

Only sheer curiosity impels the interest of the public today, in talk of stations in space and rocket trips to the moon and planets. They are interested more in a thrilling newspaper story than the real potentialities of space travel. But someday, the worlds beyond our atmospheric envelope will be the new frontier; new life, new opportunity, new advancement for mankind will be obtained by men and women with courage and scientific ability. This inspiring saga, which combines new scientific ideas with vivid human situations, foretells the hardships, romance, and achievements of future, space pioneers.

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(Illustrations by Thomas O'Reily)

BEYOND WHERE EARTH'S cities loom, crickets still chirp hauntingly at night in the open countryside. No one with a love of Nature would ever want that changed.

The far stars still look the same, too; though Man, encouraged by other triumphs, now dares to believe that he will reach even them, some day. Mars still seems the same red spark in the distance, and Venus, though no longer uninhabited, remains the silver speck that attends the sun at dusk or dawn, on Earth.

But the nearer sky is not quite as it was in the past. The space ships leave their blue-white trails of nuclear fury. The Moon is flecked with pale dots—the airdromes of mining and experiment stations, and of Cyclopean factories, where many of the craft for the conquest of the void are made.

And close around Earth itself the orbiters move swiftly, glowing. They are little, artificial satellites that were not there to be seen, before. They serve many purposes—television-relay, weather observation and control, the marking of the hour by their passage at zenith, the guarding of the world against the danger of warfare which once plagued the nations.

Each of these tiny satellites has a history, which can be simple and routine, or grandiose—full of the drama of soaring plan and chance-taking, death, tragedy, and the magnificence of something new and wonderful achieved, thus renewing faith in often errant human drive and vision, against the background of gigantic forces which Man has begun to wield.

Of all of these small moons, there is one that is a little larger than most, and of a strange elongated shape. It has circled the Earth for more years than most, too. But at a two-thousand-mile distance, it is not the nearest nor the farthest away. It is not the brightest nor the gaudiest—the light it reflects from the sun is soft and pearly. It is not necessarily the most useful of the orbiters. But it is certainly the best known.

Its charm is many-sided. It was, for instance, the *original* of several things. On its surface was built what is still the greatest astronomical observatory to benefit from the clarity of observation of the universe, afforded by a lack of atmosphere. But the thoughtful, quiet mood represented here—reaching hungrily for the utter limits of space—is in contra with this orbiter's other departments.

For example, within its interior is a great chamber, given over to the carnival spirit, where weird amusement devices, made possible by the condition of minute gravity, entertain hordes of visitors with fantastic sensations of rising and falling and floating.

Fun and laughter are part of romance, of course. But romance often has a more serious, poetic face. And in romance lies this satellite's special fame.

For on its surface is the greatest and most talked-of and glamorized of the resort hotels that are off the Earth but still within easy reach. There is a regular service of passenger rockets. And here is where those who perhaps have never been in space before come for their first acquaintance with the larger playground of Man.

Front the splendid Earthview Room, sealed and pressurized, honeymooners look for the first time upon their home-planet huge, blue-green, murky, beautiful, though more than a little terrifying:. They talk, they kiss, they laugh shakily. Their dreams soar. Maybe they will become part of great triumphs, too.

Even the old and the spent look around them in wonder, at strange carvings and flowers and plants, and at weird effects of beauty, impossible to achieve under terrestrial conditions. Here, then, is the gateway to the Universe, and the Outward Reaching.

Of course many of the experienced adventurers, the spacemen, stop on this tiny satellite, too. Some, of course, are hired as entertainers; but others have a real sentiment and memory for the place. All are set apart from the other visitors. For they are at home in their surroundings. Their pleasure is more subdued. They come, they go.

Usually they leave stories behind them—old and new, about how Earth's reach across the solar system has already gone as far as it has; about danger and opportunity, and the terrible madness of nostalgia that can afflict men in deep space. How the torrid, smothering atmosphere of Venus may one day be completely, cleared of poisons by the great chemical machines, the oxygen freed from the carbon dioxide, making of this planet a true, verdant twin of Earth. How quiet is the dark face of Mercury, and how like a furnace its sunward side. How Jupiter's mighty gravity must still be avoided when visiting its cold moons, for ships have been lost there ...

Yes, there are many tales told on this unique moonlet of Terra. They repel the timid, and urge the bold toward the future. But among these accounts—not all of them entirely true, of course—there are few better known than the story of Nils Tolburt, the rough, young spaceman, and his love for things unlike himself and the strange workings of Chance. All of the important points of the story are authentic.

IT BEGAN ON MARS years ago, not long after the earliest interplanetary venturings. Nils Tolburt's father was one of the first people to arrive on the Red Planet. Some thought it cruel that he took his small son with him. But rugged and eager kids are often hard indeed to leave behind.

Mars was novel and wonderful for those first few hundred adventurers, then. It bore the marks of a dead culture and race not human—that had perished in violence. With whom those beings had battled was not at once apparent. Then farther-winging spacecraft brought back the probable answer. The scattered asteroids had definitely been one planet, perhaps sixty million years ago. The lethal fruit of Martian technology then advanced beyond anything we yet know—had apparently been the agent that had smashed it to fragments. Thus, two great peoples had destroyed each other, the Martians dying less spectacularly but no less surely.

Skip onward a number of years. Nils Tolburt was now a grown man. He had already been out to the asteroids, once. But now he'd been back on Mars for some time, following the profession that was best for one of his background and training. He was a relic hunter. He had two companions, older and rougher than himself, and typical of any frontier, anywhere—"Hellas" Joe Tomkins and Nick Scillieri.

One day they came up out of the excavations where, as usual, they had been sifting red dust for trinkets and ceramics eons old. Of course they followed the custom that is ancient among men who work long in their own company, and in a desolate scene. They loaded an atoplane as battered as their airhoods, and flew back across the blue-green thickets of Syrtis Major to the domed settlement called Vananis, to sell their loot and have themselves a time.

Again an antique habit among rough, carefree men was honored—with the usual bad result for young Tolburt. By sundown he fingered the unfortunate dice in his sidepocket, and laughed without regret. Chance was his matron saint, as it must be for those whose goal is only a blurred and rosy vagueness, of a substance that cannot be recognized until it is seen. For how, when you dig in the wreckage of civilizations that surpassed your own, can you ever tell what wonders you may find?

"I'm sick of you guys and your gambling luck!" Nils Tolburt grumbled genially. "Good thing I always keep a little money aside. I've had enough of Mars—I'm going out to try the belt—the asteroids—again."

"Sure, kid we'll think about that tomorrow," said Hellas Joe Tomkins. . . . "Hey! . . . What's this?"

Encroaching culture spoiling a man's country? Can it be? . . . Could I treat you fellas to a show, maybe?"

They were face to face with an inevitable pattern of history—that wherever the masculine gender ventures, woman follows sooner or later. And, being human ourselves, can we not excuse this trio for banal reactions that are ageless? Perhaps we must.

Nick Scillieri grinned a frog grin. He read slowly from the crude and garishly lighted marquee, to emphasize relish and humor: "Margaret Tubman's Dancing Troupe. Starring Vivien Marley ..." Um-m, real girls! You spoke first—buy us those tickets, Joe!"

Vivien Marley was small and brunette, and very pretty. She danced on points, frilly ballet skirt bobbing. Sometimes she sang, too. And for young Nils Tolburt, she was not just a Name in Lights; she was all of the soft, lovely, whimsical things of Earth, that he scarcely remembered or had never known, and hardly knew he had missed in the life that was in his blood and bone.

What he felt was not desire, or even hope. One does not hope to possess an impish goddess from beyond one's ken ... He did not see how the two-fifths-of-earth-norm gravity sometimes made her clumsy. He only gawked like a yokel in appreciation that went considerably sentimental, as he knew it did. His acquaintance with femininity was very slight.

Others gawked too, not all of them in the same way. Some leered and cheered, and she laughed, and blew them all kisses. The troupe to which she belonged had come to this trading town to sell them a little of the gentler life which they all lacked.

Hellas Joe Tomkins saw Nils' expression, and taunted in his ear, "Easy, son. Powder-puffs and hard space can't mix. You're going back to the asteroids, remember? This fluffy little devil would wilt out there in a minute. Now take Nancy Peters homely, but more your type."

Tolburt was naïve in some respects, but no fool. He growled lightly, smiling. "Hell with you, Joe. Your mind is dim. I just want to look. And I'm coming back to see the show again tomorrow night."

So it was. And so, beyond all foresight, the miracle and tragedy happened. It was Chance, his saint or devil, working with Circumstance. Tolburt had a good head, but he didn't realize that in feminine eyes he was the most interesting young man around.

He was tall, the way they grow on Mars, where the slight gravity inhibits the lengthening of bones less than on Earth. His body and chin were strong. His cheeks were browned by the thin-veiled sun of Mars, rich in ultraviolet radiation, though far away small in the distance. His blond hair was bleached more blond. His eyes were far-seeing with a questing dream. He was unpolished and deep, with gentleness added. So, to a young girl fresh from the sheltered Earth, he was all the romance and enigma of an expanding space domain.

Near the end of her performance, Vivien Marley smiled honestly at Nils Tolburt. When she left the stage exit a little ahead of the others, of course he was there, the half-forgotten yearning in him to express tenderness, wondering—with some humor why she would even notice him as a person. But surely it would only be a wonderful, harmless moment. It couldn't go far . . .

If he were shy, Vivien Marley was not. Yet she didn't greet him with an ordinary or crude manner. "I'm glad you waited, stranger," she said. "I think that you can tell me a lot about what it is like to be off the Earth."

He felt as though he had two left feet. "Over beer?" he suggested, certain that the idea was coarse, though it was all that occurred to him.

"Can't we do better?" she asked. "Can't we go out there beyond the airdrome of the town—in airhoods and thick clothes? That would be more—more 'local' —wouldn't it? Oh, I learned that you can rent such equipment at the Gate . . . Please don't be startled. I think I can stand it, Mr. —?"

"Tolburt," he filled in for her. "Nils Tolburt. Okay, Miss Marley . . ."

So they walked out there together, miles beyond Vananis, named for some sounds left in fragments of a Martian recording machine found on the same site—sounds of a speech too ancient and dead and different from the Earthly ever to be reproduced by human throats.

The nocturnal cold alone would have killed them but for their electrically heated garments. The dry wind, thin as in the high stratosphere of Earth and holding only a trace of oxygen in this latter-day Mars, would have smothered them except for the clear plastic bubbles encasing their heads and the steady

functioning of their air-purifiers. Yet they were kept snug and safe at least from these elements.

THE DANGER was in the magic of the night. Above, Phobos, the nearer satellite, substituting for Earth's romantic moon with a weird effectiveness which Luna could never have equalled. The surrounding Martian hills, the color of dust and silver. The clumps of grotesque vegetation, paper-dry but alive, their faint rustle just audible through the airhoods. The dense shadows. The huge heap of rust looming nearby—once an irrigation pinup, a building, or a climate-control machine—who knew what? The bas-reliefs, sand-scoured, so that their strange, hunched figures were all but obliterated. The sheared-off showing strata that went back—in small Mars' swift development—to an era comparable to Earth's Age of Reptiles, but far older. The heaps of rubble, crusted and glassy as with nuclear heat in a last great interworld conflict whose precise causes were unknown. Here in the night was history, layer on layer, showily, growth, triumph, folly, beauty, death. History and enchantment.

Mars was almost Nils Tolburt's native region; but to her, Vivien Marley, it was utterly new. And the newness seemed to be reflected from her to him—newness as rich and strange as her unbelievable presence here with him. Her eager excitement made her even prettier. To him it was as if they—as unlike as a teeming city is unlike the depths of space—could find a contact-point for this little time, and be very close. There was triumph here, as of doing the impossible.

"Wonderful, wonderful everything's wonderful !" she said at least a dozen times. See that thing—like a tree! See how that ridge reflects Phobos' light: ... May I hold your arm? I've heard that voices carry better that way, than through two airhoods and the thin atmosphere . . . And you're part of it all, Nils Tolburt. You're part of the vanguard of our own civilization, spreading out and out! Tell me, Nils Tolburt. When did you come here?"

He could sense her young and guileless earnestness. She was like a kid, here, eager and off-guard right now, though at other times she could be smooth and cool. Perhaps she was twenty, but no older.

Nils' laconic tongue loosened. "Dad brought me here," he said, "when I was nine. He was lost out in the red deserts long ago. I'm twenty-three now."

"You're what they call a 'grubber', aren't you? A relic hunter for the antique trade back home. I've seen beautiful, costly, fantastic art objects!"

He laughed. "I think I'm an amateur archeologist at heart, though, Miss. I think differently, and love discovery . . ."

"I suspected as much, Nils Tolburt. And I like that. But you must have many plans."

There she was, getting down to his plans, digging into him as a woman always does. Even he, with his scant social experience, knew that. But her desire to know about him gave him a feeling of warmth and friendliness.

He crouched beside a carved rock and looked up at the sky. A big meteor blazed. "Lots of meteors hit Mars' atmosphere because it's so close to the Asteroid Belt," he said. "I'm going there again."

"Why?"

"It's better there for a grubber, as you must know," Nils answered. "Things weathered away on Mars, even after its inhabitants were wiped out. But that original asteroid world went up all at once and completely, under Martian attack. A big torpedo, boring to its center, perhaps it was. The crust hurtled outward, and the blue sky vanished—all in an instant. The flame died out. And of the things that were left—more than you'd think, since the fury passed so quickly—many were preserved, completely new for those millions of years, in the cold vacuum of space. There was no weather at all to rust or damage them."

She smiled at him again, her eyes wide open with fascination. "Yes I've heard. I've read." she told him. "And I've seen, too, at home. Parts of mummified bodies—ugly as those beings seemed to us . . ." She looked sad for a second, then brightened once more. "Cloth, jewelry, wonderful scientific instruments. Seeds, even, that can grow again, shielded deep in lumps of soil from the killing ultraviolet

rays of the sun. Flowers, vegetables. Some of them have become common in Earthly gardens. Then there are, of course, natural metals and ores, from the rich insides of the planet ... Yes ... But what do *you* expect to find out there, Nils Tolburt?"

Her question was like a tease, that touched his own vague dreams and awoke a familiar thrill in him.

He shrugged. "How can I tell?" he said. "That's the fun of it. Those long-ago people were scientifically pretty smart. The secret of life, maybe? Photographs of dinosaurs, taken on Earth before there were men to see? It's all possible! I wish you could go out there—feel the presence of the Belt the way I do!"

"Why can't I? Oh, I know, Nils! I haven't got the stuff—you think!"

"Think? Know! ... Please—it's not any insult to you! You just have to be born to space. Like dancing, I guess. Because it can get unholy rough on you out there—particularly after a long while! Still—I wish you could go!"

She laughed gleefully. "You're wonderful, Nils—maybe I will! Why not? Don't women always go where men go—in the end? And am I any different, fundamentally, from other women? Here, Nils—I can't kiss you not really—not with both of us having to wear these bubbles over our heads. But this is a kiss." Her small, gloved hand squeezed his large one. "Honestly, Nils ..."

He was a little dazed. She was as guileless and spontaneous as before. Could the diverse personalities of the crude, toughened grubber and the dancer of whimsical ballet from completely civilized Terra blend after all—and especially Out There? Night and Day Beauty and the Beast? Half in humor, half in fright, but with a complete thrill, Tolburt wondered.

"I wouldn't very much care to leave the space life forever," he said quietly. "You like your dancing—don't you?"

She bit her lip. "Of course ... I've always loved it—at least till now, when something bigger comes ..."

Look, Nils—can't we both sit down here under the stars and talk this out? What does a night like this mean, if it's wasted, sleeping? ...

She was very earnest. Maybe in some ways women are forever reckless, and men cautious and traditional.

"Yes," he said. "I'd like to talk it out." He pressed her hand, too—a kiss.

Chance and Circumstance were working on them both. The chance of their meeting, their own separate drives, newness, glamour. And it was easy to say "I love you," and mean it. Then all problems will dangers seem easier to answer. If sometimes lie frowned worriedly, she made little motor sounds or pup-dog growls as close to his ear as the airhoods let her come, and things were better.

When dawn streaked the east, and brought color back to the pastel-tinted landscape, their minds were in accord. They were happy, as they walked back toward Vananis.

Hellas Joe Tomkins and Nick Scillieri, grotesque, bundled figures against the sky came out to meet them.

"What in hell!" Joe roared. "Where yuh been, you two? Miss Marley—your boss-lady, Tubman, is mad and scared enough to be tied!"

Vivien's mouth showed a hard pout though her throat muscles worked—a loved career was lost, now. "Let Tubby be sore," she stormed. "I can't help it! And she's a tyrant, sometimes! ..."

Later, in their hotel, Joe cornered Nils, and his brown face turned very paternal. "See here, fella," he said. "I size this Vivien up as a life-hungry little demon—now, suddenly space-struck. Tomorrow, it'll be another guy and another idea. I'm glad. Because she's too fine drawn. Do you want to see her sort of shrivel out there while you go nuts slowly, watching? Or do you want to have to keep at bay the woman-starved wolves that you meet out there?"

"I thought of all that, Joe," Tolbert said. "In a way it would be a relief to me if you were right about Vivien. But I don't think you are. So there you have it."

So Joe and Nick tried shanghai-tactics on Nils: but when he awoke from the doped liquor and found himself in Hellas, the big Martian oasis, long known to astronomers, where they'd been grubbing before, he simply borrowed their plane and escaped.

Margaret Tubman must have raved—oh, raved! —at Vivien. But they say that frontal opposition to

love is very poor psychology.

So Nils Tolburt of the solitudes of Mars and the Belt, and Vivien Marley, artist of the theater—her thoughts once having gone to crowds and applause and the hope of fame—were married to each other, and to the Great Distance and the Scarcely Known.

When Hellas Joe and Nick found a lift back to Vananis, they tried to give Nils money. "Buy her at least a halfway decent passage on a freighter, out to Ceres City, kid," Joe said. "We know you haven't got enough dough, with all the stuff you'll need. And she won't have saved much either."

Nils said, "No," and grinned. Masculine pride. Then he added: "Vivien is better than you think—fine on the free-fall test that scares so many. And her health is perfect."

They shook his hand. "We'll always give you good luck anyway, Nils," Nick said.

And Hellas Joe added: "So long, fella. Maybe I'd do the same as you, if I had the chance. She's sure a sweet trick!"

NILS WAS LEFT alone with the grim business of a change of course—counting two out there in the Belt instead of one. For once he deeply regretted his wastrel habits. But he drew his savings and sold two beautiful blue Martian vases he'd kept—soon they would grace a fancy home on Earth. He had a tidy sum, which nevertheless melted away with purchases, even though many of them were second-hand. Two real space suits, more solid than the garments for Mars. Instruments. Guns for protection. A small propulsive jet. Then there was dehydrated food. Other things that—perhaps naively—he thought might help a woman to feel more comfortable out there in the void. And so forth.

Then he had just about enough money left to buy two tickets for the Hitch Out.

Yes the Hitch Out. It was a common term among the asteroid wanderers. It meant the rough way to get into space—borrowing escape velocity from any major planet or moon from a spaceship. Once you've broken loose from the attraction of such larger bodies, you're free. A small nuclear jet with a heavy radiation shield can get you almost anywhere.

At the Vananis dock they stood together, among their mountainous supplies, to be weighed in. The men who did the weighing eyed them curiously, and with a pity that was like contempt for madness. This little girl, her face looking sweet and frightened and determined behind the vision plate of her helmet, going into the void by the hard route? Crazy! Then they shrugged.

Nils was scared, too. He'd never stopped being that for her, and even for himself, now. But it was her choice, too. And everything was a gamble. But maybe love is always like that.

Inside the dark, none too clean hold of the freighter, he helped her strap down. "This buckle goes so," he said. "There. Ready? Just relax."

Doors were sealed, signal bells clanged. The rockets thundered. From the corner of his eye Nils saw his wife's small, dainty features twist before his own vision blurred under the strain of the thrust. He heard her cry "Nils!" once.

Minutes later the terrific pull was replaced by its opposite—the weightlessness of the void, which feels exactly like falling.

He unfastened himself and moved toward her swiftly. For here was the thing who many a strong man with a slight fear of the heights could never take. For it did not end—not in free space where there is no hull-rotation—as in the great ring-shaped liners—to replace gravity with centrifugal force. It goes on and on, punishing the stomach and one's belief in the rightness of things, fraying nerves and often bringing on hysteria.

But Vivien took it well, as the tests had said she would. Only her cheeks paled, and to his solicitations she answered almost sharply: "I'm okay. Nils! I'm okay!"

So one hurdle was passed safely. The doors of the hold opened, and alone and with ease he thrust out the great wire-lashed box of supplies—much of it water, frozen and tinned to avoid evaporation in the interplanetary regions.

"Now we jump together," he said, speaking by helmet-radio.

And she repeated it after him like a baby learning a language: "Now we jump together, Nils . . ."

The rockets of the freighter flamed again, and it tangented on, away from Mars and toward Ceres. He didn't watch it go ... He left his wife clinging to the lashings of the great cube and went to work, quickly mounting the propulsive jet on the box, which was perfectly balanced for space flight. They and their supplies were already fixed on their course, taking motion from the first motion and direction of the ship. But he had to be ready to make slight corrections. Ahead, millions of miles away, was a little haze of light against the star-curtain the scattered cluster of fragments he'd visited before and meant to reach, now.

He took his first measurements to check course, having learned to use the instruments pretty well from Hellas Joe during their previous trip. Then he turned toward Vivien to see how she was.

She tried to smile. "Magnificent, isn't it?" she said. "Fantastic grandeur! And we're pledged to it, Nils for whatever happens!"

For courage she was now somewhat facetiously overdramatic. But the grandeur was there all right: Mars, a red, receding crescent near the corona-enveloped sun. And outward, the pinpoint of the stars against the blackness. Though he loved views like that, he respected them like cold death. He searched Vivien's face for strain—of the continued sense of falling, of the awareness of being buried alive in an infinity of unbreathable vacuum, of the distance from home increasing by miles per second. He found it clear in her eyes. Now was the time to spring what he hoped would be the antidote.

"We have days to spare, now," he said. "So let's set up housekeeping. Just watch . . . Wedding gift and surprise from your husband . . ."

She even helped him as he assembled the thin framework of rods, heavy, airtight fabric with windows of plastic—all to be fastened firmly to one side of the box of supplies. When this much was done, he motioned her inside, followed, and zipper-sealed the outer and inner pairs of flaps, between which was a little compartment—here was an air-lock arrangement for entering and leaving this fabric shelter. Now an air-tank hissed at his touch, and air filled the space tent.

"No need for armor in here," he said. "You're at home, Vivien."

Quickly he got out of his massive attire, and proceeded to arrange the interior of their quarters, while an air-purifier unit worked silently.

Miracles of compactness had been achieved in years past. But here was a house that could be rolled up and carried into the void! Just a regulation space-tent touched up by his own ideas. Of course there was a little ato-stove, fitted with clamps to secure the pressure kettles in the absence of all weight. There was a mirror for Vivien, and a plastic stand with tabs attached to hold down her toilet articles. There were even some small pictures to lie taped to the walls. And there was a rose—artificial, but real as real, even to the odor, in a tiny vase with a suction-cup bottom.

No doubt her dreams of a place to live were more sophisticated than this. But pleased surprise made her laugh, and she kissed him.

"Nils, you idiot!" she exclaimed. "But it's sweet and whimsical. Only you didn't have to but it was for the best . . . Maybe you've won with me—or we've both won—already. And I'll be all right ..."

He shook his head. "Not quite yet, Vivien," he said wisely. "Keep braced. But for now let's forget it . . ."

So, for a while they shut out the stars and the magnificent distance, which could heroine too rich and terrifying for one's soul. They were in love and together, and were comforted.

She didn't get space-sick—not in the usual sense. He did a little—as always happened to him at first. That terrible, disoriented queaziness tickled the fringes of his awareness for an hour. Then it was gone. It depended on something in one's nature, perhaps.

Her trouble was different, coming slowly and steadily as the days passed, building a strain in her, a monotony, a hunger for all she missed. There was the silence that repeated recorded music couldn't cover. The music grew tiresome and mocking in itself. She looked a little haggard, but every time he asked if she were all right, she said, "Of course. I have to be, Nils..."

A MONTH PASSED, and half of another. Millions of miles they had crossed in that little tent

pitched on one side of their box of supplies. Then she broke down—just for a minute. A burnt finger while she was cooking set her off.

She began to cry, and wouldn't let him near her. He was all tenderness and poor technique.

"Damn—nothing stays put!" she stormed. "No up, no down, no sidewise! It has got so that you can't believe in anything. No change, no sunrise, no sunset, no people! No charm. Nothing! Just this damned spider's nest of a tent, and those stars, and you ... Oh Nils . . ."

He pulled her to him roughly and somewhat sternly, and she wept on his shoulder. "Sorry, Nils—my fault. I didn't look ahead right, did I? Now we're both in a mess . . . Oh, I'm sorry I said that! I love you, Nils. That much I've got. It was just for a moment that I felt so terrible. Now I'm all right. Honest ! ..."

Then she was shelled in and the same as before except that—remembering what had often happened to men in space—he began to wonder if she wouldn't try to kill him sometime, or herself. She was a girl, and high-strung. He tried to compensate for her aches with his love. He even plotted courses back to Mars. But changing direction so radically was hard to do, and the journey would have taken longer than to go out to their destination. So what was there to do but go on, especially when he himself wanted to go on? She wouldn't bear of turning back anyway—proving at least her strength of will—perhaps for his sake, or perhaps to demonstrate something about herself to herself.

Another three weeks they journeyed. But they never reached the asteroid cluster Nils had aimed at, and had visited before. Various things interfered. First a mere, great boulder of hill size. It meant only that they had reached the Belt. They coursed with it for a while, for its direction and speed were almost the same as theirs as it moved in its orbit.

A day beyond it, Vivien came out of her silence enough to say, "Nils! Look!"

From a window of their tent he saw a larger fragment about a mile long, shaped like an arrow-head. He was almost beside himself with excitement as he fixed the glass on it.

"A surface chip of the old planet!" he cried. "And that's not all! Lady Luck, be with us now! It looks like what I always hoped to find—an isolated piece with the remains of—what would you call it, considering that they weren't men?—a town or a colony, on its hack? Here—take the glass—see for yourself!"

For a while Vivien seemed as eager as he was. "Oh, Nils it's beautiful!" she said. "It's like—like ruined castles on a crag, floating among the stars! Let's go—let's get there quickly! . . ."

He fought for calm as he checked speed with the jet. They landed, light as a bubble, near one end of this tiny asteroid. In space-suits they crept forward, as the ruins frowned over them.

"Just a quick look," he promised. "A few hours, and a picking up of what we can find that seems most worth while. Then back to Mars, hack to Earth. You need it, Vivien ..."

Excitement always buoyed her up, so that now, though thin and a little haggard, her face looked almost that of the bright pixy that he had first known.

"No, Nils!" she protested. "You'll stay as long as you like! That's what we came out for, isn't it? I'm all right! And I love this little asteroid!"

So he yielded to her insistence and his own temptations.

Walls were around them, twisted and toppled and fused in spots by the blast that had ended the world that had been the enemy of Mars perhaps sixty million years ago. Metal lay broken in bright newness that could last here forever. Fragments of eerie bodies, clawed and strange, and blackened and dried out by the dryness of space, were jammed into the warped steel, and the soft-colored or transparent building materials. It was as though part of that awful split second had come to a pastoral scene, congealed for eternity as the harsh preserving silence of the void closed in. This surface fragment must have shot straight out into space.

Nils knew that other surface shards had been found before—not as good as this one, perhaps, but much the same. He'd been on one before—seen the clear building blocks, the tiles, the tunnels, the courtyards, the crumpled machines, the queer cells and chambers, the gardens with fallen flexible roofs of glassy material, the space-blackened vegetation.

Gripped by his old passions—the treasure hunt and the archeological impulse, he went furiously to work. He found nothing obviously or clearly new. But did it matter? Digging, blasting, and grubbing, he

was in his glory. Shuffling her feet cautiously, Vivien helped him. But very soon her first eagerness faded, and the danger signs came back—mostly indicating, no doubt, an awful yet to-be-expected nostalgia.

Once she said, almost calmly: "You can't stare down those stars, can you, Nils? They just keep staring back, the way they'll keep staring after we're dead. Eons after. This is a graveyard, Nils. And the skeletons in it aren't even human."

Then she began to cry.

"Just a little more time," he said as he cuddled her. "At least we've got enough trinkets to make us rich."

That night—yes there was a day and night on his asteroid—it turned like a spindle once every twenty-nine hours—he stretched out to sleep, tired from his strenuous work. While she lay asleep near him, he heard coarse voices over his radio. He caught only a few faint words:

"You think . . . just a rock?...Wanna bet your ... ? Hell! ... Ceres City ... Dames. Ha-ha!"

It was asteroid hoppers talking by helmet phone, only a few thousand miles away. Ordinary guys changed and poisoned by space, by living too long bottled in their armor, smelling the stench of their own unwashed flesh, constantly worried about this or that the shortness of supplies, or that their air-purifiers might break down. They were woman-starved, homesick, civilization-starved. No one could say what they might do, given the chance ...

Nils Tolburt waited with a nuclear rifle, sweating and praying. They must not come here! But even then, a stray thought that he could not help crossed his mind. It was bitter and sour, yet it had something of a wish for the best in it . . . Vivien needed company, sound, laughter, change. Ceres City might not be good for her—but better than this life! Or so it seemed to him. She might even have wound up in Ceres City, if she had failed to find triumph as a dancer and had chosen another path ...

The hoppers passed his asteroid by, but he could have called them easily-enough by radio.

HIS GREATEST MISTAKE had been over-using the propulsion jet-tube to blast through shattered masonry. Damn all trust of second-hand equipment! The next morning it blew out from the side, and narrowly missed killing him. It was ruined beyond all repair. He stared at it, and at the dead things and the dead grandeur of the sky, scarcely realizing that the twinge in his chest meant that his sick wife and he were stranded. Their desert island of space was moving in its orbit farther and farther from a region where there was any chance of their being picked up.

After that, he set up his small radio to keep out a continuous signal of distress, hiding it from Vivien's eyes. His first and only thought was survival, and protection for his wife. He had the usual survival equipment even seeds and hydroponic jars for growing green vegetables that would give a little variety to diet. He had a large store of dehydrated food, and there was considerable water left. He knew that deep in most asteroids, particularly the "surface" ones, there is much water in the form of ice. These pieces of a living world, hurled suddenly into the cold of space, didn't dry out slowly, like the Moon or Mars. The water-table, deep down, merely froze swiftly, and was sealed against loss through sublimation, by the surrounding rock and soil.

And water, being oxide of hydrogen, was also a source of oxygen to breathe. A simple electric current could set it free.

Other castaways had lived for months, before, on asteroids.

The whole character of Tolburt's work changed, though the fury of his toil was even greater. He put the transparent jars of his hydroponic garden out in the sun.

It was a small sun, here, shrunken because it was more than two-hundred-million miles away, and provided only a scant fifth of the radiant energy per unit area that is delivered at an Earthly distance—yet it was still brilliant, as it must be in space where there is no atmosphere to absorb a considerable portion of its intensity. Sealed inside the hydroponic jars, each fitted with a tiny atomic heat-unit, and whose walls cut out only the damaging portion of the solar radiations, plants would still grow rapidly. Other vegetation had certainly grown on the original asteroid world, whose distance from the sun seemed to have been compensated for by an intrinsic warmth in the planet itself—hot springs, and a higher internal heat,

maintained by radioactive materials at its core.* (*Light intensity is inversely proportional to the square of the distance from its source. Using the earth's distance from the sun, 93 million miles, as a unit, and the intensity of solar light on earth as another unit, comparative approximations of the sunlight received by other planets can easily be calculated.

For instance, Mars' distance from the sun—140-odd million miles on the average, for a rather eccentric orbit—can be represented roughly as $1\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{3}{2}$ squared is $\frac{9}{4}$, which, inversely, becomes $\frac{4}{9}$ that is, Mars receives $\frac{4}{9}$ of the solar radiant energy per unit area that earth does.

Tolburt's asteroid is clearly one of the more sunward ones—it is almost the first he meets while journeying outward into the belt. Its distance, then, from the sun, can be considered as somewhat more than 200 million miles, or about $2\frac{1}{4}$ times as far as the earth.

$2\frac{1}{4}$, or $\frac{9}{4}$ squared is $\frac{81}{16}$, which, inversely, becomes $\frac{16}{81}$. $\frac{16}{81}$ is just slightly less than one-fifth.—*Author.*)

The existence of radioactive materials in quantity was evident from the explorations of the asteroid miners.

The double thermos walls of the jars would slow the escape of warmth at night.

Among the many things that Tolburt had searched for in the ruins, were machines and devices that still worked. He discovered a pump—all soft and rubbery material like a heart—except for the hidden electromagnets and wires, which were the "muscles" within its texture. He found batteries that had been known before. They were sealed in black cases. Atomic they certainly were in basis, for the current of one the size of his hand could have killed an elephant. He collected much flexible glass, twisted but unbroken. A little heat welded it. He found tools which his human fingers did not quite fit.

Of course Vivien knew what had happened almost at once. His change of activity was a plain sign. She was keen in her judgments. He could not hide anything. It was to the credit of her fundamental grit and courage that she kept silent and tried to help him during all of two long days of new effort.

But the facts had to come out of her mind. Will power could not bottle them up. She said the first words quite calmly:

"I know what's happened, Nils. You've hidden the radio, or are using it for something else. And I don't see the jet-tube anymore. It's broken, and we're stuck, here. Isn't that it? We're not just sorting our loot. I wish it *were* funny, and not so serious."

Then, like many a space man who feels himself buried alive in millions of miles of vacuum, she went all to pieces in a kind of claustrophobic panic. She could not stop her wild laughing.

Nils forced her inside the space-tent, and got the helmet off of her armor. Then in some mixture of fear and exasperation and hope that it would help as it would help a male companion in a similar seizure—he slapped her repeatedly.

"Vivien!" he shouted. "Steady up!"

Perhaps he had just made his worst mistake of all after a long run of mistakes. Chance didn't seem to be on his side right now at all.

Saving tears came to her eyes, again. They lasted for minutes while he held her close. Finally she smiled up at him as if in gratitude.

"Nils—it was something fierce. I thought I had spoiled everything for you in some terrible, wonderful place that could never be. I must have been dreaming for a long time. But we were always at home, weren't we? Just now we were making a nice garden ..."

Her thin, pixy face was screwed up and earnest. Her dark curls were damp

Whatever Tolburt did not grasp at once by evidence, he sensed by intuition. Vivien's mind had armored itself with *unreality*. People are not built for the interplanetary regions. Her weakness was a common one. Nils knew that what had happened to his wife might, and perhaps still would, happen to him. Or even to someone like Hellas Joe Tomkins for all he knew.

Nils Tolburt's first panic-stricken impulse was to try to call Vivien back to facts. But some flash of wisdom stopped that. Maybe it was wrong, but he said:

"So let's make a bigger and better garden."

After that, one day of toil followed another in a grim, purposeful grind. Vivien worked with him and

seemed happy at it, but quite unaware of her real surroundings, her gaze always on the ground, her feet shuffling cautiously, in some reflex action to the tiny gravity.

But Nils Tolburt lived in hope that she would awaken. In any case, the unbreathable, airless magnificence and harshness of the void must not batter at her again. It must be veiled and masked by a living beauty that a girl from Earth could understand.

Almost as soon as the first green showed in the hydroponic jars, the walls of another airtight garden were restored, the edges of the building blocks were welded together and sealed.

Then its clear roof went up—anciently it had had a roof, too; now the flexible glass had to be straightened and repaired. Water from ice, melted by heating units deep under ground, was pumped up to wet desiccated red soil which Nils knew would bloom again the seeds and spores in it preserved forever in deep freeze.

When one garden was finished, and given a sealed-in and electrically warmed atmosphere, the Tolburts started restoring another. Vivien meekly took Nils' simple orders to bring him this or that. The two gardens they now possessed were separated only by a wall.

Toil went on and on, for Tolburt's vision was extravagant—drawing from what was lacking of life in the void all the fierce yearning for the opposite—seeming impossible out here. There were rich old tiles to cement back into place, and strange stone monsters to re-erect, paths to make, and in the ruins of adjoining buildings, sealed quarters to provide and furnish. Furniture from warped metal had to be devised. Gorgeous old tapestries of glass fabric had to be hung.

Nils' self-reliant life had made him a fair mechanic; and he did his best and kept trying—for Vivien. It was love; it was paying back for a sense of guilt. It was a lonely man's way with a wife who was his only companion, as he was hers. Whatever else they'd lost, they had kept the sweetness between them. And now maybe there was shelter for her, and for him, too, during whatever time there was left. She looked better, now—happier, and better filled out. Though he felt that she'd die sometime, in her fogged condition. Her perpetual gaze let her do simple things valiantly but never let her see the truth. She would die, and he'd be alone, and sometime he'd die, too—here. His signaling radio had burned itself out. They were far in space, where no one would come perhaps for decades.

Their first tiny garden—the hydroponic jars—was stripped of its first produce and forgotten. In the second, amid curling, hairy shoots of a fantastic order, the zinnias bloomed first. Funny that he'd thought to bring zinnia seeds in a survival kit. He'd done it by the same kind of impulse that had made him bring that artificial rose for their first "house." A thought of Vivien, it was. And a vagrant sentiment. Zinnias shouldn't have been here in the Belt at all. But they were zinnias impossible on Earth. With so low a gravity to inhibit their growth, they became as tall as corn. Call this a new development or extravagance—an offshoot of the science that enables men to travel in space!

The months passed.

Strange flowers opened. Fruit hung green and then ripened. Some were sweet, some acid, some doubtful for human use. Some were starchy, others were rich in protein and fat. Some of them, their seeds found elsewhere in the Belt, were already being cultivated on Earth.

"Vegetables for the kitchen are getting stranger all the time," Vivien commented with some puzzlement. "Some taste almost like meat." But when she tackled the cooking, the results were usually good.

Furry little creatures, half like insects, hatched out from ancient eggs left in the ground, and scampered in the foliage, twittering and mewling.

BETTER THAN THREE Earth-years passed. Very little changed except that Tolburt went on building and building, extending his quarters and gardens, and making them as different from raw space as he possibly could. The leaves of plants touched the clear roofs. More and more habitable rooms were wrested from the ruins. He could never have accomplished so much on Earth in that time, but, since materials had so little weight here work was quite easy.

Sometimes Tolburt felt almost happy, as a sense of possession and peace and permanence came

over hint. He had a way of accepting and making the best of what Chance and Circumstance brought him, and that helped.

But often he was bitter, feeling that both he and Vivien had been cheated. Love? Compromise? When people were not too different, yes. But some lovers should not marry. He'd labored for years, making up to her only a little for a great mistake. And where would she be without him? Famous, for all he knew. Not mad, at least—not a sweet shell of her former self, smiling and shuffling cautiously ... Where was Hellas Joe, now? And the others? Damn Choice and Chance! He, Nils Tolburt, had been carefree and eager ...

"Don't work so much. Stay inside more with me, Nils," Vivien often urged him. But he had his answer:

"No—not yet. There's still one more thing I've got to do."

It was another extravagance that fascinated him. It began with the way water behaved out here—a great mass of it not lying flat in a pool, as it would have done on a world with any reasonable gravity. Instead it formed itself into a gigantic, slightly flattened dewdrops, which, like lenses, inverted the image; of things beyond them.

It was beauty, impossibly unlike the aspect of the bleak asteroids and space, yet impossible anywhere else. It was a newness which might be developed.

So, keeping his wife away, he built a circular room, lined it with varicolored tiles and fanciful old carvings, and roofed it with the usual flexible transparent material. He transplanted vegetation into it, the fuzzy green fronds reaching the ceiling, freshening the air as green plants always do. Flowers bloomed. The little furry creatures appeared there. So far the room was like the other gardens, but richer.

But into the old pool basin at its center he pumped hoarded water always he'd hoarded and stored water in underground cisterns. The water bellied up from the rim of the pool, held by cohesion and surface-tension which far outmatched its feeble weight. It extended upward like a crystalline balloon being inflated, until it was almost a sphere. So far, so good.

One more touch he added—a square box made of tooled gold. Inside was a mechanism which he had managed to put into working order. It played weird, sing-song, yearning melodies, millions of years old.

He already had an idea of what *might* happen. But his main thought was still to give Vivien, as best he could, the soft, gentle things that might keep her safe. For a long time he had suspected that, almost imperceptibly, her mind was sinking deeper and deeper into the fog. But now he felt quite proud of himself—as if, in this room, he had created something advanced and charming and impossible before, that kept pace with the era of Man's venturing beyond the Earth.

He brought his wife through a passage to the room, and said: "Here it is, Vivien. Now our home is finished."

She looked around her for a long time, and scented to listen to the sounds that were there, her gaze remaining dull and yet puzzled. At last she smiled and said mildly, "It's nice, Nils, it's gorgeous. All for me? Thank you." And she kissed him.

He had hoped for more response than that. "Isn't it a dozen times better than anything we've had before?" he demanded in a kind of tired bitterness. "Don't you see? Don't you feel?" By a mighty effort he kept his voice gentle.

She seemed half to study hint, as if trying to find out what he wanted her to say. "Of course, Nils," she answered. "It's beautiful and it's different. And I love you, and thanks forever."

He missed the strange, groping glitter in her eyes because he thought it best, then, to leave her alone. Before his frazzled nerves betrayed hint into shouting at her. She was his Vivien, and she had always tried valiantly. She could not help it that she failed.

He went away to fuss with his various machines. And so it was for more than a week—he left her to herself more than usual.

But suddenly, near one noonday on the asteroid, something like a premonition hit him. It was partly guilt, again. It was partly the unclear memory of something unusual about his wife, now—a kind of darkly secret animation. And now, all at once he was smitten by a nameless sense of silence in his rooms and

gardens, though music still played. It was as if now he were left alone for good.

In panic he hurried from chamber to chamber, searching. And so he arrived at the entrance of the circular room which was his masterpiece. Sunshine treated through the roof, water rustled and tinkled. And his premonition proved utterly wrong. For he heard Vivien's voice humming—trying to follow the notes of a tune not conceived by a human mind. Then he stopped, flabbergasted, hiding in the shadow of a great leaf.

She was not on the ground, shuffling cautiously: she was high in the air, floating down, her body making a graceful arabesque. Some soft, blue, mineral fabric, as old as the rocks of Earth, was around her—that was all. She landed lightly, and as the eerie music soared, giving back a lost art-form, she leaped again, lightly, creating something new, and possible only where gravity was almost zero—something to match in dancing what the spaceship represented in science. This, too, must be part of a new age.

The movement of the music changed, and she glided down, straight for the gigantic dewdrop in the pool-basin. With the impact of her body, it broke into a thousand lesser drops, inches in diameter, that shot toward the roof and then drifted gently back, coalescing again, brilliant in the sun, while she swam among them, a dainty nymph figure, not dull-eyed any more, nor bound to a timid shuffle, but laughing, nimble, and joyous.

He ached with gladness and appreciation for the new beauty that was here. But the best was knowing that the results of his work had been good—that it had sheltered Vivien from the too-blunt magnificence of space, until restored peace and the suggestion of her surroundings, and her old love of dancing, combined to open for her the way to recovery . . . Yes, that must have been how it was. And her keen mind had regained its ingenuity, using what the once fearsome asteroids could give her, to produce something never seen on Earth.

Tolburt clapped at last, and shouted "Bravo!"

She grinned, and floated toward him, and then, as if just in fun, but not quite fun either, she kissed his rough hand solemnly. "That's thanks—thanks for everything, darling," she said. "Yes—I know now. I've come back to facts. We're on a beautiful little world that you made. Here, ballet and space aren't utterly incompatible things any more; they come together, and make each other better. And you're here. So I'm happy, and all in one piece again . . . and now, shouldn't I be cooking dinner, instead of fooling around? . . ."

NILS TOLBURT had a deadly scare, an Earth-month later. As he moved alone among still unrestored ruins, a shadow darkened the parched rock and ground around him. Looking up, he saw a great, ring-like hulk blocking the sunlight. He had almost forgotten that his asteroid, moving in its orbit, had nearly circled the sun in the more than three years since Vivien and he had come here, and now again was not too far from Mars and the traveled traffic lanes.

Memory of how men sometimes become in space made Tolburt wish mightily to go for his gun before he saw that this was hopeless. Dozens of forms in armor were already dropping toward him from the great ship.

Soon they were around him in a horde, their voices—both masculine and feminine—filling his helmet-phones:

"Hello Mister! An asteroid with gardens on it? How come? . . ."

"Yes—we saw it from space, through the 'scopes. And of course we wanted to visit the ruins, too . . ."

"Uhunh—we asked the Captain to come close, and he seemed to have the same idea, so . . ."

"Hey Friend you don't have to look so surprised. We're just tourists. Don't you know tourists when you see them? ..."

All this chatter from so many people quite threw Nils Tolburt off balance.

But then one girl—obviously seared of her near weightlessness, but knowing that she would soon be back in the liner with the comforting centrifugal "gravity" of its slow rotation, gained momentary command.

"Quiet, Dad," she ordered. "Quiet, all of you! Can't you see the poor man's a castaway not used to so much noise? .. Yes probably you've been here for years. Sir—you wouldn't know what progress has been made. You ought to see . . . Yes—right now we are bound for Ceres City, which we hear has become quite civilized and luxurious ... But right now Sir —may we see the wonderful things you have here? Please! We can pay you. . . ."

Tolburt had to be polite; more than that, he was glad for the presence of others after so long—for himself, and certainly for his wife. He grinned proudly. "Come along to the main air-lock, folks," he said. "This trip is on the house." And then, after all were inside his domain: "Hey, Vivien—company! . . ."

Vivien's eyes shone. She remained gracious and poised. "This way to the principal garden," she said. "Perhaps while Mr. Tolburt explains things to you, I could make you drinks—something typical and special ..." Yes, Vivien had the makings of a great hostess.

Later, they sipped the juices of tangy, exotic fruit through slender tubes from bottles left by the ancients and very useful now in controlling liquids, which are elusive where gravity is very low. Many oh's and ah's and delighted comments about the charm of the strange surroundings were still to be heard:

"What gorgeous flowers. What fantastic music! Look at those carvings and that drape. Oh—Alice isn't it stupendous! Oh—I hope I'm not getting ill! ..."

"Nonsense, Clara—it's all in the mind. I wish Dot hadn't been too unsure to leave the ship. What a wonderful place! You know, I'd almost like to *stay* here . . ."

Nils Tolburt heard no more of this, for two large individuals, who had purposely lost themselves in the crowd and lingered in the background, now made their presence known:

"Pss-sst! Nils!" A stage whisper, then a pair of grins from two ugly brown faces.

In joyful unbelief, Tolburt slipped quietly away, leaving the company in Vivien's capable hands. He led his two old buddies to his private workshop.

"Your lady—I see she's fine—we were wrong about her, kid. We apologize," Hellas Joe Tomkins said.

"Thanks. Glad you admit a point," Tolburt laughed. "But now—how, in the name of all miracles, did you two happen to turn up here, and in a *tourist* crowd?"

"Tell him, Nick," Joe ordered, sheepishly.

Nick Scillieri cleared his throat. "After you got married, we worried about you more than ever, Nils," he said. "So we left Mars for that asteroid cluster where we'd all been before, and where we knew you meant to go again. We hunted everywhere, and asked everybody we met, but there wasn't a sign of you any place. On the grubbing side, we didn't do any better than usual, either. No 'secret of life' that you used to josh about, has yet turned up. Yeah—somebody *did* find some real dinosaur pictures—only not us. And somebody else found some ideas for improving spaceship jets, making better liners possible. So we figured —on looking around us, and feeling the holes in our empty pockets after we'd spent our dough that space is moving on, getting almost civilized in spots, and that we'd better blend in."

Tolburt grinned. "Is that the reason for the ship stewards' uniforms you're wearing?" he chuckled.

"Yeah," Nick admitted defensively. "We figured that the best of the Belt—the mineral deposits and all—had already been claimed, and marked 'No Trespassing.' So here we are, and—damn you—it ain't so bad, with the tips you get! ... But that's not the point, now . . . We remembered yuh, Nils. And Joe said that if you weren't in that cluster, you must have got some place else first, because you could hardly have missed it. We remembered that until just a few months ago on Mars, when we already had our ship jobs. In Vananis we found an astronomer with a new set of telescope photographs of the Belt, and we talked to him, giving dates and everything. So he pointed to a little speck in a photograph, and said that it must have been right in your path when you headed for that cluster. He said it was on the way back,

now. So we pow-wowed with our Captain. 'A good trick to spring on the rubbernecks, Sir,' Joe said. 'A little detour to give them a sense of real exploration.' So we got here, Nils, and found you . . ."

"Sure," Hellas Joe Tomkins joined in. "Of course we wanted to locate you and defend you from danger; but to tell the truth, kid, we had a hunch that if we did find you, our rotten luck would change . . ."

Joe sounded so lugubriously hopeful that Tolburt couldn't help laughing silently inside. In fact his merriment couldn't be kept hidden; it broke to the surface.

"I don't see nothing funny," Joe grumbled, hurt. "What's wrong with thinking of making a buck some way, maybe with all the stuff you've got here?"

"Nothing, Joe," Tolburt chuckled, sobering a little. "The fact is, when I look back, it surely seems as if luck *has* changed! At least by comparison. So I feel damned good. And I owe you two plenty of credit. Thanks! Nothing can seem very difficult, now."

"Sure, Nils," Nick broke in. "The tourists—the rubbernecks—you heard them getting all steamed up about everything here. And if they want things, they'll pay . . . Maybe this *could* be a place for rubbernecks, kid . . . Only—dammit—bunches of them will still be few and far between, way out here . . ."

Tolburt's high spirits, produced by the contrast of past black misfortune with present pleasure in good company, didn't decline with the regret in Nick Scillieri's final words. He wasn't discouraged that easily—not now! After so much trouble and hopelessness, it seemed that problems were being answered in his busy and freshly enthusiastic mind by suggestion alone, although those effortless answers to the future were completely alien to anything that he, the relic grubber, could ever have thought of before. It was as if his matron saint, Chance, had combined with Circumstance to ease up on him, and to laugh at him benignantly, now. Just then *he* felt benignant toward the whole human race.

"Listen, you two," he growled, grinning. "Stop saying 'rubbernecks.' They're people, eager to see what they never saw before, and that's fine! Now, just let me think . . ."

Nils Tolburt's mind was reviewing everything: His strange, rugged youth. His marriage to a dancer. Vivien's sickness. The beauty he had repaired and built. Vivien's wonderful recovery in the adaptation of her pleasurable art to go hand in hand with the void . . . And these people coming. Their interest in everything. Civilization reaching deep into space. So —was distance now still to be an obstacle, when a course of action was almost obvious, particularly when, in his leap outward from Mars—years ago—with a young wife and a great box of supplies, he had employed the actual solution on a small scale?

Or was he only dreaming—making things seem all too simple in his optimism? But science provided atomic power, cheap and plentiful, didn't it? While the vacuum of space was frictionless. . . . And the interest of people in wonder and romance could be sold, couldn't it? Was that thought a cynicism? Or was it—more—the clear-seeing of a means to provide a gift—a thing of progress and education? Tolburt's thoughts soared on . . .

"All right, what's on your mind, Nils?" Hellas Joe Tomkins demanded at last, impatiently.

"Orbiters," Tolburt answered. "Little moons of Earth. They've all been built in space, up to now, haven't they? From materials rocketed up from the ground. But this one is ready-made, and *could* be different. It could be brought close, into a path around the Earth, where everyone could see and visit it easily. What I've already put together could be the start of a tourist hotel, where folks could get acquainted with space—feel the wonder of it—even see what big civilizations once existed in the solar system, and how they came to an end especially if that lesson becomes important again, in our own culture . . . What we could do is take some of the relics I've found here to Earth, and sell them for working capital. On Earth we could look for further backing . . . Is the whole idea crazy? What do you guys think?"

Hellas Joe and Nick Scillieri suddenly looked alert—almost wolfish.

"You mean," Nick gasped, "jet this whole, mile-long hunk of rock millions of miles across space, and into an orbit around Terra?"

"What do you think he means, Slowbrain?" Joe snapped. "Yeah I'm for trying the idea, Nils. A mile

of rock ain't so much to push around not in a vacuum, and away from restraining gravity. You just build up speed and then coast, as with a ship. As for the rest, we'll see ..."

SO THE SCHEME was put into action. During the months that followed, back on Earth, and then in the deep void once more, there were moments of discouragement. But after much time and work mostly done by the three men themselves, the great rocket-tubes were welded into place on Tolburt's asteroid—now appropriately named *Inspiration*—and set aflame. Grandly a little world began to move, pushed by nuclear fire, from its age-old path.

After it was established in its new orbit around the Earth, its possibilities were smoothly realized. Novelty of achievement always arouses interest. Here, close at hand, was a chip of a vanished world—beautiful, fantastic, an advertisement of the solar system, the stars far beyond, and the whole future of the restless human race. Famous universities took up the appeal for funds for the construction of a great observatory on the surface of the satellite that had once been an asteroid. And Tolburt's gardens and rooms, once meant for another purpose, became the beginning of *Hotel Inspiration*, glamorized far and wide. Other ideas were realized, falling naturally and easily into place. Thus, things are as they are today.

Tolburt himself is not quite as he was. He is still big, and somewhat rough; but there is a charm to him. He looks opulent, as the head of a great enterprise perhaps should. Hellas Joe Tomkins and Nick Scillieri, his partners, have become more glossed than one would believe. Of course, all three have things to regret, sometimes. For their earlier ears had been wild and free.

Vivien? For a while, for the benefit of people fresh from Earth, she performed dances similar to the one which space first allowed her to invent though less frantic. Now she gives that wonderful exhibition only occasionally. She has a small son and a daughter.

So here is the story of Nils Tolburt, his strange beginnings, and their unforeseeable outcome. It is a story of one of the little moons that were not always seen in Earthly skies the story of *Inspiration*, the captive asteroid.