

# Forbidden Planet

SHE WAS a large hunk of ship, was *Sally Ann*, too large and too imposing for the name she bore. She stood proudly in her berth at Port Forlorn, dwarfing cranes and gantries and administration buildings, towering high above *Rimstar* and *Rimbound*, both typical units of the Rim Runners' fleet. Yet, to the trained eye of a spaceman, a relationship between *Sally Ann* and the smaller vessels would have been obvious — all three bore the unmistakable stamp of the Interstellar Transport Commission and all three had come down in the Universe. *Sally Ann*, for all her outward smartness, had come down the furthest; she had been a Beta-class liner, and now she was tramping. *Rimstar* and *Rimbound* had been Epsilon-class tramps and now they were dignified with the name of cargo liners.

Commodore Grimes, astronomical superintendent for Rim Runners, looked out from the window of his office towards the big ship, screwing up his eyes against the steely glare of the westering sun. His hard, pitted face softened momentarily as he said, "I'm sorry, Captain. We can't use her. She just won't fit into any of our trades."

"Fletcher, your agent on Van Diemen's Planet, assured me that I should be sure of getting a charter as soon as I got out of here," said Captain Clavering. "I've delivered the load of migrants that you were clamouring for; now it's up to you to at least give me profitable employment back to the Centre."

"You had nothing in writing," stated Grimes. "You took Fletcher's word for it. I know Fletcher — he used to be a purser in your old concern, Trans-Galactic Clippers. He's got that typical big ship purser's knack of seeming to promise everything whilst, in reality, promising nothing." He got to his feet and pointed towards *Rimstar*. "There's the sort of ship that you and your friends should have bought when you won that lottery. A tramp can always make a living of sorts out on the Rim — one of our captains came into a large sum of salvage money and bought a tramp; he's running the Eastern Circuit on time charter to us.

"I heard about him," admitted Clavering. "He pulled *Thermopylae* off Eblis. I was in her for a while after she got back to her normal running... But, Commodore, what Calver's doing has nothing to do with *my* problems. Surely there must be some passenger traffic on the Rim. Fletcher told me...."

"Fletcher would tell you anything," snapped Grimes. "If you've seen one Rim World you've seen them all. Why should anybody want to proceed from Loin to Faraway, or from Ultimo to Thule? The handful of people who must travel for business reasons we can carry in our own ships — they're all fitted with accommodation for twelve passengers, and it's rarely used.

"In any case, why this desire on your part to run the Rim? We have a saying, you know — a man who comes out to the Rim to make his living would go to Hell for a pastime."

"Because," said Clavering bitterly, "I thought it was the only part of the Galaxy where a tramp passenger ship could make a living. It seems that I was mistaken."

Grimes got to his feet, held out his hand to the younger man in a gesture of dismissal. He said, "I'm sorry, Captain, I mean it. I hate to see a good spaceman with a large white elephant hanging around his neck. If I hear of any profitable employment at all, I'll let you know — but I can't hold out much hope."

"Thank you," said Clavering.

He shook hands with Grimes and strode out of the office, walked with a briskness that masked his reluctance to face his shipmates, his fellow shareholders, across the windswept, dusty apron to his ship.

They were waiting for him in *Sally Ann's* shabby, but still comfortable, lounge. There was Sally Ann Clavering who, in addition to being his wife, combined the functions of Purser and Catering Officer. There was Taubman, chief and only Reaction Drive Engineer, and Rokovsky, who was in charge of the Interstellar Drive. There was Larwood, Chief Officer, and Mary Larwood, the biochemist. The few remaining officers were not shareholders and were not present.

Clavering maintained his stiffness as he entered the lounge, by his bearing counteracting the shabbiness of his uniform. His lean face, under the greying hair, was expressionless.

"So they have nothing for us," stated Sally Ann flatly.

“They have nothing for us,” agreed Clavering tonelessly, watching disappointment momentarily soften the fine lines of his wife’s face, watching it succeeded by a combination of hope — surely a hopeless hope — and determination.

“We’d have been better off,” growled burly, black-bearded Rokovsky, “if we’d never won that blasted lottery. What do we do now? Sell the ship for scrap, hoping that she’ll bring enough to pay our passages back to civilization? Or do we lay her up and get jobs with Rim Runners?”

“It was a gamble,” said Larwood, “and it just didn’t come off. But we were all in it.” *And I’ll gamble again*, said the expression on his dark, reckless face. *And I*, declared the mobile features of his wife.

“At least,” pointed out the slight, heavily bespectacled Taubman, “we have reaction mass enough to take us up and clear of the planet, and the Pile’s good for a few years yet.”

“And where do we go from here?” demanded Rokovsky. “And what do we use for money to pay the last of the bills?” asked Sally Ann.

“Buy another ticket in the Nine Worlds Lottery,” suggested Larwood.

“What with?” she countered. “The prizes are big, as we know, but those tickets are expensive. And we have to get back to the Nine Worlds first, anyhow.”

“Damn it all!” exploded Clavering. “We’ve got a ship, a good ship. We didn’t show the profit that we should have done on that load of migrants, but that doesn’t mean that there’s no profit to be made elsewhere in the Galaxy. That Psionic radio operator of ours will just have to wake up his dog’s brain in aspic and keep a real listening watch for a change. There must be *something* somewhere — a planet newly opened up for colonization, some world threatened by disaster and a demand for ships for the evacuation...”

“He says that it’s time that he got paid,” stated Sally Ann. “And so does Sparks.”

“And the second mate,” added Larwood. “And the quack.”

“What fittings can we sell?” asked Clavering hopelessly. “What can we do without?”

“Nothing,” replied his wife.

“We could...” began Clavering, then paused, listening. Faintly at first, then rising in intensity, there was the wailing, urgent note of a siren, loud enough to penetrate the shell plating and the insulation of the ship. Without a word the Captain got to his feet, strode towards the doorway of the axial shaft and the little elevator that would take him up to the control room. Wordlessly, the others followed. This, obviously, was some kind of emergency — and in an emergency the spaceman’s conditioned reflexes impel him automatically towards his station.

Clavering and his officers crowded into the little elevator cage, waited impatiently as it bore them upwards to the nose of the ship. They almost ran into the control room, looked out through the big ports.

The sun was down and the sky was already dark save for the pale glow in the west. Falling slowly, winking balefully, were the red stars of the warning rockets that had been fired from the control tower. Scurrying out on to the spaceport apron like huge beetles, the beams of their headlights like questing antennae in the dusty air, were two red painted fire trucks and the ambulance. There was activity around the two Rim Runners’ ships, *Rimstar* and *Rimbound*, as their personnel hurried out of the airlock doors and down the ramps.

“There!” cried Larwood, pointing.

Clavering looked up, almost directly overhead, and saw a fitful glare in the sky. There was a ship there, and she was coming down, and the siren and the red rockets and the lifesaving equipment made it obvious that she was in some kind of trouble. There had been, he remembered, a ship due that evening — *Faraway Quest*.

“Switch on the transceiver,” he ordered.

Larwood had anticipated the command. Suddenly there was a fresh voice in the control room — a crisp voice, calm, yet with an underlying note of anxiety.

“Impossible to pull out and clear. Numbers one and two liners gone, number three tube liner starting to melt. Will try to bring her in on the other three — if they hold that long.”

Grimes’ voice replied. “Do your best, Captain.”

“What the hell do you think I am doing? This is my ship, Commodore, and it’s the lives of my crew and passengers that are at stake. *Do your best!* What else is there to do?”

“I’m sorry, Captain,” replied Grimes.

“Just keep off the air, will you?” snapped the other. “I’ve a job of work to do, and I can’t do it if you keep nattering. Just have everything ready in case of a crash, that’s all. Over and *out!*”

“Do you think he’ll make it?” asked Larwood, of nobody in particular.

“He has to,” said Clavering shortly. *He has to*, he thought. *He’ll have to fight her down every inch of the way, anticipating every yaw. The servo-mechanisms in those old Epsilon-class ships were never designed to cope with any real emergency...*

He found his binoculars, adjusted the polarization, stared up at the descending ship. He was no engineer, but even to him the irregular pulse of the exhaust looked unhealthy, as did the great gout of flame that dropped from it, the incandescent, molten ceramic of the liners. He could make out faintly the shape of the vessel above the blinding glare of the back-blast, saw that her captain was maintaining her in an upright position.

The noise of her passage was audible now, drowning the screaming voice of the siren, pulsating as irregularly as the siren had done. At times it was almost the full throated roar of a full powered ship, at times it died to a querulous mutter. If the rockets failed entirely she would fall. Desperately, Clavering willed them not to fail, knew that the others with him were doing the same. If will power could have sustained *Faraway Quest* it would have done — but there is a limit to the weight that even a team of trained teleporteurs can handle, and even a small ship is far in excess of that limit.

Down she dropped, lower and lower, making for the berth midway between *Sally Ann* and the nearer of the two Rim ships. Still she was under control, although beginning to yaw heavily. *He’ll make it*, thought Clavering, *he’ll make it*. Dimly he was aware of his wife’s hand on his arm, gripping it painfully, dimly he was aware of the muttered curses of Rokovsky, the tense whispering of Larwood — “You’re almost home. Stay with it man, stay with it!” — the heavy breathing of Taubman.

With feet only to go, the last of the tubes blew, blinding the watchers. They heard the crash, heard the notes of the siren swell to fill the silence that followed immediately, heard the noise of shouting.

Slowly their vision cleared. Through streaming eyes Clavering stared out from the view port, saw *Faraway Quest* standing there, gleaming in the beams of the searchlights. He thought at first that she had, miraculously, escaped damage — then saw that her vanes had driven deep into the concrete, that her stern was crumpled. An arc flared blue in the vicinity of her airlock door as the rescue began to burn its way into the ship. Grimes’ voice was barking from the speaker of the transceiver, “Captain! Captain Hall! What casualties have you?”

The voice that replied was faint and unutterably weary. “I... I don’t know yet. No reply from the reaction drive room. The engineers...”

“I can guess,” said Taubman heavily.

“We all can,” said Clavering.

“It’s an ill wind,” said Clavering. “If anybody had been killed in *Faraway Quest* I shouldn’t be feeling so happy about it, but even those in the reaction drive room escaped with only a bad shaking.”

Sally Ann laid down her pen, looked up from the store sheet that she was checking. As she looked at her husband’s face the frown lifted from her own. “Tell!” she ordered. “What are you so cheerful about?”

“Grimes sent for me,” said Clavering.

“I know,” she said. “What did he want you for?”

“I’m coming to that. *Faraway Quest* is, as you know, a converted Epsilon-class tramp. She is — or was — a survey ship of sorts, which means that cargo space had been modified for the accommodation of personnel. She had a full load of scientists when she crashed here — she was on her way to Eblis to carry out a proper exploration. .

“Eblis,” said his wife. “That’s the world that *Thermopylae* was almost lost on. . .

“That’s right. Anyhow, there’s this expedition fitted out at great expense and no ship to carry it. *Faraway Quest* can be made space-worthy again, but it’ll not be done in five minutes. Meanwhile, here at Port Forlorn, is one large vessel — complete with ample accommodation and storage space — a large vessel, furthermore, that’s just pining for a charter. . .

“You mean that they want us?” she demanded.

“Who else?” he countered. “Meanwhile, call a general meeting of the shareholders — they’re apt to sulk, Rokovsky especially, if anything is done without their being consulted.”

"I," she said, "will do just that."

"Also," he told her, "you can tell the hired help that they're getting paid."

He left her to make the arrangements, went into the lounge, sat in his usual chair. Larwood came in, his wife with him. They smiled at the captain, knowing from his expression that he had good news for them. Rokovsky, morose as always, joined them, and the only slightly less gloomy Taubman. Lastly, Sally Ann entered briskly, carrying a large folder of papers.

She remained standing, said, "The Chairman of the Board of Directors will now address you." She sat down as Clavering got to his feet.

Briefly, yet omitting nothing, Clavering told them of his meeting with Grimes. He said that *Sally Ann* would be on hire for a minimum period of six months, and that during this time all expenses — wages, propellant, supplies — would be paid by Rim Runners.

"And what," asked Larwood, "about insurance? Lloyd's have a list of proscribed planets and Eblis is on the list. We can land — but it means ruinous premiums if we do. Or are we just hanging off in orbit and sending the scientists down in the boats?"

"We are landing," said Clavering. "Grimes assures me that there is a plateau in the northern hemisphere that's quite safe. Rim Runners are looking after our insurance in any case.

"And what sort of planet is this Eblis?" demanded Rokovsky.

"It's just what its name implies," replied Clavering. "It's in the throes of perpetual vulcanism. The atmosphere's a fine, rich mixture of carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide and a few more noxious gases. The seas are practically undiluted acid. The electrical storms are so spectacular as to be clearly visible from over a thousand miles out in Space. . ."

"Any life?" asked Mary Larwood.

"That's one of the things the expedition hopes to find out," Clavering told her.

"We shall be risking the ship," grumbled Rokovsky.

"She'll be well covered," Clavering assured him.

"And our lives," continued the engineer.

"We're spacemen," said Larwood, "and we risk our lives every time that we lift from the surface of a planet. Come to that — we risk our lives every time that we cross a busy street."

"The Commodore," said Clavering, "wants our answer by 1300 hours today. There will be quite a deal of fitting out to be done if we accept the charter. So we'll vote on it now."

"I still don't like it," complained Rokovsky, but his hand was raised in assent with those of the others.

None of *Sally Ann's* people was sorry to get away from Loin. It is a dismal planet, perhaps the most dismal of all the Rim Worlds. It is always cold, and the wind is always blowing, and the air is always thick with dust and chemical fumes.

They were pleased, all of them, when the passengers, the personnel of the Combined Universities Expedition to Eblis, boarded, when the ramps were drawn up and in and the airlock doors closed. They were happy as they stood by at their various stations, as the last seconds ticked away to the authorized time of departure.

Clavering and his navigating officers sat in the control room, looking out at the dismal landscape — the low, brown hills, the heaps of slag, the untidy, unlovely huddle of shabby buildings that was the city of Port Forlorn. The sun shone bleakly through the haze that was the work of Industrial Man as much as the work of Nature.

Clavering watched the sweep second hand of the chronometer, waited for the last reports to come in from all departments. Satisfied, "Lift ship!" he ordered.

"Lift ship!" repeated Larwood.

*Sally Ann* trembled as the rockets fired, then the great bulk of her rose as though she, like her people, was glad to be getting away and clear from Loin. Clavering could see the dirty concrete of the spaceport diminishing fast below them, cranes and gantries and the Rim Runners' tramp loading for Tharn looking like toys, the hulk of the unfortunate *Faraway Quest*, surrounded by the busy machines of the ship repair squads, looking like the body of some large insect being torn to pieces by voracious ants.

Clavering was sorry for *Faraway Quest* and for her Captain — but he was, at the same time, glad — his loyalties were to *Sally Ann*, and this charter, even though it was the direct result of another shipmaster's misfortune, could well mean her salvation.

She was clear of the atmosphere now, her rockets silent, falling free in orbit about the dun, uninviting ball that was Loin. To one side of her was the great glowing lens of the Galaxy, to the other the black emptiness of intergalactic space. Her gyroscopes whined as she turned slowly, as Larwood lined her up for the Eblis sun. Clavering was content to watch the efficient, unhurried actions of his Chief Officer; reckless he might be in some respects, but never in his ship handling or his navigation.

"Resume accelerations sir?" asked Larwood. "One gravity for five minutes?"

"Resume acceleration," replied Clavering.

Again the rockets roared, building up thrust and velocity. Larwood took observations and read instruments, assisted by the Second Officer, corrected *Sally Ann's* trajectory with a brief burst from a steering jet. When he was satisfied he looked at Clavering, who nodded. Larwood cut the reaction drive, ordered the Mamschenn Drive to be started. The song of the spinning, precessing flywheels filled all the spaces of the ship; abruptly the Galactic lens took on the appearance of a huge, luminous Klein flask fashioned by a demented glass blower. Clavering felt, as always, the uncanny sensation of *deja vu* as the temporal precession fields built up, the knowledge that past, present and future were one and indivisible. He wondered, as he always did on these occasions, if he possessed in some slight degree the talent of precognition. He tried, as he always did — and invariably without success — to foresee coming events.

"On trajectory, sir," reported the Chief Officer.

"Thank you, Mr Larwood. Set deep space watches, observe standing orders."

He unbuckled himself from his chair, pulled himself by the guide rail to the axial shaft. He wanted to see how *Sally Ann* was making out with the passengers and, more especially, with the almost untrained girls who had been engaged as stewardesses. He tried, for the last time, before his mind became accustomed to the time-twisting field of the Drive, to look into the future.

All that he could think of was what Grimes had said to him when he had been trying to arrange a charter: "A man who'd come out to the Rim to earn his living would go to Hell for a pastime."

It was a quiet trip.

The scientists kept very much to themselves and gave no trouble. There was no need for the ship's staff to organize entertainments, to keep the customers busy and, therefore, happy. The customers kept themselves busy, checking and rechecking their equipment, studying what little was known about the world to which they were bound, attending lectures given by the experts in various fields.

The only one of the party with whom Clavering had any real contact was Dr Fosdick, the leader of the expedition. He and the Master studied such maps and charts as existed — and incomplete and vague they were — and tried to work out some sort of plan of campaign.

"This is the plateau, Captain," said Fosdick, his gnarled index finger stabbing at the paper. "Observations from Space indicate that it is free from volcanic activity and not affected by earthquakes.

"Can you see an earthquake from a thousand miles out?" asked Clavering dubiously. "Remember that a ship on the ground is a fragile and top heavy thing, and a relatively slight tremor could well cause her total destruction.

"The spring stays should take care of that," Fosdick assured him. "After all, Captain Calver, in *Loin Lady*, rode out a hurricane on Melise — his ship was grounded for engine repairs — by using his stays."

"I've heard all about that," grumbled Clavering. "I'm beginning to wonder why the marvellous Captain Calver wasn't picked for this job. In any case — a hurricane is not an earthquake, and both are outside a spaceman's normal range of experience."

"There are hurricanes as well as earthquakes on Eblis," said Fosdick cheerfully, his teeth startlingly white in his gaunt, brown face as he grinned. "You'll be used to both by the time we leave."

"If we leave," said Clavering gloomily.

"We'll leave all right. Now, this plateau. It's an ideal base for our operations, affording a good landing ground for both 'planes and helicopters. As far as we can see from the photographs from space there's a fairly gradual slope down to the south'ard — it's almost more of a bluff than a plateau,

really that our tractors will be able to negotiate. All that you have to do is to set the ship down somewhere in the middle of it.”

“Easier said than done,” remarked Clavering sarcastically.

He was far from happy about the project. He had been brought up in the big ships of the Trans-Galactic Clippers, in a service in which the biggest of all crimes is the hazarding of one’s vessel. He had made landings only on planets with proper spaceports and adequate facilities. He had lived, until now, in an orderly Universe governed by wise rules and regulations. He was beginning to regret the winning of that huge lottery prize by the syndicate of which he was a member.

He said, “I’ll have to send down probe rockets first.”

“Of course, Captain. You’re the spaceman — we’re only passengers. The terms of your charter demand that you deliver us and our equipment on Eblis, that you maintain your ship as headquarters for the expedition. *How* you do it is up to you entirely.”

“I’ll need the help of your people in evaluating the data obtained by the probes.”

“Of course.”

“And my requirements are a stable landing ground and no winds over fifty knots.”

“Now,” said Fosdick, “you’re asking too much.”

Yes, thought Clavering, he had been asking too much. He and Larwood sat strapped in their chairs in Control while Fosdick and his team correlated the data being sent up from the surface of the planet below them. He looked out through the ports at the huge, ruddily glowing sphere. Whoever had named it Eblis had not exaggerated. It seemed impossible that any life could survive on its fierily hostile crust for longer than five seconds at the outside, no matter what cunning aids existed. He heard Fosdick and his men and women exclaiming happily — happily! — over each fresh piece of evidence. “Surface temperature 99.5 degrees Centigrade!” “The wind force of seventy knots!” “And what a wind! Straight hydrochloric acid gas!” “The radiation count’s surprisingly low...” This in tones of disappointment. “Hullo! Free oxygen! What’s that doing here?” “No trace of it from *my* rocket.”

Larwood raised quizzical eyebrows. He murmured, “We seem to have let ourselves in for something, sir.”

“You’re telling me,” agreed the Captain. “I thought that this was a good idea at the time we drew up the charter — now I’m not so sure.”

“Rokovsky’s bellyaching as usual,” said Larwood. “He’s telling everybody that it’ll be suicide to attempt a landing. Mary’s quite keen, though. She has the idea that there might even be life of a sort on Eblis.”

“And all that Sally Ann’s worried about is getting the hire money,” said Clavering.

Fosdick pulled himself over to them, handling himself in free fall with almost the ease of an experienced spaceman. He looked almost happy. He said, “How soon can you take her down, Captain Clavering?”

“As soon as I get a detailed report from your bright boys on what to expect,” replied Clavering. “As soon as I get some data on wind velocities and on the nature of the terrain on the bluff, or the plateau, or whatever you’ve decided to call it. As soon as I can be assured that the ship won’t be toppled over by an earth tremor as soon as she touches down.”

“That last assurance I can’t give you,” said Fosdick.

“Then we don’t land.”

“I appreciate your feelings,” said the scientist, “but I must remind you that according to the terms of the charter party you receive no hire money whatsoever until the landing is made. If you’ve brought us here to have a look at Eblis from a safe distance then you, and you alone, are liable for the cost of our transportation for the round trip. Believe me, I hate having to hold a pistol at your head — but I have my job to do, just as you have yours.”

“Sally Ann should have had more sense when she arranged the charter,” said Larwood.

“We all read it,” said Clavering. “Even Rokovsky was in agreement. And, after all, if we do lose the ship we don’t lose financially.”

“There are such minor matters as our lives and our certificates to be considered,” said Larwood, grinning. “Still, it’s a gamble, and I’m one never to turn a gamble down.”

“I’m not a gambler,” replied Clavering shortly.

“Well, Captain?” demanded Fosdick impatiently.

“You heard what I said,” Clavering told him. “I’m not a gambler. I’ve no intention on gambling that the earth tremors will hold off long enough for me to set *Sally Ann* down on her beautiful backside and for me to get the spring stays rigged.”

“So you refuse to land?”

“I never said that. I said that I wasn’t gambling. I’ve devoted a great deal of thought to the landing problems; I never believed that your plateau was the ideal spot you said it was. I worked on the assumption that it wasn’t — and, as far as I can gather, the probe rockets have borne me out.” He turned to his Mate. “Mr Larwood — those stays are easily accessible, aren’t they?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Then I’d like them shackled to the stem eyebolts right away. At the same time you can have numbers one and two boats ready for launching. You’ll need four of those portable electric winches that Dr Fosdick has among his equipment — I’m assuming, Doctor, that you’re willing to lend them to me. . .

“I don’t see why I should.”

“Do you want to land on this literally blasted planet, or don’t you?”

“I do, but I can’t see. . .”

“As you keep on reminding me — I’m a spaceman. Now, Mr Larwood, these stays. I want them shackled on with the spring up. It’s not the way they were supposed to be used, but it’s the way that I’m using them.

“Spring up, sir,” repeated Larwood.

“Good. Now, Dr Fosdick, I’m going to ask you for volunteers. As you know, we don’t carry a large crew. We haven’t the personnel for what I have in mind. I’ll want at least six of your men, all in radiation armour.”

“You’ve thought of something,” grumbled the scientist, “but what? And surely it would have been better if we had all discussed it in advance of our landing.”

“That,” said Clavering, “was the one thing that I didn’t want to do. Landing a big ship is essentially a one-man job. If he discusses the job first, other people will put forward their own schemes, some of them at least as good as his own. That way the seeds of doubt are sown and take root. That way, at a crucial moment there’s just that second or so of hesitation, and the ship is lost. Understand one thing, please. I know what I’m going to do, and I think that it’s the best way to do it.”

“I think that we should know what you’re going to do, too,” said Fosdick. “After all, if we volunteer we have a right to be told what risks we’re running.”

“I take it that you’re among the volunteers?” asked Clavering.

“Of course.”

“All right. As you are aware, it might well be that a sudden earth tremor, a sudden gust of wind, will upset the ship at the very moment of landing. She’ll be safe enough once the spring stays are rigged — but quite a lot can happen while they’re being rigged. This is my plan. I send two boats down in advance of the ship under my chief and second officers. Each boat will carry two of the portable winches, anchoring gear, and the volunteers. The volunteers will set up the winches and mark the landing site. We, in *Sally Ann*, will drop down as gently as possible, with the stays all ready to be fired to the ground by signal rockets. I considered landing with the stays trailing, but there’s too much risk of their getting into the exhaust. As soon as the ends of the stays are on the ground they will be taken to the winches and heaved taut, and kept taut as the ship loses altitude. . .

“You’re putting a lot of trust in the winches and the ground anchors,” said Fosdick.

“I have no option.”

“And you say that *I’m* a gambler!” exclaimed Larwood.

“A calculated risk is not a gamble,” replied Clavering stiffly. “Now, Mr Larwood, you know what I want done, and why. I shall be obliged if you will begin making the necessary arrangements.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” replied Larwood smartly.

*It should work, thought Clavering. It must work. As far as I know, no landing of this nature has ever been attempted before — at least, not with a spaceship. I’ve seen something similar done on Chassor, where the natives use big, gas-filled airships for transport — but a spaceship is not an airship. Even so, I’m substituting thrust for buoyancy, so there’s not all that much difference. .*

The periscope showed him the terrain immediately below the ship. He could see the great daub of white pigment on the bare, red rock, the two boats well clear of it, the four winches, each standing in its own patch of white, the tiny, spacesuited figures of the two officers and the volunteers.

So far things were going well. He was finding it easy to keep Larwood's marker centred in the field of the periscope. Mary Larwood, with another three volunteers from among the scientists, was standing by in the airlock with the signal rockets, to which the thin, flexible but enormously strong stay wires had been shackled. To make a landing with an airlock door open was against all the rules of spacemanship — but in this case it had to be done.

Sally Ann was assisting in the control room; it was not the first time that she had done so. Short handed as the ship, her namesake, was, it had often been necessary for officers to perform duties outside their own departments. She was watching the radar, calling the altitude readings at short, measured intervals.

"Seven hundred... Six-fifty... Six hundred... Five-fifty..."

"Airlock!" barked Clavering. "Fire one!"

"Fire one!" replied Mary Larwood's voice from the intercom speaker.

The missile came into the field of the periscope, trailing its plume of white exhaust smoke. It fell with deceptive slowness — the difference, thought Clavering, between objective and subjective time. It struck well clear of the winch for which it was aimed, burst in brief flame and flying fragments. Larwood's men pounced on it, took the end of the wire to the anchored winch.

"Fire two!" ordered Clavering.

"Fire two!"

The second rocket, to the Captain's dismay, was speeding straight for its target. He thought of increasing thrust to lift the ship, hoping thereby to twitch the line and throw the rocket out of its trajectory, knowing that with all the slack wire there was little hope that this could be done. His hand was about to descend on the firing keys when he saw the little rocket veer — it was, he learned later, an opportune gust of wind acting upon the vanes and the trailing line — and, it seemed to him, barely skim the winch. *A miss, he thought relievedly, is as good as a mile.*

Again Larwood and his men pounced, working with speed and efficiency.

"Landing party to *Sally Ann*," came Larwood's voice, tinny and distorted, lacking depth. "Chief Officer to *Sally Ann*. First and second wires on winches."

"Up slack," ordered Clavering. Then: "Control to air lock. Fire three!"

"Fire three!"

There was a limited arc of fire from the outer door of the airlock; even so, Mary Larwood contrived to place the rocket well clear of the first two. Clavering watched Larwood's men — fewer of them now, two of them were standing by winch controls — carry the end of the wire to the third winch.

"Control to landing party," he snapped. "Up slack. Control to airlock. Fire four!"

After a short interval Larwood reported, "All wires on winch barrels. Am taking up slack."

The scene below the ship, in the periscope field, quivered, as though watched through disturbed water. Stupidly, Clavering looked at his gauges and meters, wondering what was wrong, why he felt no vibration, realized that he was watching a severe earth tremor. He saw the landing party stagger and fall, saw the men at the winches cling to their machines desperately. Through the ports he saw that, even so, an even tension was being maintained on all four stays. The tremor was worsening, though. The driver of the northernmost winch was thrown from the seat of his machine. He must have clutched at the control lever as he fell. The wire tightened. Looking up, Clavering watched the powerful spring at the ship's stem opening.

"Larwood!" he called urgently.

Larwood had scrambled to his feet, was running unsteadily towards the runaway machine. The Second Officer, who had risen to a sitting position, was waving to the other drivers, making circling motions with his arms, obviously signalling to them to open up their own controls to maximum speed.

It was the southern winch that took the strain first — and as the weight came on it a dark fissure opened in the rock directly under it, directly in way of the screw pile anchor. The machine lurched over the ground, spilling its operator, climbing up its own wire.

*Sally Ann* tilted dangerously, in the direction of the overtaut stay to the northward.

*When in doubt, Get out!*



The words of the old spaceman's rhyme flashed through Clavering's mind. But he couldn't get out. He was secured to the surface of the planet by three strong wires, by three screw piles. If he applied maximum thrust the wire *might* break or the piles pull out, at the risk of considerable damage to the ship and, even worse, severe casualties to the landing party.

He cut the drive.

*Sally Ann* fell sickeningly. The red rocks rushed up to meet her, to crush her.

Clavering's hands fell heavily on the firing keys. The ship shuddered under maximum thrust, shuddered and checked her descent, started to lift. Swiftly, Clavering reduced the power of his thundering jets, held the ship balanced there, thrust cancelling but not overcoming gravity. He realized that the wire of the runaway winch had sagged into the incandescent exhaust and had been parted, saw that the other three were once again under full control. He knew that there were now only three stays, and those not placed to the best advantage.

"Rokovsky," he said into the intercom. "I want you to get another wire along into the airlock, and I want it shackled on to the stem as soon as we touch. Larwood!"

"Sir?" answered the Chief Officer.

"You heard what I told Rokovsky. Can that winch and the screw pile be used again?"

"That winch is tough," replied Larwood, "and the thread of the pile's undamaged."

"Good. Get them set up again as near as possible to the old place. Is the tremor over?"

"Yes."

"Maintain the tension on the other stays. I'm coming in." He dropped the ship without undue haste, yet without undue caution, careful, however, to defer landing until the winch was once again anchored. At the first quiver that told of contact with the surface he cut the drive. He sat back in his chair, conscious at last of the perspiration that had soaked his garments, grateful when *Sally Ann* got up from her own seat to stand beside him, her hand on his shoulder. He watched the spacesuited figures clambering up the hull outside the control room ports, heard faintly the clang of their armoured feet and hands in the recessed rungs. He saw the wire snaking up after them, saw Larwood and his people running with the free end of it to the winch. He felt the ship tremble as, after what seemed an unconscionably long delay, the weight came on it.

Only then could he begin to relax, could he stare out of the ports at the desolate landscape, at the barren rocks, at the distant, heavily smoking, flaring volcanoes, at the ruddy sky with its glowing, ominous clouds scudding before the gale.

"Even so," said *Sally Ann*, "it's not as bad as Loin."

Clavering, who had come to hate that planet during his vessel's long stay on its surface, agreed.

They were not long on the plateau.

Fosdick had lost no time in sending out his exploring parties, both by land and by air. It had been the party that he was leading that had found the valley, an oasis in the burning aridity of the north polar regions. There was life in the valley — as, in fact, there was in many other regions of Eblis — both plant and animal. The surroundings hills shielded the valley from the noxious gales and the atmosphere was breathable by humans. There was a level plain, beside a river of barely lukewarm water, on which a ship could land. The valley was a paradise compared with most of the planet — and it was like a medieval artist's conception of Hell.

Clavering, not reluctantly, had lifted the ship from the plateau, had taken her to the valley. It had been necessary to repeat the manoeuvre with the stay wires and winches — the new landing place and base was not free from earth tremors

— but this time the operation had been carried out without mishap.

The time set for the expedition's return to Loin approached.

Clavering, taking one last walk through the valley with *Sally Ann*, decided that he would be sorry to leave the place. It was pleasant to walk abroad without a spacesuit, lightly attired in shorts and shirt uniform, to feel the warm air on bare skin, to breathe that same air and to appreciate the not unpleasant tang given it by the diluted fumes from the distant volcanoes. There were no volcanoes in the valley itself — only two huge pillars of flaming, roaring natural gas and a half dozen spectacular geysers.

By the river they walked, the steam from the warm water billowing about them, obscuring and still further distorting the outlines of the rocks tortured into towering, grotesque shapes by some long ago volcanic activity. Past trees and shrubs they walked, past the plants with their gnarled, convoluted trunks and stems, with the broad, jagged edged leaves that were black rather than green, over grass of

the same sombre hue. But there was colour in the crimson river and the crimson sky, in the clumps of monstrous fungi, misshapen monstrosities in orange and lemon yellow. Overhead, black, ragged silhouettes against the glowing sky, flapped the flying things, more bird than reptile, croaking dismally. A tribe of “devils” — horned, scaly beings built on the same lines as the Terran kangaroo — hopped to meet them, hold out their claws for the candies that the explorers had learned to carry in their pockets.

“This place is frightening,” said Sally Ann, “but it’s not frightening in the real sense of the word, not any longer. It’s like... It’s like the scary rides and so on in a Fun Palace. You pay good money to be scared — but, all the time, at the back of your mind you aren’t scared. You know it’s all make-believe. It’s the same here. There’s scenery like an old time artist’s idea of Hell — the river could be a river of blood and these rocks could be the damned themselves, writhing in perpetual torment. Then we have the devils...” She paused to give some more candy to the most persistent of them. “We have the devils, the most evil looking beasts that I’ve seen on any world I’ve visited — and all that they’re good for is scrounging chocolate...”

“You know,” she went on, “people pay to see far less convincing shows than this — and we’re getting paid for seeing it. Oh well, we’d better make the most of it. We have to take our load of scientists back to Loin, and then we’ll be back in the real Hell — the one in which we have to make enough money, somehow, to keep the ship running. When this character expires there’ll be nothing for us on the Rim...”

“So everybody keeps on telling me,” said Clavering.

“And Grimes told me something else, too. I’ve just remembered it.”

“What was it?” she asked.

“Just one of the Rim World proverbs,” he said.

She was a large hunk of ship was *Sally Ann*, too large and too imposing for the name she bore. She stood proudly in her berth at Port Forlorn, dwarfing cranes and gantries and administration buildings, towering high above *Rim girl* and *Rim bird*, both typical units of the Rim Runners’ fleet.

Commodore Grimes, Astronautical Superintendent for Rim Runners, looked out from the window of his office toward the big ship, screwing his eyes against the steely glare of the westering sun. There was a certain admiration showing on his hard, pitted face as he said, “So you’ve done it, Captain. You’re making that big white elephant of yours pay for her feed bills...”

“And there’s a little left over for us,” said Clavering, watching the embarking passengers moving up the ramp in a wonderfully steady stream.

“You’ll have had expenses,” said Grimes. “Setting up a permanent holiday camp on Eblis, for a start. And your advertising...”

“Your people did most of that for us,” said Clavering. “Those excellent films made by the expedition have been showing to packed houses on all the Rim Worlds. As for the rest of it — the Universities are sharing the expense and, of course, the profits, which will help to finance their further explorations of Eblis.”

“How did you think of it?” asked Grimes.

“It was something my wife said our last night in the valley. You’ve seen the films of it — it’s a weird place, rather terrifying, yet with no real danger whatsoever. Even if there’s an earthquake, the grass is soft, and the inflatable houses we’ve shipped out are earthquake proof anyhow. She said it was like those scary sideshows in Fun Palaces — haunted houses and the like — that people pay good money to enter. They like to be frightened, as long as they know that it’s a make-believe fright. Too, it’s a change from Loin and Faraway, Ultimo and Thule... Yes, and it was something that you said, too, that put me on to it.”

“And what was that, Captain Clavering?”

““A man who comes out to the Rim to make his living,”” quoted Clavering, ““would go to Hell for a pastime.””