criminal. Why they do the things they do I can't say, it may be just love of doing wrong, it may be a sort of warped lust for power, it may be both. But I'm bitter. The people who did what they did to Jane got off far too lightly—after all, Ceres is no punishment for the kind of criminal who will, inevitably, come out on top in their hierarchy of evil.

"I hadn't been married to Jane long. I don't think that any of my shipmates knew that I was married—for she never came down to any of the spaceports. She hated ships, anyhow. Perhaps she sensed that they were rivals for my affections—perhaps she was right.

"Well, I got the chance to sail with Storensen as chief pilot—it was on his expedition to Pluto. Of course, I went. Jane took it badly—she was convinced, somehow, that no good would come of it. Funnily enough, I had the same idea at the back of my mind, but I refused to pay any attention to it.

"Jane was an actress and, naturally, most of her friends were theatrical people. I'd met them all, at various times, and I liked them. I must have been a poor judge of human nature, for one or two of them were—vile.

"It was one of her friends that started her on drugs. I don't know how—probably told her that it would soothe her nerves when she was so obviously worrying about me. And she had something to worry about, too. For our radio had failed—a complete blowout, and we hadn't sufficient spares to rebuild the transmitter. And so there was no news from Storensen.

"Inevitably, the usual fools started rumors. Gone with all hands—the usual kind of thing. And Jane took these to heart. Somehow, the supply of drugs must have been cut off—and in a fit of depression the poor kid just walked into the sea. Anyhow, that was the story they told me when I got back.

"They got the woman responsible. It was her second offense, and she was certified as incurable. But, her name . . . I remember, now—It was—Audrey Wayne!"

"Yes, John. My twin sister. That probably accounts for your thinking we had met before that day at the airport. But she wasn't bad, John. Please believe me. She was weak, yes, and as much a victim as poor Jane—"

"I'm sorry, Valerie. The tests don't lie. If they said she was bad, then she was bad. And Ceres is too good for her."

"John! Remember, she is my sister."

Bitterly, Cartwright said something about birds of a feather. Then—

"Good night, Commander Cartwright. Thank you for a very pleasant evening."

I hadn't meant to hear all this, and I resolved that no word of what I had heard would ever be divulged. Yet, I wasn't exactly sorry. I suppose I'm just naturally nosy, and there were a few things that had always puzzled me about the commander. Molly would be—No, not a word to her, even. In the meantime I had better wait till the coast was clear and then retire to my virtuous couch.

I heard Cartwright go to the little locker in which cold beer, mineral waters and such were kept. Suddenly, I looked up to find him standing over me with a bottle in each hand.

"You were listening—" he said.

"Unfortunately, yes. I was asleep in this chair, and must have woke up when one of you raised your voice. And I thought it would be less embarrassing for all concerned if I just lay doggo for a while. I'm sorry."

"It's just as well, perhaps," said the commander. "I want somebody to drink with. I have never believed in drinking alone."

"Then you'll not be drinking long—I've got a watch to keep. But one bottle won't hurt me."

Oh, we had the one bottle apiece, and then another, and then some more. It did Cartwright good to talk, I guess. He told me about his wife, Jane, and what he had been told about her tragic end. And he

talked of Valerie. There wasn't much doubt about it, he was in love again, and seemed to think that it was mutual.

"But it's this Penal Reform League!" he complained. "This isn't the first quarrel we've had, and it's always been on the same lines. Tonight was the first time that I told her anything of my own past—and it would have to be her own sister involved in the tragic mess. The girl's an idealist—"

"So are you," I murmured.

"What was that? Rubbish. The girl's an idealist, and I like her all the more for it. But I wish she'd expend her idealism on a worthier cause than the well-being of a gang of moral lepers. But that's the trouble with crusading women—so often the personal issues involved overcloud everything else. If only—"

"If only the pair of you could find some common cause to fight for!" I said. "Well, you may, some day. I hope you do. But I have some pressing arrears of sleep to make up."

It was the next day, I think, that Hamilton showed me his latest invention. I can't be sure, for in deep space a day is a meaningless term—it can be two watches of four hours each and two spells of eight hours off, it can be three meals with a few extras, only to the navigator has it any significance. And to him it is merely once around the dial of a twenty-hour hour chronometer.

But I had been putting off and putting off the grim experience. I don't like weapons. But Hamilton was insistent, and to deny him any further would have been like refusing to view a newborn child and give a flattering opinion of its looks and abilities to the brat's mother. Yes, mother, for there was nothing fatherly in the second pilot's devotion to the children of his brilliant, but misguided, brain. No. He was, one might say, fiercely maternal.

So Hamilton led me down the long series of companionways and —latterly—metal ladders to the workshop, which was right aft, adjoining the engine room.

"Look!" he said, proudly displaying a sort of plastic cylinder about four feet long and, maybe, a foot in diameter at its thickest part.

"It's wonderful, Jimmie, but what does it do?"

"It's a torpedo. Here are the jets, one driver and four auxiliaries spaced equally around it. The fuel—a thin thread of metal with all the magnitrons knocked out—at least, nearly all. With all gone it would be too unstable for fuel. The charge goes in here"—he pointed to the extreme end of the thing's nose—"just a block of any unstable element. The shock of impact will be enough to set it off."

I backed away hastily.

"Is the thing loaded?"

"Of course not. In actual practice you'd have a ship fitted with a special converter as we have here, and just knock the magnitrons out of anything that came handy and load the torpedoes before firing."

"But there's nothing new here. You're using atomic fuel, of course, and atomic explosive but, in essentials, it's just the same as the affairs they used at sea in the twentieth century."

"Perhaps. But here we are, embarked, shall we say, on a career of piracy"—we both laughed—"and along comes some fat-bellied merchantman. We signal her to heave to, threaten to slip a torpedo into her guts if she doesn't. She doesn't. She sees our projectiles coming, swings to avoid them and then runs like hell, literally squealing with fear over her radio.

"But she won't. Not if the bold pirate is using one of Hamilton's patent magnetic torpedoes. Look!"
With deft fingers he opened up an inspection plate at the thing's for'ard end.

"See this? It's a needle, free to move in three dimensions. You know as well as I do that a rocket in flight takes a magnetic field along with her. You've got all the free magnitrons out of the fuel rushing around, and even if the batteries are working efficiently to stow them nicely red to blue and blue to red, there's always some wastage. And you know the result, a whacking great blue pole aft and a red one for'ard.

"Now, suppose that the torpedo is going to miss above the target, what happens? This needle is deflected down, the rear end rises and bridges these two contacts, and the upper auxiliary jet cuts loose and steers the whole contraption down until she is once more running true and level. Do you get the

idea?"

"I think so. But it'll be something of a boomerang. Law of Inverse Squares, you know. When you loose her off, the magnetic influence of your own ship will be predominant and she'll just come back and hit you where it'll do the most harm."

"I've thought of that. One solution is a little device timed to release the needle when the torpedo is well inside the other ship's fields of force."

"But suppose she knows the nature of the weapon and cuts her drive?"

"Well, even then there will be sufficient transient magnetism hanging around to make the control function—as well as a fair dollop of permanent. To be on the safe side, the attacking ship should turn everything off the moment the torpedo is launched."

Then I saw the fly in the ointment. A fly? It was about the size of an albatross.

"All right," I said. "Now suppose that this atomic nemesis of yours is just going to miss the bows of the target ship. I suppose that the needle inside the controlling mechanism has its own red pole for'ard—so what happens? Like repels like, or so I was always taught at school. It is deflected *away* from the objective, and the torpedo will never make contact."

Hamilton grinned—that superior grin of his that was, at times, so infuriating, especially to those placed in authority over him.

"I never said that the needle was a permanent magnet, did I? Well, it's not. It's made of Mumetal, which, as you know, is notorious for its permeability. If it happens to be in the vicinity of the red pole you were talking about—then the end of the needle nearest said red pole immediately becomes a quite strong little blue pole. What the answer is in dynes I don't know, I've never bothered to work it out. But take it from me, the little beast will assume the correct polarity every time. Satisfied?"

"And before you think of it yourself, I haven't installed a little converter in the torpedo for two reasons. Firstly, it would be hard, though not impossible, to make one of that size. Secondly, the consequent electromagnetic disturbances would throw the whole mechanism completely out of control. By using fuel already practically stripped of its magnitrons I reduce such errors to an absolute minimum.

"Take it from me, if you see one of Hamilton's Horrors coming for you, there's no escape!"

So the long voyage wore on. Meaningless, artificial days and nights, the comforting routine of watch on deck and watch below, eating, drinking, sleeping, card playing.

Hamilton appeared to have got over his calf love for the P.R.L. secretary, and she and Cartwright made it up again and then fought like wildcats at regular intervals.

And we reached that uncharted, variable point in space when the navigator gave the order to turn her over, and we experienced a few seconds' dizziness till the drivers took hold again and deceleration commenced.

The prisoners?

Oh, you become callous about these things. Most of us never gave 'em a thought. Valerie Wayne at last wheedled the consent of the brass hats to her coming with them on the daily tour of inspection—and she was shaken. It is one thing to feel an overwhelming sympathy for the members of any one class of society in the abstract—it's another story when you come up against them in the raw.

We weren't surprised when the girl retired to her bathroom immediately on returning forward, and still less surprised when we heard the shower running for a considerable period.

Then, at last, it was Landing Stations.

Below us flashed the red beacon of Port Capone, situated almost exactly on the North Pole of the prison planetoid.

Carefully, gingerly, I set her down.

There was a slight shock as we grounded.

Then we sat in the control room, looking with some curiosity at the barren, jagged landscape with its curiously circumscribed horizon.

A few hundred yards from *Thunderbird* a circular door slid open in the side of a low cliff. We could see artificial lights gleaming inside. Then, grotesque in the thin, harsh sunlight, a dozen or so spacesuited

figures emerged. The reception committee.

Kayne and his men, not without a certain amount of bullying, hustled their charges into spacesuits. In batches of ten they were assembled in the starboard air lock, and then marched down the retractable gangway. Once ashore, they were lined up in rough formation by the colonists who had come to meet us. These, I saw, carried metal-shod staffs, and even their clumsy, all enveloping clothing could not conceal a certain air of authority, of almost military briskness.

I was on duty in the air lock with Parker, one of Kayne's underlings.

"I thought you had no guards on Ceres," I said.

"We haven't. This is all Mr. Ruddy Broderick's doing."

"Broderick? Who's he?"

Parker laughed, a nasty tinny sound in the helmet phones.

"He's plenty. One of *the* Brodericks, just the one that got found out. I hope we have the pleasure of bringing the rest of the clan here."

"What's wrong with them?" I asked indignantly. "I voted Latter Day Democrat myself last election. It's a pity they didn't get in."

"That's what you say, Mr. Jones. *Hey! Step lively there, sister! They ain't going to leave this ship planted here forever as a monument to your lost virtue!* No, Mr. Jones, you space officers don't know much about politics. You lose touch. Though, come to that, most people ashore don't know much, either."

"Well," I said, "I may be wrong, but it seems to me that the big strides made by the L.D.D.s in every country show that they must have their points."

"Sure, they have their points, on paper. Do you know—though I don't suppose you do—the Kremlin is even thinking of going back to their old one-party system—even if it means pulling out of the Federation. And you know what *that* means. *Step lively there, you bunt, WE'VE had enough of your low company. Somebody else can try it and see if they like it!*

"Yes," he continued, "you can learn plenty about politics in this job if you keep your eyes and ears open. And you'd be surprised *if* I told you how much connection there is between politics and crime. Ninety percent of this bunch are L.D.D.s."

"Rubbish!"

"Sure, sure. You know best, mister. Rule No. 17—never argue with ship's officers. But if Russia has the guts to throw out the L.D.D.s, I'm going there before they swamp the rest of the world. Better the dictatorship of the proletariat than being bossed by the Brodericks!"

And he started whistling, a thing that one should never do when one is wearing a spacesuit complete with helmet set.

I was no longer on duty in the air lock when the labor boarded, but I was in the lounge when William Broderick paid his respects to the captain.

He had shed his spacesuit immediately on boarding, and confronted us in all his tarnished finery. The mere fact that it was tarnished added to the man's piratical aspect, as did the sword hanging from a gold-embroidered belt. But it was one of the people with him who, at first, drew all our attention. It was—almost—Valerie Wayne. The same elegance was there, but subtly meretricious. The eyes were the same—but lacked the clear candor. The mouth was—wrong. Like her sister, Audrey Wayne was an aristocrat. A decadent one.

Valerie paled.

"Why," she gasped. "Audrey! *Audrey!*"

"If it isn't little Valerie!" said the other. "What have *you* done?"

The P.R.L. secretary ignored her twin's flippancy and walked slowly forward, almost like one in a dream.

"Audrey!" she said again.

We could see tears glistening in her eyes.

There was a little, uncomfortable silence whilst the sisters ignored everything outside the little world of each other's arms.

Plainly displeased, Broderick fidgeted. A frown darkened his coarsely handsome, blue-jowled face.

At last—"Pardon my interrupting this touching reunion," he said, "but allow me to introduce myself. I, captain, am King William the First of Ceres. We"—this time he had it right—"have decided to accompany our loyal subjects on this expedition to see for ourselves their conditions of labor. These"—he waved his hand—"are the ladies and gentlemen of my . . . I mean *our* . . . court."

Captain Wilton looked uncomfortable. How was he supposed to receive this self-styled monarch?

Kayne took the matter out of his hands.

"You," he said, "are William Broderick. And you are wearing a weapon, which is against all the regulations. This, of course, will be reported to the proper authorities. Hand it over, please."

He waited, then drew his pistol. It wasn't one of the five-hundred shot affairs that fired nice little needles coated with an anaesthetic, nonlethal compound. No. It was an old-fashioned gun firing a slug almost a half inch in diameter. Broderick looked sullen.

"Hand that toothpick over!"

The King of Ceres shrugged, then grinned.

"You never did like me, Kayne, did you?" he said. "Perhaps I shall be in a position, one day, to deal effectively with people *I* don't like. Here."

With an almost courtly air he presented the weapon, hilt first to the guard. He looked around.

"Is this the lounge? Not bad."

"You will feed here, Broderick, you and your staff, but that's all!" "But the new regulations—"

"Say that the leading hands of the labor shall mess with the officers. They don't say that they shall enjoy *all* the amenities provided for the ship's staff. Three times a day—provided, of course, that either Captain Wilton or Commander Cartwright comes along to open the door for you—you and your entourage will be released to inflict your company on us at table. And, three times a day you will be returned to your proper place—under escort."

Broderick was about to protest, then Parker created a diversion by coming in to report that all the labor—thirty men and five women—was aboard.

"Thank you, Parker. Have I your permission, captain? Good. Boys, escort the King and his Court to the Palace!"

That was the last we saw of King William and his entourage till dinner,

Meanwhile, the orbit had been plotted that would take us to 596, that lonely, jagged little world lying a little North of the Plane of the Ecliptic, and out of the main stream of the asteroids. Nobody was on the landing field to see us blast off, the last, spacesuited figure had scuttled into the now closed door to the interior hours before our sailing time.

Once again we were all at stations, once again the warning bells shrilled briefly, and then we were swinging out and away for the indium mines.

And then we had to face the ordeal of dinner with the "King" and his loyal subjects. We regretted, deeply, that we did not rank high enough to follow the Old Man's example and have our food sent to our rooms. And yet—it promised to be an experience.

Strangely enough, Cartwright made no demur when it was proposed that Broderick and Audrey Wayne sit at the Seniors' table. He realized, of course, that Valerie would want to see as much as possible of her twin, and, perhaps, he may have hoped that close contact with the criminal classes, as typified by King William I, would knock some of the nonsense out of her head.

Kayne didn't mind, as long as he was able to keep an eye on his precious charges he had no real worries. Donovan welcomed the opportunity to add to his knowledge of abnormal psychology. And I, being in a minority of one deemed it politic to make just one protest as a matter of principle, and then let nature take its course.

It was a funny meal.

One thing was clear from the outset — Audrey was dangerous. Broderick was, too, but he wasn't in the same class. He would achieve his ends with any tools or weapons that came to hand, and with a fine disregard for any code of law or ethics. But the girl would achieve ends as great, if not greater, with weapons far less obvious. It seemed indeed strange that her charm had not cheated the law of its victim. But, probably, sojourn on Ceres had sharpened her natural weapons to an edge of almost fantastic keenness.

It was the waterworks that she turned on first.

With a break in her voice she rhapsodized about how it felt to be free once more—even if it were only freedom on the end of a chain. Her voice—the voice of a consummate actress—held all the yearning in the world—all the worlds. At the other tables the junior officers and the shifty-eyed toughs turned their attention from the faded blondes of William's court to gaze—with a certain wistful wonder—at the central table.

"To travel," she said, "that is the only life for the superior person. The Golden Journey.

"How does it go?"

*"Thy merchants chase the morning down the seas—
But now they chase the very stars across the sky."*

"Hassan — " said Cartwright I slowly. "You know it?"

"Why, yes. I played in it. No," she said, before he could ask the question that was trembling on his lips. "Not Pervaneh. Not even Yasmin, though God knows I'm well enough qualified—"

"Audrey!"

Valerie's voice was sharp with distress.

"Nothing like being honest, my dear.

"No, Commander, I was just one of the dancing girls. *You* know

*"We are dark, but as the twilight,
Shooting all the sky with fire—"*

Again she paused, and regarded her sister steadily over the rim of her glass.

"If you want a Pervaneh, commander, there she is. The perfect little idealist. Always ready and willing to sacrifice her own, or anybody else's life on a matter of principle. I don't know whether to feel sorry for her or," her voice fell to almost a whisper, "to envy her.

"But 'Hassan,' commander, there is the play of plays. That last scene —Gate of the Moon, Baghdad, blazing moonlight. Can't you see it? The fantastic buildings, the guards, the merchants, and—the pilgrims.

"And the philosophy of it all, philosophy as old as Transport itself.

*"We travel not for trafficking alone—
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned,
For lust of knowing what should not be known
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand."*

She paused again.

"That applies to you, commander, doesn't it? It applies to all of you —" She swung a little in her chair, swept the unmasked battery of her glowing eyes over what had become her audience.

Did they, I wonder, linger ever so lightly on Hamilton's rapt face? Had she, already, chosen the tool with which she would work?

But Audrey Wayne swung back into Flecker's deathless lines.

"We are the pilgrims, master; we shall go

*Always a little farther—it may be
Across that last, blue mountain rimmed with snow,
Across that angry, or that shimmering sea.*

*White on a throne, or lonely in a cave,
There lives a prophet who will understand
Why men were born—but surely we are brave
Who take the Golden Road to Samarkand—"*

There was, for a little, silence. Nobody quite applauded, but I think that if anybody had started it would have burst the bulkheads.

Audrey Wayne filled her glass.

"The Golden Journey, commander," she cried. "The Golden Journey!"

Did her eyes slither past Cartwright's to meet those of the second pilot?

"The Golden Journey," replied the commander, his voice curiously flat and toneless. Then— "You will all excuse me, won't you? I have to check our orbit. Thank you for your company—and the entertainment Miss Wayne. It has indeed been an interesting experience to dine with my wife's murderer—"

"John!" cried Valerie, unheeded. "Let me know, Mr. Kayne, when you are returning these birds of prey to their nests."

And he was gone.

"The Board shall hear of this!" blustered Broderick, his hand where the hilt of his sword had been. "If these be officers and gentlemen—"

"Please." It was Audrey Wayne, her voice the voice of a rather frightened little girl. "You should have told me, Valerie. I had forgotten. One forgets so much. And *you*," there was a flash of her old manner, "wouldn't know what a gentleman is. But then, of course, kings don't have to worry about the little niceties the same as us commoners—"

Her voice broke, and she started to sob. In a flash, her sister was by her chair, comforting arms around her.

It was all very embarrassing. I was going to help Cartwright check the orbit and leave Donovan—after all, it was more in his line than mine—to pour oil on the troubled waters. But I was too late. Donovan didn't bother to trump up any excuses—he just left. And one of the seniors—and I was the only one left—had to stay in the saloon. "Mr. Kayne," said Valerie, "I know this is against your absurd regulations—but may I take my sister to my room? Thanks to Commander Cartwright's inexcusable conduct she is in no fit condition either to stay here or to be returned to her own quarters."

The way she said it, it was more of an order than a request.

Without waiting for the guard's consent, she rose to her feet, supporting her sister with her right arm. And so they stood there for a moment or so, the tall, slim figure in somber black and the other—so Else and yet so unlike—in form-revealing red.

"I'm all right now, Val. Really." The voice of a child trying to be brave.

"No. Come with me."

If Broderick wished to ape royalty, he couldn't do better than take a few lessons from Miss Valerie Wayne,

After Cartwright's exhibition of how to win friends and influence people, the rest of the evening was hardly a success. Kayne was reluctant to go to Valerie's room and tell her that it was time for her sister to be returned to her own quarters, so Broderick and his court enjoyed an extra hour or so of relative freedom. It wasn't much use to them. The people in the lounge—for the collapsible tables had been stowed away by this time—just split up into three distinct groups—ship's officers, guards and criminals. The juniors, I know, would gladly have improved their acquaintanceship with King William's ladies—but Kayne and myself took good care that they didn't.

At last—"Orders are orders," said Kayne, "and she's not going to stop in this part of the ship. I don't give a care if her sister is Secretary of the P.R.L. I don't give a care if she's —" He paused for the right word, couldn't find it, and continued— "Anyhow, Mr. Jones, I'd be pleased if you'd come along with me."

"All right. Duty is duty."

So we went along the short alleyway, and Kayne rapped on Valerie's door.

"Miss Wayne!" he called.

"Yes. Who is it?"

"Me. Kayne."

The door opened, and the two girls came out.

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Wayne, but—"

"I quite understand. The rules and regulations by which you order your life make no allowances for the finer feelings. You will raise no objections, I take it, if I accompany my sister as far as the door to the cells?"

"No, no. Of course not."

Kayne was pleased at getting off so lightly.

The girl pressed her advantage. "And I take it that it will be quite in order if my sister comes to my room for half an hour or so after every meal. It is many years since we saw each other last, and we have many intimate matters to discuss." This time Kayne hesitated ever so slightly, looked to me as though for support. I carefully avoided his glance.

"Of course," he said. "But, mind, no more than half an hour."

"We would not dream of trespassing overmuch on your generosity. Come, Audrey, let us go with Mr. Kayne. We have already disturbed the routine of this prison ship sufficiently for one day."

When we returned to the lounge, Cartwright was already there. Somebody had sent for him so that he could officiate at the acoustic lock. He carefully refrained from looking at the girls. Not that it mattered, as they looked right through him.

The prisoners were marshaled, then, and the little procession made its way through alleyways and down companionways to the prison quarters. Broderick and his staff, in all their tawdry finery, went first, then the guards in their olive drab, their paralyzer pistols at the ready. A little behind them walked the sisters—a tall, slim figure in black and a tall, slim figure in flaming red. They bore themselves like tragedy queens on the way to the guillotine. Kayne himself was their escort. I wondered whether he would have the guts to use his pistol if either of them started anything, Cartwright, too, would he use force? I glanced at his face as I walked at his side, but it told me nothing.

We reached the door.

The guards cleared a space around the funnel-shaped aperture into which the commander would whisper the magic word. Looking neither right nor left, Cartwright paced slowly forward. He bent his head slightly, for he was taller than average, and then, his lips almost touching the lips of the funnel, murmured something. Every ear among the prisoners, at least, must have been strained to catch what it was. Silently, the ponderous door swung open.

"Good-bye for now, my dear," cried Valerie Wayne. "I'll see you again tomorrow!"

Briefly, the sisters embraced, and then the slim figure in the flaming gown passed into what Kayne, but a short while before, had referred to as the Palace. And, from her bearing, it could have been one.

"All right, commander," said Kayne.

The door shut. The guards holstered their pistols.

"Come and have a drink, Peter," said Cartwright. "And you, Kayne. I think we've earned it!"

A low, malicious laugh startled us.

We turned to look at the tall, slim figure in somber black leaning against the bulkhead.

"Yes, commander, you certainly have!" said the girl. "And I wish that I had the job of naming your

poison!"

Nobody was surprised when Valerie Wayne threw over Cartwright in favor of young Hamilton. Not that anybody expected anything serious to develop from the flirtation—not as far as the girl was concerned, anyhow. But everybody was of the opinion that, this time, the commander had definitely put himself out of the running.

It all seems very trivial, no doubt, but remember that a ship is like a small village and that the average spaceman is, I think, without peer as a gossip monger. None of it malicious of course, but merely a means of lightening the tedium of the long voyages.

But we had far more to concern us than the purely personal affairs of our shipmates.

For, out of the star-specked blackness of the Belt loomed another star, a little red star flashing with monotonous regularity. And it flashed in code—numeral five, numeral nine, numeral six. The beacon of the indium mines.

Then came the rather ticklish job of throwing ourselves into an orbit around the little, jagged chunk of metallic ore. A landing, of course, was possible, but it would have been extremely imprudent to essay the feat in a vessel of *Thunderbird's* tonnage. The only level patches on 596—and the configuration of the terrain had not been improved by continuous blasting since the last survey—didn't appear to be much larger than a pocket handkerchief.

This contingency, however, had been provided for in the refit before sailing. The cradle in which, normally, our Number 2 boat rested had been greatly enlarged, and now carried a big tender. This would ferry the labor from the ship to the mines and would, of course, act as an ore lighter.

Broderick, of course, refused to take any interest in the work of his subjects, although the lords and gentlemen of his court shed their robes of office and appeared in the spacesuits of charge hands.

It was soon apparent that the loading was not going to be a short job. The tender had to make two trips each morning—even here, where there was neither day nor night, the new agreement between the Earth government and the colonists called for an eight-hour day—once with the explosives which had been manufactured in the auxiliary converter, and then a second trip with the labor. And then—but I could spend hours on a catalogue of the many and ingenious time wasting devices employed by the convicts.

We took it in turns operating the tender.

And after a wearing day at the controls of the little craft, it was galling to have to have to eat our evening meal in the company of the glorified foremen whose errand boys we had, in effect, become.

Cartwright no longer came into the saloon for his meals.

As I was now the senior at the table, Hamilton asked if he could make up the number. It was weak of me, perhaps, but I gave my consent. Perhaps it was because I could keep a better watch on developments between him and Valerie Wayne. Frankly, the whole business had me puzzled. No observer at our table could have told which of the twins was his inamorata. I doubted if he knew himself.

Perhaps only one man of the entire ship's company was happy. That was Captain Wilton. Leaving *Thunderbird* in the capable hands of his second in command, he would range back and forth along the Belt in one of the lifeboats, taking with him two of the cadets. He had often advanced the theory that the planet which, eons ago, had scattered its wreckage between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter had been the cradle of all life in the System. And now he was hurtling happily from one insignificant little piece of rock to the next on his endless, but so far unsuccessful, search for the merest thumbprint of animate Nature.

One evening, after dinner, I was in Cartwright's room.

"I wish they'd hurry up with the loading," complained the commander bitterly. "Kayne says that this is the slowest he's ever seen 'em."

I sympathized with his desire. The condition of weightlessness, consequent upon our being in a free fall around the indium asteroid, had long since lost the charm of novelty.

"You'd think they'd want to get away themselves," I said. "Surely even they can't like having to lash themselves to their chairs, and having every meal out of a bottle."

"Just the kind of thing that would appeal to *them*," said the commander moodily. "If you expect to find any human emotion among that bunch of moral lepers, you're—"

The telephone from control to Cartwright's room buzzed insistently.

"Hello . . . Speaking . . . *What?*" His face paled under its tan. "Turn on the gas, man ! ... You have?" He turned to me.

"Trouble in the prisoners' quarters. Turn on the snooper, will you?"

I went to the switch of the speaker on his bulkhead. There was one of these in control, one in the captain's room, and one in Cartwright's. Only the one in the control room was kept running continuously. At the other end of the wiring was a set of microphones distributed at secret, strategic points in the prison accommodation.

Hand over the switch, I hesitated. There was a new note in Cartwright's voice, a new expression on his face. , Before they had been the voice and face of a senior officer worried, but not too badly, over the safety of his ship. I had always thought that *Thunderbird* came first, always would come first, in his affections. I saw that I was mistaken.

"*She's* down there? . . . But how? . . . Oh . . . And *you've* known about this all the time ... I'll break you for this, Hamilton . . . Raise as many people as you can. Arm them. And get down to that Hell's kitchen as quick as you can!" Then, as an afterthought, "Leave one of the cadets in control."

By this time the speaker was switched on.

From it came gusts of coarse laughter, angry voices.

We heard Broderick say—"You little spy. Come here snooping for that supercilious boy friend of yours, I suppose? What shall we do with her, boys?"

"What does it matter, your majesty?" roared somebody. "The worst they can do to us is sentence us to life on Ceres!"

Then another voice, Valerie's. "You fool! Can't you see that I've come down here to help you? Get hold of Audrey—she'll tell you!"

"Take this!" Cartwright had fished two pistols from a drawer, one of which he kept himself. "And hurry!"

The most nightmarish experience possible in waking life is, I think, trying to get somewhere in a hurry inside a spaceship in a free fall. A spaceman has to be reasonably adept at this art but—even so—there is never sufficient practice to attain proficiency. And when there's a very real sense of urgency it is like a child's toy balloon being chased by somebody with a pin.

We met the others in the lounge —Hamilton, Donovan, the third pilot, the engineer, three of the cadets.

"The guards, sir," gasped Hamilton, swimming towards us. They're drunk, I think. We can't wake them."

Kayne and his men were lolling in their chairs. Floating in their vicinity, like a kind of alcoholic aura, were a dozen or so empty drinking bottles.

"Never mind them. I'll break them—too!"

The second pilot recoiled from the mask of fury turned upon him by the commander. I couldn't help noticing that he brought up the rear of the little procession that was floating with grotesque attempts at speed, down to the prison quarters.

At last—and it seemed an age—we reached the door.

It's funny how, even on the most dreadful occasions, one's mind will notice the little things. I had always wondered what the word was. Cartwright threw secrecy to the winds. "Open, Sesame!" he almost shouted into the funnel of the lock. "Open, Sesame!"

Our guns were ready, we expected some opposition.

But there was none.

Here, in what had been passenger quarters, there were guide rails along the alleyway. Led by the commander, we began to pull ourselves along with relative rapidity.

Then a voice, Valerie's voice, made me turn.

"Jim! Jim! What are they doing to my sister? What are they doing to Audrey?"

"Sorry, my dear," I heard Hamilton say. He raised his pistol and shot the girl. Without releasing his pressure on the trigger, he swung the gun, and we heard the hissing of its continuous discharge as a hail of the little, anaesthetic needles swept along the alleyway. I felt a brief, pricking sensation as the tiny missiles found face, and neck, and hands I tried to raise my own pistol to return Hamilton's fire, but it was too much trouble. Everything was too much trouble.

"Mr. J. Hamilton . . ." I was mumbling to myself. "J for Judas . . . Laugh ... It's funny ... very —"

We had time to dope things out aboard the tender.

Yes, that's where we found ourselves—all of us, guards and crew.

All but the commander, Valerie and, of course, Hamilton. And we tried hard to think of soft words to turn away Captain Wilton's righteous wrath when he returned from his bug-hunting expedition in No. 2 Boat. We could have got in contact by radio, but ours, needless to say, had been effectively sabotaged. So, we found on his return, was the Old Man's. I had misjudged friend Hamilton in more ways than one. I had taken his enthusiastic, personal checking of the captain's radio equipment as a manifestation of the old we'll all-come-back-next-trip-sir spirit.

But we weren't too badly off—yet.

We had air, and food, and water. We had enough fuel to keep us going with heat and light for a considerable time—we had enough, in fact, to blast us off from the barren surface of 596. But we hadn't enough to take us anywhere. Except Ceres. And after our experience of the conduct of the aristocracy of that pleasant little world, we weren't exactly anxious to rub shoulders with its proletariat.

No, all we could do was sit tight and await the coming of some kind of rescue ship. We knew that when *Thunderbird* was reported missing, as she surely would be, the indium asteroid would be the obvious place to commence a search.

The worst of it was that the tender had been fitted with what was, in effect, only a large scale lifeboat converter. Had it boasted one of the pattern supplied to the big ships, we could have fed literally *anything* into it. But, at that time, the rocket motors of small craft were dependent for fuel on the converters of their parent ships.

There was one hope—that when the Old Man returned we should be able to pool resources and scrape up enough fuel to send the lifeboat clear to Mars. But he, as had been his practice ever since he started his one-man survey of the Belt, returned with the merest sliver of unstable iron in his magazine.

The only thing that he had plenty of was bad language.

When the tumult and the shouting had died he held a conference. Regarding our present circumstances, the general outcome of it all was as I have outlined it above. There was nothing to do but sit down and wait for help. Regarding what had happened in the past—well, all of us proved remarkably adept at putting two and two together to make at least four—and this when the problem in human mathematics had worked itself out long since.

It was plain to us now that the twins had used the daily sessions in Valerie's room to change their clothing. This would have been obvious—but for one thing. It was impossible to associate Valerie Wayne with anything of a criminal character. Even now, excuses in plenty were forthcoming to excuse her conduct. As Secretary of the P.R.L. she wished, naturally, to live among the convicts as one of themselves. It was the only way to learn anything about them. It never occurred to the little fool that she was playing with the worst kind of fire, and that whilst she was earnestly engaged in taking mental notes, her precious twin had marked down her prey, and was doing her best to seduce him from the line of duty.

But what had Hamilton to gain?

Plenty.

First of all, Audrey Wayne herself. And then, assuming that, as we thought at the time, Broderick intended to embark on a career of piracy, as the only astronaut in the party he would attain considerable rank and influence. Lastly—and this, knowing the man, is not to be dismissed lightly—he would have an unparalleled opportunity of playing with his dangerous toys.

Our conclusions were wrong in some things, but, as we were to discover later, we had all been remarkably wise.

After the event.

John Cartwright's awakening wasn't such a leisurely affair as ours had been.

What brought him around was the fact that somebody was methodically slapping his face—a crude but effective means of restoring the victims of the paralyzer pistol to full consciousness.

He put up his hand to ward off the blows. That is—he tried to. It was then that he discovered that he was lashed hand and foot to a chair.

No, he didn't say—"Where am I?"

On opening his eyes he saw that he was in the captain's room. And that sense possessed by all spacemen told him at once that *Thunder bird* was no longer at rest, that she was going somewhere—fast.

He looked around, as far as his bonds would allow him. Not far away, in another chair, was Valerie Wayne. She was conscious. Her eyes met his. Under happier circumstances that glance would have made him almost delirious with joy. For, in addition to an expression of most heartfelt apology, it told him that he, John Cartwright, was an object of great concern to the girl. As she was tied as efficiently as he was himself there wasn't much she could do about it.

A splendid figure in his scarlet, gold-braided coat and white breeches, Broderick was lounging in the captain's easy-chair.

"You may go now," he said. "We will ring if we want you."

"O.K., boss. Sorry. Your majesty."

There was the sound of a door closing behind the prisoners as whoever had done the face slapping departed.

Broderick sat on his shoulder blades and lit a cigarette.

"Now we can let our hair down," he said. "I feel, commander, that I owe you an explanation—"

"You must be psychic," said Cartwright. "Where's that young swine, Hamilton?"

"Captain—or should one say 'admiral?'—Hamilton is now at the controls. Strange though it may appear, he has evinced no desire to meet either you or Miss Wayne. On the contrary, in fact.

"Where are the others?"

"All safe on 596. Even Kayne. We wished to make him walk the plank—in other words to stroll out through the air lock without a spacesuit. But the chief of our intelligence—your sister, my dear—dissuaded us. I shall have to do something about that girl. She's far too humane. It must be love."

"You see?" said the girl, eagerly. "She's not bad, really. It is only exile to Ceres that has—"

"Rubbish, my dear," interrupted the self-styled monarch. "She's tarred with the same brush as the rest of us. But let's get on with the washing.

"You may think yourself hard done by, commander, but all this is the result of long months of planning. There was a certain element of luck involved—your Mr. Hamilton was a gift from the gods. But Miss Wayne—she's here because *we* wished it. She had to be here so that we get her sister into the *respectable* part of the ship."

"*You!*" flared the girl. "I was sent on this trip by the P.R.L.!"

"I know, my dear, I know. And what is the P.R.L.? One of the many organs of the Broderick clan. Not openly, of course. But the editors of the *Latter Day Democrat* newspapers have had their orders to give you people a favorable write-up, you have been given L.D.D. time over the air. You wouldn't know, of course, that the majority of your members are also *Latter Day Democrats*. But I can assure you that they are."

"And all this," said Cartwright scornfully, "to get William Broderick out of jail!"

Broderick laughed easily.

"I fancy myself, commander, but not that much. No, there's far more at stake than my comfort. But let me continue.

"*Charon*, as you know, cracked up on sailing. That was sabotage. We wanted to get a ship with

inexperienced officers in her place. The cylinders of anaesthetic gas were not fitted. When they finally came, it was too late to make a test. They contained, of course, just ordinary atmosphere under pressure. So far, so good. But, now, we were dealing not with machinery, but with incalculable human beings.

"That's where your sister came in, Miss Wayne. A gifted and talented girl. She knew you—better, perhaps, than you know her. She said that you were sure to fall for her scheme of an exchange of identities. She let you suggest it, let herself be argued into it.

"And whilst you were slumming, seeing how the poor live, she'd got her claws into our Mr. Hamilton. She was sure that she'd be able to find one junior officer—or even a senior—that she could use. She was right—and she sure picked a beauty. An astronaut *and* an armaments expert.

"She thought it advisable that the big scene should be staged on one of the days when you were your yourself in your own quarters, writing up your notes. One reason was that she, a trained actress, could put a far better show over the air than an amateur. The other—well, she was afraid that some of the boys, in their enthusiasm, might carry things a little too far.

"Hamilton, of course, was in the know. It was he who put knockout drops in the guards' beer."

"But what do you hope to get out of it?"

"We have nothing to lose. The worst that can happen to us is exile to Ceres. And we shall, at least, have had a run for our money. But if things go well, we shall gain plenty.

"Do you know where we're bound now? Mars. Oh, we're not invading, although we could, almost, do so. No, we're just threatening. With that nice little auxiliary converter of yours we're going to make a pile of atomic explosives and bomb the power station, unless our terms are met. And you know what *that* means. Everything stops on Mars once the first bombs connect at Port Gregory. Transport, light, heat, and the compressors which maintain a breathable atmosphere in the cities. The Earth government will have to come to terms—especially with the L.D.D.s bringing pressure to bear."

"You can't do it," said Cartwright flatly. "Accurate bombing will be impossible unless you bring the ship right down. And that's just absurd."

"But we're using Mr. Hamilton's magnetic torpedoes. It's an atomic power station, isn't it? Well, we can't miss. From *any* range.

"But the terms.

"First—recognition of Ceres as a sovereign state.

"Second—the right to own, build, and operate spaceships.

"Third—the unsterilization of myself and all my people.

"Don't you see what it will mean? It will mean the colonization of the Belt by a tough breed of men and women. It will mean, ultimately, that Man's frontiers will be pushed forward far farther and faster than they will be under our present, namby pamby rulers. It will mean, I think, war and piracy among the stars—but that, with an expanding culture, is good. The race can't expand properly when it's composed of white rabbits. Read your history. Consider the big men who pushed out from the Old World to the East and the West. Were they explorers or slavers, or pirates? All three, I guess."

"Men against the stars," said Cartwright. "*Real* men. If they came any more real, they'd be swinging from trees with the same furry tails as our first, hairy parents. I've been with *real* men clear out to Pluto. *Men*, I tell you, not jailbirds. And those same men would have sold their souls for a ship capable of making Alpha Centauri!"

"You supercilious—!" exploded Broderick.

Then the angry flush left his face, and he resumed.

"I had hoped to have you with us. But I see that you've sold your soul to the little white rabbits. And so you and Miss Wayne come along with us in your original capacity. As ballast. I beg your pardon. Hostages, I mean."

He pressed the button by his side.

"Guards! You may return the prisoners to their quarters!"

The worst part of the period of imprisonment was the uncertainty. Broderick—whether it was on account of Audrey Wayne's influence, or because of a primitive desire to make public sport of his

captives, is not known—had them at his table with every meal. And it is certain that the strained relations existing between the commander and his erstwhile subordinate must have been exquisitely funny—provided that one had the right sense of humor.

The harrowing uncertainty filled the time between meals. "As ballast," Broderick had said. As *ballast*. So it was with acute anxiety that both Valerie and Cartwright awaited the call to table. Suppose they took their place at Broderick's board—and there was a vacant chair? He had wanted, they knew, to make Kayne "walk the plank."

Meanwhile, the automatic machinery of the ship continued its many and varied functions, oblivious of the change of masters. In odd corners things clicked, and ticked, and traced intricate graphs on paper-covered drums. In the Radio Office, the long "toilet roll" unwound, sometimes fast when the ether was full of messages, sometimes slowly. Summaries of interplanetary news were there, personal messages to *Thunderbird's* crew—which they would never receive—Notices to Astronauts. Orbits of any new navigational dangers were there, comets and meteors, all manner of cosmic debris, and the precalculated courses of all shipping in Space.

Thunderchild cleared from Port Gregory for Port Lasalle, Ganymede. *Thunderchild* roared up from the desert landing field, and swung in a great arc north of the Plane of the Ecliptic, over the Belt, for the Moons of Jupiter. Had she sailed a little earlier she might have seen the little red flashing beacon, endlessly sending out the numeral 596.

Aboard her sister ship the traitorous navigator skimmed through his Notices to Astronauts. *Just a few thousand miles to port, he thought, and we shall see her. Why not test the torpedo on a moving target? It's too easy lobbing 'em at a stationary power station. I must put it to Broderick—*

So it was that, a few nights later, Cartwright and Valerie were surprised at being escorted not to their quarters, but to the control room, after dinner. Hamilton fidgeted nervously until they were lashed into chairs. Here, in what had been the commander's holy of holies, he was far less sure of himself than he was at table. But he took hold of himself. Even here, he had the backing of Audrey, and Broderick, and four of the latter's bullies. "*Thunderchild*—I admire your system of nomenclature for the ships on the Jovian run. That reminds me, I must have this old scow"—Cartwright was pleased to see that Hamilton winced—"rechristened *Revenge*. But where was I? Oh, yes. *Thunderchild* is due to pass this way very shortly. And our Captain Hamilton asked me if he could try his torpedo on a moving target. You are familiar with its operation, I take it?"

"Yes, Broderick," said the commander. "Too familiar."

"You most certainly are," said the King of Ceres, a little childishly. "But we will cure that. "Hamilton! Is all ready?"

"Yes. A temporary launching rack has been rigged in the starboard air lock. The firing switch is here."

He lightly touched a new and somewhat crude looking little lever, which looked rather incongruous among its highly polished neighbors. Broderick frowned at the second omission of his rank and title, but said nothing. His look conveyed that Hamilton was soon to get what was coming to him.

They picked up *Thunderchild* almost before the screens heralded her approach. Leaning back in their chairs and looking up, and a little to starboard, they could see her bearing down on them like a bolt from the hand of Jove himself, a strange, rapidly waxing star among the stars.

Cartwright could imagine well how things were aboard the other ship. The officers would be gathered in control, discussing the strange vessel that was bearing down on them from their zenith. They would decide, he thought, that, for once, the routing officers had slipped up badly.

The most fantastic thing of all, he said later, was the thought that *Thunderbird's* up was *Thunderchild's* down—for the acceleration in both vessels would make the direction *down* exactly opposite to that of the line of flight.

Think of it, Cartwright told himself. There, above my head, are people walking and talking with their feet in the air

Perhaps they were having an after-dinner dance aboard the other ship. The thought of the upside-down couples circulating on the topsy-turvy floor almost made him smile. Almost. For the thought of what was going to happen to those same people in a very short time was far from funny.

For the hundredth time he strained at his bonds. But the man who had lashed him to the chair knew his job.

Hamilton's hand was poised over the firing key.

"Hamilton," said Cartwright in a low, tense voice, "do you realize what you're doing? This is sheer, wanton murder. To think that a swine like you ever wore the black and gold!"

"I know what I'm doing," said the renegade. I can just imagine the superior smile with which he said it. "I'm firing far too early, really. In actual practice I'd allow far less deflection. But I want to demonstrate that my torpedo can't miss—not even when the target has ample time to get clear. There's no escape."

He cut *Thunderbird's* drive, so that she was falling free towards her sister ship, her magnetic fields at a minimum.

"Fire!" he said.

He pressed the key.

"This is where we start getting our own back!" snarled Broderick.

"Hamilton!" said the commander. There was a world of contempt in his voice.

Slumped in her chair, Valerie Wayne was sobbing bitterly.

Then, through the starboard ports, they saw the projectile. It must have come round in a great, lazy arc, and now it was speeding up and away, with unerring aim, towards its victim. It looked, they said afterwards, like a little rocket ship. Just a model, a toy. A devil's toy.

Audrey Wayne looked at the two prisoners, then at Hamilton.

"Jim," she said, "this has gone far enough, I think."

"Yes. Too far."

"And little Audrey laughed and laughed," said the girl, "because she knew it wasn't loaded."

"Yes," said Hamilton, "there's no charge in it. Just a harmless flare so we can see when it strikes. And the plastic of which it's made is too soft and brittle to penetrate butter,"

"And the cream of the joke," put in Broderick, "is that it *is* loaded. After you'd set the beastly thing up in the air lock and come forward, one of my men slipped in a good, hearty charge. I know nothing about these matters, but I should imagine that it's sufficient to blow a young planet to smithereens!"

Hamilton, they say, was like a man paralyzed. With no acceleration to play the role of gravity, and with no bonds to hold him down, he couldn't slump in his chair. But he did his best. He looked appealingly at Cartwright as though for help, although what aid he really expected from his bound and captive commander is a matter for conjecture.

Cartwright thought hard. There must be a way, he knew. There *was* a way, if he could only think of it. He toyed with the idea of cramming on power and chasing the rocket projectile. But that wasn't very practicable — even assuming that Broderick would allow Hamilton to do it. But wait!

"If that charge is as big as you say, Broderick," he remarked, "this section of space is going to be a little hell of atomic fire and flying fragments. And I calculate"—he cocked his eye aloft—"that we shall be just about abeam of *Thunderchild* when the torpedo hits her."

"Why should *you* worry?" sneered the little king. "I always thought that in your officers' code, death came before dishonor. But I guess that, at bottom, you're just like the rest of us, your own skin comes first."

"But is that true, Hamilton? Shall we be within the danger area when your toy explodes?"

"Yes. I guess so."

"Then switch on the power. Get us out of here before the blasted thing goes up. Hurry!"

Hamilton shot a glance at Cartwright. He knew.

He should have thought of it himself, but the realization of the vile, hopelessly incriminating trick that

had been played on him had, momentarily, driven all else from his mind.

Recklessly, he punched buttons and pulled down levers. The violent acceleration pulled those who were seated deep into their chairs, flattened those standing to the deck. It would have been almost impossible for the second pilot to cut the drive now, even if he had wished. It would have taken long, agonizing minutes for him to have lifted even a finger against the giant's pull of pseudogravity.

In terms of distance, the torpedo must have been midway between the two ships. In terms of magnetic attraction, *Thunderchild* was having it all her own way—until *Thunderbird's* flared into violent life. Then—it was a tug of war between the ships, with *Thunderchild* the preordained loser.

When any kind of atomic motor begins to function there is, at first, an uncontrollable surge of free magnitrons. For some reason, not yet explained, those with red polarity flow, along the ship's structure, away from the converter. Those with blue polarity stay put. The result is a magnetic field of almost immeasurable intensity, strong enough, to quote the spaceman's hyperbole, to pull an asteroid out of its orbit. Strong enough, in all certainty, to pull a little Mumetal needle away from any previous allegiance, the Law of Inverse Squares notwithstanding.

All this the commander had realized.

Death before dishonor.

As Broderick had said it—a trite phrase, almost cheaply humorous in its implications. And yet—it has only been its use by those who have had no intention of living up to it that has brought it into disrepute.

Death before dishonor.

Whose impending doom, I often wonder, bulked biggest in his eyes? Valerie Wayne's — or *Thunderbird's*?

Cartwright could never be sure, but he thought that *Thunderbird* actually overhauled and passed the torpedo. He saw something flicker past the control viewports, something like a little ship, with a fiery tail, going the same way on a roughly parallel orbit. Roughly parallel, I say, for, a few seconds later, the missile struck,

A little aft of amidships it must have been. Had it been forward of the hold, there would have been no survivors. But the cargo took some of the force of the explosion, and the tongues of atomic fire that licked through compartments and along alleyways didn't quite reach the control room.

It has often been said that terrible disasters are far more spectacular to the onlooker than the participator. So it was in *Thunderbird's* case. *Thunderchild's* officers, peering intently through their glasses at the other ship—by this time they had recognized her—saw her blossom, suddenly into a great flower of flame. It was a sight never to be forgotten, almost, as one of them said, like having a ringside seat at a Nova.

But *Thunderbird's* personnel saw none of this. It is indeed doubtful whether any of them felt anything, even. Those in control felt nothing. The shock was too dreadful, too sudden, to register. The freakish feature of the whole business is that they survived it.

When they recovered consciousness, they found themselves in a little world—a world spinning lazily on its axis. All around them, as seen through the ports, was a cloud of debris, not all of it inorganic. Either the bulkheads or the emergency doors — which had closed automatically—must have been ruptured, for a thin, shrill whistle of escaping air formed an inescapable background to every thought, word or action.

Broderick was the first completely to recover. Gingerly, he extricated himself from the tangle of arms, legs and bodies that hung in the approximate center of gravity of the compartment. He looked "down" at Hamilton and the prisoners, still in their chairs. At some time the second pilot must have snapped his safety belt into place.

"You knew," he said at last.

"You must have known. I am King for but a little longer, but I still hold the power of life and death—"

He tugged at the holster at his belt, pulled out an old-fashioned pistol that was the mate of Kayne's. Or, perhaps, it was Kayne's.

Unsteadily, he leveled the weapon, squinted along the sights. Hamilton made no attempt to save himself. Perhaps he was still too dazed. Perhaps he just didn't care. Perhaps he saw, in the vengeful Broderick, the fate that he so richly deserved.

"Go on," he whispered. "Get it over with!"

"Die, double traitor!"

Broderick pulled the trigger, but a split second before the shot rang out, a hurtling form knocked him to one side. He missed. The recoil threw him back to fetch up with an audible thud against the big, round port right in the ship's nose. The heavy slug spanged and whined around the compartment until, at last, a cry told that it had found a billet in one of the guards.

Broderick fired again. A split second later, another shot rang out. Where the king's face had been was an obscene, bloody mask. But he hadn't missed with his last shot. Hamilton, drawing an outlandish looking weapon of his own manufacture from a secret shoulder holster, had been too late to save Audrey Wayne. She floated motionless, a dark wet satin spreading across the front of her scarlet dress.

"Audrey!" cried Hamilton.

Then again—"Audrey!"

He released himself from his chair, and drifted "up" to where' the girl's body hung suspended a the center of gravity. He made to, draw her to him, but one of the surviving guards, actuated by the devil knows what brutal motive, snatched her from him, the impetus imparted by his pull sending her crashing against the control board.

Then the second pilot went berserk.

His gun came out again, and for long minutes the compartment echoed and re-echoed with the thunder of his fire. It was like, the commander said afterwards, a barracuda loose in a goldfish bowl. The guards tried clumsily to escape, but, with their untrained muscles all they accomplished were futile flounderings. The last man was screaming with terror when Hamilton finally finished him. It all took so long because the second pilot hadn't been shooting to kill.

Then he went to the prisoners. "Have you a knife?" he asked.

"No. But what's wrong with Broderick's sword?"

"Of course." He went to get the weapon, then returned. "The thing was some use after all—" he said. Then—"The spacesuits are in the locker. I saw *Thunderchild* cut her drive, so I suppose she's turned and is coming back as hard as she can. You'll have the air tanks of the other six suits, so you should last out comfortably."

"But what about you?"

"No. After all, this was *my* ship when I lost her. And you and Valerie might need that extra air yet; it'll take a long time for *Thunderchild* to decelerate and start coming back after she has turned."

Cartwright helped Valerie into her suit. There was need for haste. The air was getting very thin. He shrugged himself into his own.

Hamilton was speaking again.

"The Golden Journey—" he said. "I thought that this was to be the Golden Journey for me, but it's better the way it is. But this can be the Golden Journey for you and Cartwright, Valerie. You've got each other, and you've got a common cause to fight for, now. Here!"

He gave the girl a little, black notebook.

"Fight the Brodericks for all you're worth. Both of you. It's all in here. A tale of bribery, corruption, and crime. Their dope rings to get control of powerful men, either directly or through their wives. That should interest *you*, Cartwright—"

He was gasping a little for breath. Audrey Wayne moaned and stirred.

"Jim— Jim— Where are you? It's dark—"

"Here. I'm here, darling. Cartwright, Valerie, give me a hand to get a spacesuit on her!"

"No. It's too ... late— And I don't want to die"—the ghost of a smile played across her lips—"in prison. Is Val here? Look after her . . . commander. But what ... is that ? A . . . bell? How ... strange—"

At the finish, her voice came strong and clear.

*"And softly through the twilight beat the bells
Along the golden road to—"*

And that was all.

"Audrey!" cried Hamilton. He turned a tear-stained face to the others. "It was cruel," he said. "She shouldn't have come back for just a little while like that—"

And before Cartwright and the girl could put into effect their plan of forcing him into a suit, he turned his pistol on himself and blew a gaping hole in his chest.

Valerie and the commander snapped tight the visors of their helmets and, hand in hand, awaited the coming of *Thunderchild*.

For them, the Golden Journey was just beginning.

THE END