

FIFTY THOUSAND NUGGETS By DON WILCOX

JUNE
25¢



AMAZING ANC STORIES



The scum of seven worlds
sought to solve the

**SECRET
OF THE
BLACK PLANET**

By MILTON LESSER

KEEP OUT #

BASE

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UNTIL YOU READ THIS!

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SAVE UP TO \$150 ON A NEW TV SET!

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No waiting 3 or 4 days
for service, or getting
"soaked" by independ-
ent repair man. Magic
Trouble Spotter tells what's wrong,
and shows what to do!

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Why throw away \$25
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driver give you miracle
repair in 4 minutes!

No Picture, No Sound
No need to run to neigh-
bor's house for favor-
able program! Magic Trou-
ble Spotter has set operat-
ing again before commercial is over!

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gives you movie-clear
picture in 30 seconds,
easy as A-B-C!

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- ... Install Your Own Special Antennas—Filters—Boosters!
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This Book Shows You How To:

- ... Save Up To Half The Price When You Buy!
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- ... What To Watch For When Buying!—Don't Be Cheated!
- ... Get The Top Trade-In Value On Your Old Set!

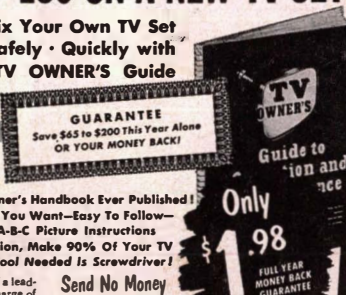
Tells You Everything You Have To Know

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for repairs?... when it's so easy to fix your set
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Hitler resisted, but the doctor was quite firm and had his way. The book

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is the 320-page story of what followed, the record of the most daring exorcism ever made into the sexual aspects of the paranoid human ego.

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Such records are usually sealed in secret files for professional reference only. But as he continued to treat his monstrous patient, three things dawned on Dr. Krueger:

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Dr. Krueger's escape to America and the publication of his book followed as matters of course.

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I Was Hitler's Doctor is a terrifying mirror which Nature tauntingly holds up before us, challenging us to look at it—**IF WE DARE!**

"Hitler flows into the madness of this age and

THE MADNESS OF THIS AGE

flows into Hitler," writes Dr. Arvin Elinde of the U. S. Army Medical Reserve in one of the book's three revealing introductions.

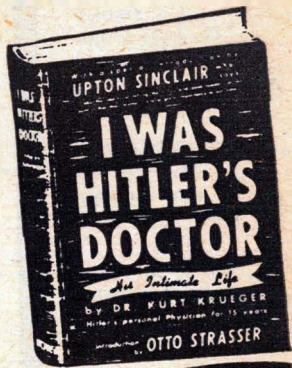
The other two introductions are by Otto Strasser who knew both Hitler and his doctor, and world-famous novelist and critic Upton Sinclair.

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All **STORIES** Complete

SECRET OF THE BLACK PLANET (Short novel—30,000) .. by Milton Lesser 8

Illustrated by Ed. Emsler

"Instantaneous regeneration of cellular composites" was a nice round impressive phrase that tossed a circus strong-man into a death struggle with three worlds!

THEY FLY SO HIGH (Short—6,000) by Ross Rocklynne 64

Illustrated by David Stone

Dornley regarded his prisoner, Dr. Skutch, as merely an old man who talked too much. What he forgot was that there is no greater weapon than a forked tongue!

THE OPPOSITE IS HELL (Novelette—20,000) by Chester S. Geier 76

Illustrated by E. A. Alexander

From out of the galaxy's mysterious depths drifted a derelict space ship, a dead crew at the controls. What would Clay find aboard: wealth, new weapons, or—?

FIFTY THOUSAND NUGGETS (Short—10,000) by Don Wilcox 112

Illustrated by Ed. Emsler

There's one nice thing about having your partners die during a treasure hunt: your own share of the loot goes bigger—if you're still around at the pay-off!

MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE — III (Short—5,000) Author Unknown 131

Illustrated by Ed. Valigursky

It wasn't until the Twenty-second Century that Earth's scientists found the real answer to space travel—and then only through the efforts of a self-styled failure

Front cover painting by Walter Popp, illustrating

a scene from the story "Secret of the Black Planet"

CONTRIBUTIONS: Contributors are advised to retain a copy of their manuscripts and illustrations. Contributions should be mailed to the New York Editorial Office and must be accompanied by return postage. Contributions will be handled with reasonable care, but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. Any copy accepted is subject to whatever adaptations and revisions are necessary to meet the requirements of this publication. Payment covers all author's, contributor's and contestant's rights, title, and interest in and to the material accepted and will be made at our current rates upon acceptance. All photos and drawings will be considered as part of the material purchased.

THE OBSERVATORY

by the Editor

IT SEEMS we've gone and put our foot in it again! We mean this "duology" business. You know, two stories about the same characters, to appear in succeeding issues of the magazine. That way we would please the readers who wanted serials, and yet not make unhappy those who don't care for continued stories.

WE TRIED the idea out with the March and April issues of *Amazing Stories*, featuring Bloodstone's "Land Beyond the Lens" and "The Golden Gods". Together they added up to 60,000 words of stirring action and intrigue, plus one of the most compelling and tender love stories we've come across in our years of reading and editing fiction.

OH, IT WENT over, all right—we've no complaint there! With scarcely a dissenting vote, the readers were unstinting with their praise. Many thought the two stories added up to a novel as fine as anything Edgar Rice Burroughs had ever written. We won't go *that* far, but it didn't miss by much.

BUT HERE'S where the rub comes in; here's where we find ourselves in trouble. For it appears that a large percentage of our readers wants us to go right on running long novels about Michael Flannigan, month after month, cover after cover. Our idea was that 60,000 words about one set of characters within two months would be ample indeed, and readers would be ready for a complete change.

CLEARLY a compromise of some sort would have to be made. To put the same author on the cover month after month wouldn't do at all; after all we can't have people asking the dealer for a copy of *Bloodstone Stories*. So, in an attempt to keep everybody happy, we asked the author to do a third, and positively final, story about Flannigan. He did and it's the best of them all and it will run in the August issue...and that, we hope, will be all of that!

WILL THAT solve our problem? Maybe not; for with this issue we start our

second duology—the first 30,000 words of Milton Lesser's tremendous novel of love and hate and adventure against a background of space and other worlds. It is, we think, equally as fine a job as that turned out by Bloodstone—but in an altogether different style and conception.

BY COINCIDENCE, we said goodbye to Milt Lesser today. The outfit that hands out free guns and uniforms decided he'd be just the guy to have around for the next few years. We have no idea how he'll work out with a gun in his hands, but if he can handle it the way he did a type-writer, he'll end up round-shouldered with medals! As it is, we hate like the devil to see him go. We had big plans for Milt....

NEXT MONTH, the second part of the John Hastings duology, even better than the first. Also, another chapter of "Master of the Universe"—a series that is scheduled for book publication soon after the last installment appears in these pages. See you next month! —HB



"But what'll I tell the census taker?"

From Out of the Ashes

By Roy Small



THE HOTTEST, most exciting metal today, with limitless potentialities, is not a replacement for steel like titanium, nor is it a substitute for aluminum like magnesium. Instead it is a feeble metal, occurring in moderately plentiful quantities and to be found in the coal pile and ash pile of every home. The metal is germanium!

The importance of germanium comes from its application, only a few years ago, to electronics. Prior to this, the metal was just another one of those oddly named ones which the chemistry handbooks like to list. Today you can't pick up a book on electronics without being aware of the revolution this metal may cause. As for tomorrow—the future of germanium is fabulous!

Germanium has two properties outstanding for electronics use. The first is that it can rectify electric current. This is not particularly remarkable, as there are many crystalline metallic and non-metallic materials which can do this. Familiar lead sulphide (galena) has this property, and most people have at one time or another toyed with galena in building small crystal radio sets. Germanium, however, works as a superb rectifier and is being widely used for that purpose today as a replacement for the diode vacuum tube in many radio and television sets.

The main use and promise of germanium, however, is in its astounding property of serving as a direct replacement without filament or heating power as a duplicate of a vacuum tube! When three small wires are connected to a crystal of

germanium metal in a certain way, the crystal performs exactly like a three-element vacuum tube—which, after all, is the greatest invention of modern times.

Now a vacuum tube is a touchy device, fragile, sensitive and power-consuming, and for the most part the limitations of portable electronics equipment have stemmed from the limitations of the vacuum tube. A germanium "transistor", as the vacuum tube replacement is called, eliminates these limitations. It's just a tiny little tube, smaller than a half-inch section of a lead pencil. It performs precisely like a vacuum tube, however, and above all it needs no filament or heater supply of electricity. The result is that it does not get hot, it does not waste power, and it can be fitted in anywhere. In addition, mechanically it is extremely rugged.

Laboratories are working frantically to make it applicable to almost every use to which ordinary vacuum tubes may be put. In particular, the Bell Labs have worked out the bugs, and while the germanium transistor will never replace the vacuum tube for power or broadcasting purposes, for reception of radio, radar or TV, the little germanium crystal seems to be unlimited. The cost, too, is being brought down and the factories are already spewing them out like peas. Scientists see portable electronics equipment no larger than a matchbox. Wristwatch radios become practicable and electronics circuits can be fitted in a button. Hearing aids are shrinking in size to button-like shapes hidden in the hair. The germanium transistor is a midget, but it's mighty!

THE PLANT THAT WANTED TO DIE

MAN ISN'T the only living thing which makes deadly errors. According to Perry Stout of the University of California, plants often severely injure themselves—or commit suicide.

It seems that there are fifteen minerals which are essential for proper plant growth. Oftentimes, plants will take up the wrong mineral, with sad results.

A case in point: experiments have shown that, instead of calcium, which is an essential plant food, a "confused" plant will sometimes imbibe strontium, an element which adds absolutely nothing to its growth. In a case like this, a deficiency in calcium results—and a stunted plant is produced.

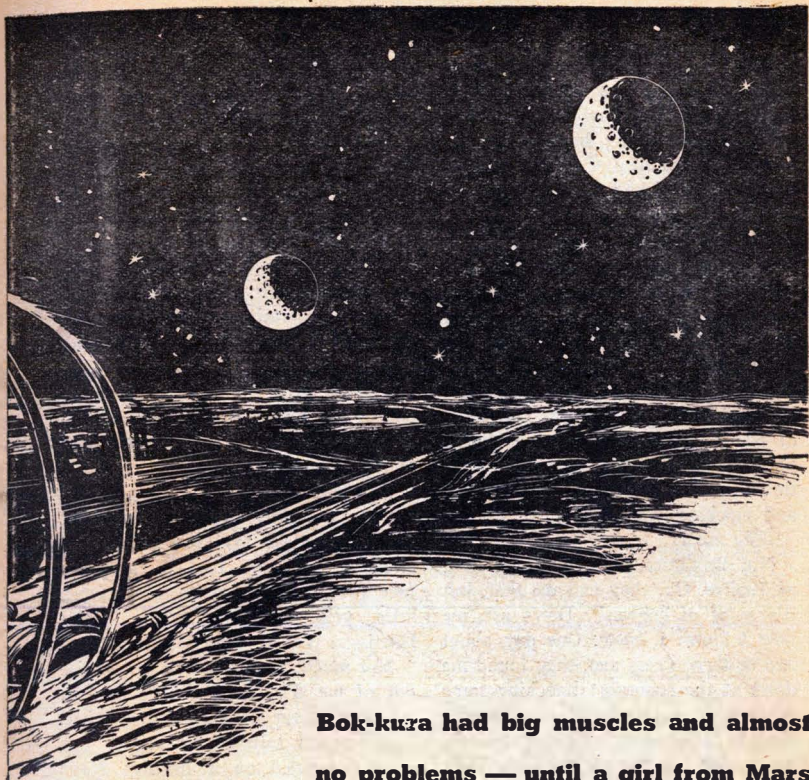
—Merritt Linn

SECRET OF THE BLACK PLANET

By Milton Lesser



The sand sled, momentarily out of control, swerved sharply just as the blow caught me



Bok-kura had big muscles and almost no problems — until a girl from Mars made a remark that got him elected as the man most likely to drop dead!

MY NAME? Hell, I don't know. Any name will do, but you might call me John Hastings, for that was what the girl called me just before someone tried to kill me.

One thing for sure—don't go around saying I'm Bok-kura, Strong Man of Jupiter. Sure, I'm strong, damn strong, and I've got reflexes so fast they'd

make your hair stand on end, like all the sideshow blurbs say. But don't call me Bok-kura, not unless you want to see that strength and those reflexes go to work on you!

I'd just about decided to give up this Strong Man stuff anyway. I couldn't look at myself in the mirror any more. You see, you lift weights, no phonies, but legitimate three-or four-

hundred-pound barbells. You bend iron rods and watch all the girls in the audience gasp. You beat up a few of the local strong boys when the show is on the road. For that you get room and board and a couple of solar's' spending money each week.

But one question keeps nagging at your brain. It's there every time you stop long enough to think. It's there before you go to sleep at night, your muscles stiff and aching. And it's there when you wake up in the morning, the Fat Man of Venezuela snoring contentedly on the next cot. Most of all, it's there all the while you're performing, the big mirrored walls throwing your reflection back at you and mocking you with it.

Who am I?

Not Bok-kura, not the Strong Man of Jupiter. Oh, they call me that, but it's a lot of hogwash. Don't ask me how I know. I *know*. One day about two or three years ago, they found me down at the spaceport knocking some sense into a couple of drunks who thought an off-duty spaceliner hostess was something you played with. They dragged me away so fast that the girl didn't even have time to thank me. I've been Bok-kura the Strong Man ever since.

What about before that day at the spaceport? Don't look at me like that—I can't remember a thing. Nothing. And so I'm Bok-kura.

The figment of an eager promotion man's interplanetary imagination, with about as much personal identity as a cubic mile of deep space....

IT WAS a weekday evening, with not much of a crowd out here in the Iowa sticks where space travel is still so much of a novelty that it brings the whole county out to watch every time an old battered circus cruiser comes snorting down on its faltering

rockets. After that, most of them go home. They wanted to see the ship, not what was inside it.

When the girl came in, she stopped the show as far as I was concerned. Not for long, only for a moment or two, long enough to take a good look at her. The cheap and gaudy dames of the solar run, with their painted faces and wagging hips, they're all right for a night's entertainment when you feel you need it. So's a bottle of Venusian brandy sometimes, but it doesn't make you think of a little cattle ranch on one of the Jovian moons, with a soft-glowing dome and a picket fence and all the trimmings.

This girl did.

Only I hardly had time to think about it, for she took one look at me sweating with my barbells and her face got all chalky white. She gave a little yelp and she cried, "John Hastings! You're John Hastings!"

Not much, really. But it got a rise out of me. I've kept a little card in my pocket ever since I can remember. Grubby and tattered, it had a few words scrawled on it hastily: *Have caution, John Hastings, they may try to kill you.*

One plus one, together they equal two. And John Hastings plus John Hastings? I didn't know, but maybe the girl could help me find out.

I put the barbell down too fast, and a muscle twinged dangerously in my abdomen. Then I think I jumped off my platform, and the way I came at her must have frightened the girl, for she backed up a quick step or two. "I'm sorry if I startled you," she said, looking at my face. "But I thought—"

"What did you think?" Sometimes I wish I could modulate my voice and sound like a tenor. I was trying to be gentle, but when I'm ruffled my voice has a way of rumbling up from deep inside my throat, and I guess my at-

tempt at gentleness didn't come off.

"All right," the girl told me curtly, regaining her composure, "you don't have to get angry. I just thought you looked like someone I used to know. It's impossible, of course—"

"Like John Hastings?"

"Yes, like John. That's what I said. You even sound like him, a little. Forget it, Mr. Strong Man. I'm imagining things." She turned on her heel and started to walk from the room.

Dufree came in then, and you don't play around on Dufree's time, not if you want to keep your job. I took one quick step after the girl, but Dufree nodded his suave good-looks toward my platform and I hopped back on it. Maybe I'd been taking orders for so long I'd got used to it, I don't know.

Dufree scowled. "Chase after the local gals like that, Bok-Kura, and I'll have to let you go. If you think I'm joking, go ahead and try it."

I DIDN'T. Instead, I had a better idea. Perez the Fat Man carried five hundred pounds around with him, but once he got started Perez could travel under a pretty good head of steam. And Perez wasn't slated to go on for another hour yet.

He lolled off in an alcove watching me perform and smoking a big cigar, the sweat rolling down his cheeks in little streams which came together at the rolls of fat under his chin. After Dufree left, I beckoned the Fat Man toward me, and he waddled ponderously forward.

I asked him, "Would you like to add my solars to yours next week?"

"That depends on what I've got to do. It's awful hot, Boky, and I'm awful big."

Bok-kura was bad enough. I kind of saw red when someone called me

Boky. But this time I let it pass. "Did you see that girl who just left?"

He gave a long low whistle and wiped the sweat from his cheeks with a damp bandana. "Lord, it's hot out here in the summer. We shoulda been on Mars for the season, Boky. Yeah, I saw her. So what?"

"So this. Follow her and let me know where she goes, and you get my credits. Okay?"

Perez shrugged and the fat jiggled up and down under his chin. "It's awful hot—"

"Two weeks, damn it!"

"And I got a lot of weight to tote around—"

"Three! Get the hell out of here now."

Perez shuffled his feet inside the special shoes which helped support his five-hundred pounds. "A month?" he asked me, yawning.

"A month! Okay, but you get nothing if you lose her."

Perez stopped shuffling, leaned forward and dragged his feet. Inertia helped him and soon his bulk squeezed through the doorway and disappeared.

I felt like laughing. There was a fine quarter-ton shadow to put on someone. . . .

Five minutes later, a man I'd never seen before tried to kill me.

IT HAPPENED like this: three or four people stood around while I got ready to press a three-hundred-pound barbell. Try it with half that weight when you have the chance. It isn't easy, and it requires all the concentration you can muster. But thanks to the girl I felt in no mood to concentrate, and that probably saved my life.

Briefly, I let my eyes wander over the audience, brought the bar up halfway and then started to strain. A nondescript figure of a man stood right

up front, reached inside his jumper and came up with what looked like a needle gun. I think it was a needle gun, although I'm not sure. Whatever it was, I had a pretty good hunch it could kill me.

The man pointed it at my chest, and no one saw him do it. They all watched me.

I lunged forward with the three-hundred-pound barbell still poised over my head. When I let it go, people started screaming, including the nondescript man who pointed his needle gun at my chest.

He threw up his hands involuntarily and when the bar struck there was a crunching sound. He started to fall and the weight fell with him, landing with the bar across his chest and the disks barely touching the ground on either side. He couldn't have been pinned better if someone had stuck a spike through his chest. He lay there moaning weakly and no one would have placed a bet regarding the state of his rib-cage. His arms lay limp, the right one flopping about a little. The needle gun had clattered away on the floor somewhere, into Perez' alcove perhaps.

Someone screamed again, not the nondescript man. Dufree came in, very grim and very angry. He took the situation in at a glance, said: "Was that an accident?"

Maybe this had finally done it. Maybe now I could go around finding out the things I had to know. Or maybe it was only temporary, but I felt pretty cocky then. "Does it look like an accident?" I demanded.

"Don't get snooty, Bok-kura. I asked you a question."

"I heard you. Why don't you find out for yourself?"

"Why don't I—" He turned white, not as white as the girl, but white enough. "First," he said, "you're fired.

Second, I'm going to call the police as soon as we can get your bar off this man. Come on, lift it up!"

"You lift it," I suggested. There was an old me somewhere deep inside, and at least for now it had come to the surface. Bok-kura performed his feats docily, like a well-trained animal. But someone else didn't.

John Hastings?

"You know I can't budge that," Dufree protested.

"Get someone to help you on the other side and you can roll it off him."

"Roll it! We'd break his ribs, if they aren't broken already. He could sue."

I muttered something about that being a shame, and then I began to walk out.

"Does someone have a gun!" Dufree cried. "I want to keep him here for the police. Doesn't anyone have a gun? Nothing?" And then he was grunting, and I assumed he had set about trying to move the barbell. For a moment I hoped quite cheerfully that he'd crush every rib in the man's chest, but then I found myself walking back inside.

I grabbed one of the disks and heaved up and over with the bar, placing it down gently on the floor. The man continued to groan as if I hadn't done a thing. At first I wanted to remain and question him, but it looked a lot like his answers would consist only of groaning, for a few hours at least. I turned to walk away again, flung Dufree off when he clung half-heartedly to my arm. Someone stood off in a corner with one of those new wrist phones, dialing the police probably.

That meant it was time for me to do like Perez—to scam, and fast. Perez!

SOMETIMES you can be fourteen different varieties of an idiot. How could I leave without hearing from Perez? The girl with her John Hastings had started this whole thing, and I wouldn't have been too surprised if Perez turned up with a connection between her and the non-descript man with the needle gun.

I ducked around the vacant lot and into the small bunkroom which I shared with the Fat Man, stripped out of my Strong Man getup and donned a jumper and a pair of leatheroid slacks. A moment later I ran out the back way and caught a glimpse of Dufree and another man approaching the front entrance warily. I thought the other man carried a gun, but it could have been my imagination.

A ditch separated the lot from a good two-lane highway which cut out across the prairie straight as a plumb-line toward Cedar Rapids, thirty miles away. I stretched out full-length in the ditch and prepared to wait. It might be a long wait at that, for Perez wouldn't exactly fly back with his information—if he got any.

A few jetcars streaked by on the highway, zooming off in the direction of Cedar Rapids. The sun hung low on the Western horizon, and off to the South a big thunderhead was piled high, billowing mass atop billowing mass. The whole thing rumbled ominously as it reared its dark head over the flatlands, and an occasional flash of lightning knifed through the sky.

In big lazy drops at first, the rain started to come down. But then the wind kicked up a bit and the thunderhead soared still higher. The wind stopped abruptly, leaving everything on the prairie as still as the red wastelands of Mars between dust-storms.

Then the rains came, sheet after sheet of them. The dry prairie could

sop them up so fast that the ground almost didn't get wet. But my ditch couldn't, and I almost thought I'd have to swim away before Perez returned.

BY THE TIME it got dark, a jetcar of police had arrived from Cedar Rapids, and soon I could see them probing through the rain with their searchbeams. Dimly, I heard Dufree telling them what had happened. It seemed his Strong Man of Jupiter wasn't of Jupiter at all. Just a bum he'd picked up one day at the New York Spaceport a couple of years ago, a bum he'd never trusted, but hell, business was business and anyway he was insured, so could they just issue an alarm and then clear off his lot and let business resume? What, the injured man? Dufree thought he was alive, but he couldn't be sure.

Four policemen had piled out of the jetcar, I remembered, and now with the midway lights overhead, only three returned to it. One would remain on with the circus, despite everything Dufree could say about that sort of thing being bad for business.

For once I agreed with Dufree. I didn't like the idea either, not while I had to wait for Perez.

He returned not ten minutes after the jetcar roared away. The rain had slowed to a trickle and the air had become hot and sultry again, like it always does so soon after a Midwestern summer storm. I could see the headlights of Perez' obsolete automobile from far off, coming slowly up the highway. The Fat Man couldn't get inside a standard model jetcar, and a special job would be too expensive. He used a rebuilt fifty-year-old auto instead, with the front seat flung all the way back and the shaft of the steering wheel lengthened to extend up over his paunch.

I darted out of the ditch and trotted up the road, flagging Perez down a good three-hundred yards from the lot. The car clattered to a stop and Perez oozed out through the front door like one big mass of thick syrup.

"Well?" I said.

Perez mopped his soaking brow. "Why couldn't you meet me back at the lot? And where's my solars?"

"You'll get them each week. Think I have them saved up or something?" It was a lie, and I never liked telling lies, but if I told Perez I'd been fired, he might decide to forget about the whole thing. "Now, what did you find out?"

"Well, it wasn't easy. Look: she had one of them jets and I had a follow in this automobile. But Perez is smart, Boky, and don't you forget it. Know what I done?"

I said no, I didn't.

"I checked with the highway police outside of Cedar Rapids. They gotta register every vehicle entering a spaceport city. I described the gal and they remembered her. Hell, you don't forget a dish like that so easy.

"Anyway, you know where she went?" Perez took out the stub of a cigar and lit it, puffing furiously and making the sweat come to his cheeks again. "To the Port, that's where." An edge of finality had come to his voice, and he squeezed in again through the doorway of his automobile.

"That's all?" I wanted to know.

"Sure, Boky. That's what you're gonna pay me for, to find out where she went. I found out, so you'll pay."

"Do you know anything else?"

"I ain't saying. A bargain's a bargain." Perez rubbed his short, thick hands together, forgot to wipe away the sweat which was dribbling off his chin. "Lord, I'm hungry."

I reached into my jumper pocket,

came up with all the loose change I had. "Here. Now, what else do you know?"

PEREZ' BEADY little eyes blinked in their folds of fat. "I told you old Perez was a smart cooky. You bet, Boky!"

"What else, damn it!"

"Relax. Just relax. A man's liable to get all hot and bothered in this weather. I went to the Spaceport and found out the gal had a ticket on the Mars liner—"

"Mars!"

"Like I said, Mars."

"When does it blast off?" I asked the question automatically, but it might as well have been Pluto. You don't earn enough money to book passage on one of the big liners by working in a circus sideshow. Not in a whole year you don't.

"I dunno. But the liner was in its blasting pit, and the pit boys were busy carting their grease cans away from the runners. Pretty soon, I'd say."

I nudged Perez with my elbow until he got the idea and moved his bulk over to the other side of the seat. I climbed in beside him. "You're taking me to Cedar Rapids," I said.

"You're crazy, Boky! I'm overdue already."

"Okay, have it your way. But I got into a fight back at the midway, and I hurt a man. The police are after me, Perez. I hurt one man, and I guess another won't make much difference. Cedar Rapids, Perez?"

He looked at me for a long time, and I couldn't tell what he was thinking because his eyes were hidden in their bags of fat. He started the car and then I heard a scraping noise as he muttered something about those damned gears. He swung the car around in a wide turn and started

back toward Cedar Rapids.

I found myself wondering how we'd get past the highway patrol outside Cedar Rapids. I didn't know how, but I felt we could do it. I wasn't Bok-kura any longer, timid for all his strength. I was John Hastings—whoever John Hastings was. . . .

I think Perez must have sensed it.

A SLIVER of a moon had peeped out from among the scattering clouds by the time we reached the highway patrol station. Ahead we could see the lights of Cedar Rapids, a small city suddenly grown big with the coming of space travel. And off to the left the spaceport itself was a pulsing glow on the horizon.

Perez hadn't uttered a word in the thirty miles of bumpy driving, but now he asked me, "Just how do you intend to pass them, Boky? Tell me that, eh?"

He'd slowed the car to a crawl and now I climbed over the seat and hunkered down behind it. "Listen," I hissed, "you'd better play along." I guess I sounded tough, I don't know. I'd never sounded tough about anything before, not as far as I could recollect, and I think I must have found the new role to my liking.

"Yeah. . ." from the way he spoke, Perez must have been sneering. . . "and what if I don't?"

"Well, I didn't do anything that would keep me in jail forever, Perez. Just remember that. When you reach the patrol, you're alone in this contraption, understand?"

Perez muttered to himself, braked the auto to a stop when we neared the patrol gate.

A voice said: "Jeez, where'd you get this car, a museum or something?" Voices always sound more ominous in the darkness, and I was plenty worried. But then the voice

took on a touch of laughter. "Oh, it's you, Skinny! You just passed through here."

"Smatter," Perez grumbled, "there a law against it?"

"Nope, just checking. That is the law."

"Well, I forgot something, so I'm going back."

"Umm-mm. Guess I don't have to check your credentials again."

"Suit yourself. I got nothing to hide, but I wish you'd lemme drive off the road and outa this damned heat!"

"Sure. Okay, go ahead. If you're back before midnight—my shift ends then—you can pass right through, Skinny. I'll recognize this thing you travel in. Hah-hah, that's good. Thing—"

"I really couldn't say," Perez admitted honestly enough. "I don't know when I'll be back, but I hope it's soon."

By then I'd begun to breathe easily, if quietly, but I was unduly optimistic. The officer hadn't finished yet.

"Say, I remember! You was from that there circus."

"Yeah. I play the skeleton man." Perez' laughter was louder than the officer's.

"What ya think of the guy who went nuts?"

"Who's that?"

"The Strong Man, whatzisname? Bok-kura."

"Search me." Perez shrugged mountainously. "I got back there after it happened. Well, can I go? I'd like to get me a nice cool gin an' tonic in town, officer."

"Guess so. Have a sip for me, will-ya? S'long, Skinny."

Perez scraped the gears into their low speed once more, and we were on our way. I was grinning when I

climbed back over the front seat. "Perez," I chortled, "you were magnificent."

"Yeah? I got me a hunch old Dufree hates your guts after tonight. All right, I wouldn't mind squatting on Dufree and crushing a coupla his scrawny bones. Maybe that's why I'm helping you. Where to, Boky?"

I said the Spaceport and settled back, almost able to enjoy the bouncing ride of Perez' antiquated vehicle. A mile must have passed before I realized he'd called me Boky.

THE GIRL at the information desk smiled professionally. "Yes, sir?"

"When's the next liner taking off for Mars?"

She consulted a chart. "In two months, sir. The fifteenth of September."

"Huh?" I turned to Perez. "I thought you said—"

"Yeah, that's what I said. She got a ticket to Mars. A one-way ticket."

I frowned. "Two months in advance—"

The girl smiled professionally again. "Too bad, if you wanted to get to Mars. You just missed the boat, you know."

I asked her what she meant. "The *Queen* blasted off forty-five minutes ago, sir."

"Oh, I see. Say, can I get a Mars boat someplace else?"

"Yes. Yes, you could do that." She consulted another chart. "White Sands, New Mexico, in five weeks. Or New York in six. Nothing sooner than that. Shall I call for a reservation?"

I shook my head. "No, don't bother."

We got as far as the door to the administration building, Perez beginning to puff and snort. We got no further.

Someone came in and pointed a

finger at me. Thin, medium height, nondescript. The man who'd tried to kill me!

Two policemen closed in, their blasters ready. I guess I was struck dumb. I just stood there, my mouth hanging open foolishly. Sure, Dufree could have put two and two together. Perez was missing. I was missing. We roomed together. A cinch. They checked with the highway patrol, found Perez had come this way.

But that wasn't it. Last time I'd seen the nondescript man, he'd been stretched out on the floor, a three-hundred-pound weight across his chest. Probably a few ribs were broken. At the very least, both his arms had been shattered. Now he stood in the doorway with a cold smile on his lips, pointing an accusing finger at me. He didn't exactly look the healthy type, but I'd have bet he was never any healthier than at that moment. Despite enough broken bones to keep him in the hospital for a couple of months.

"...right, friend," one of the policemen was saying. "don't try anything. Just come with us."

The fat quivered on Perez' jowls as he shook his head from side to side. "Not me, officer. You don't mean me too. I ain't got nothing to do with this. I just want a big cool drink."

"It looks a lot like you helped him get away. Come along."

"Helped him!" Perez blubbered. "Not me, sir. Oh no, not me. Why, he forced me. Yes, he forced me. He said, 'Perez, if you—'"

"That's enough! You're coming too."

They came toward us slowly, and I did a lot of quick thinking. Apparently no one knew of the nondescript man's needle gun. No one knew he'd tried to kill me. But they all saw me

go wild, all saw the way I'd lunged forward with a three-hundred-pound weight and hurled it at him.

Maybe I could get off with six months or something, I didn't know. But hell, the girl had gone to Mars, with a one-way ticket. And the girl knew me—from somewhere. Not much of a choice, not really. Prison—or Mars....

BY THE TIME the first policeman reached me, a curious crowd had swung in toward us on all sides, forming a tight little circle. When I move, I move quick. That's what they paid me for at the circus. I wrapped my fingers around the officer's wrist before he knew what had happened, and I wrenched. The blaster tumbled from his hand and he fell away, getting all tangled in the crowd.

His companion tried to do something about it, while everyone started to yell. I don't know if it was an accident or not, but Perez got in the way, and by the time the officer could circumnavigate his ponderous girth, Perez had given me my chance.

I darted into the crowd, pushed my way clear, and sprinted the few remaining feet to the door. It was an eerie feeling, for at any moment I expected to hear the roar of a blaster and then hear nothing else at all. Ever. Nothing happened. Probably fearing they'd hit someone else, the officers had refrained from shooting.

I didn't stop to think about it. Outside, I hustled onto the nearest pedestrian ramp and glided along smoothly with the third fastest level. They couldn't stop all pedestrian traffic on the moving ramps to look for me, that would disrupt the Spaceport's scurrying activity. Oh, they'd do some checking. Maybe they'd even halt ramp ten, the express ramp. But what was so special about ramp eight

if a man wanted to escape?

Amnesia is a funny thing. You can go for two or three years without remembering a solitary thing. But then something—like a girl crying a name which must be yours—something can trigger a lost mechanism in your mind. And then things start to move. Not fast, but they move.

Like the nondescript man who'd healed instantly. He'd helped trigger something too, if only I could find it. It gnawed at my consciousness now, an almost physical gnawing. I could feel it trying to break clear of whatever held it in check.

Instantaneous regeneration of injured tissues. Where had I encountered that before? Important? God, yes! Maybe more important than the beautiful girl who'd uttered the name John Hastings. Regeneration? An asteroid, damn it! Why an asteroid? Don't argue, let it push itself clear. An asteroid—one out of ten thousand... Regeneration, and something secret, so secret that the governments of three worlds would spend half their annual budgets to find out about it. Which mote of an asteroid...

Then I bumped my nose.

The pedestrian ramps swing around the spaceport like a huge belt, and when you make one complete revolution you're supposed to get off. The bump on the nose was not a gentle reminder, but a tall slender bank of machinery rises out of the ramp at the administration building, running the complicated ribbon of moving roads. That meant a lot of concentrated thinking, and a speeding ramp had carried me around the Spaceport completely, right back to where I started.

I hopped off the ramp quickly, walked around the bank of machinery and got on the other side. I let the ramp carry me half way around this

time, out beyond the blasting pits with their gleaming, polished rails and beyond the anti-grav air-docks which housed spaceships.

At that point I left ramp eight for the seventh moving road, left that one for the sixth—working my way down until I reached the first ramp, which hardly moved at all. From there I alighted on the concrete apron which skirts the whole complicated system. And for now, that was it. I didn't doubt that I'd shaken off the police, for I could have left the ramp—and the Spaceport, too—at any one of fifty points.

But I still had to find the girl who knew John Hastings, and the girl was on her way to Mars.

THERE ARE three Spaceport cities in North America. New York for the East, Cedar Rapids for the Midwest, and White Sands for the Far West. There are also three Sargasso Cities.

You know the old legends about sailing ships disappearing in the Sargasso Sea. Well, as far as I know, there's no Sargasso Sea for spaceships, but there are three of them for spacemen.

New York. Cedar Rapids. White Sands. Cities within cities, a hundred taverns and a score of flop houses where ex-spacemen with the wistful look of deep space in their eyes can get a cheap drink and a cheap bed and watch the liners blasting off for Mars or Venus, for the asteroids or the Jovian moons.

Rumors circulate on the twisted, tortuous streets of Sargasso City as freely as Venusian street-walkers. You can take your pick of the street-walkers for a stiff shot of Venusian brandy, and the rumor-mongers are just as reasonable. Often, they knew more about a lot of secret things than

did the government agents who ventured within Sargasso City to question them. Things like regeneration and asteroids. . . .

And thus it was that I entered Sargasso City with the firm conviction that a lot of talking and a lot more listening might lead to something. Also, in a strictly unofficial sense, Sargasso City was off-limits for the police, and brushing shoulders with murderers and smugglers and political exiles, I'd be able to thumb my nose at the law. Not that I wanted to for any indefinite length of time, but certain things seemed more important than a trumped-up warrant for my arrest.

Sargasso City doesn't merge gradually with Cedar Rapids. It stands off a little to one side, between the city proper and the Spaceport, and when you enter it you have the feeling that you're leaving behind you the mores of our twenty-first century civilization.

IT WAS LATE, after two a.m., but the taverns of Sargasso City never close, except for a brief noon-time hour when the floors are wetted down and the debris disposed of. Someone far off in a dusky corner was strumming a ten-stringed Venusian lute as I pushed in through the swinging door of *Port O' No Return Cafe*. A dour little man stood behind the bar, with about as much Japanese blood in him as Venusian upland. The mixture came off olive-green, a little on the pale side.

"Brandy want?" he asked, grinning coarsely. "Or Venus miss? *Port O' No* has both, friend."

I grinned back. "I haven't any money."

The corners of his mouth straightened into a thin line. "Toc bad. No money, no nothing. Come again, may-



Ignoring the startled passersby, Hastings raced headlong down the winding ramp.

be?"

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe I'll stay." I took a ring off my finger, gave it to him. I don't know about that ring, I've had it ever since I can remember. I'm no expert, but it looked like Venusian fire-opal.

The uplander-Jap gulped, and his Adam's Apple became very prominent. He only looked at the stone for a moment, then said: "One hundred solars, please?"

"It's worth a thousand, and you know it!"

"Two hundred is all poor relation can afford. Two hundred?"

I nodded, waited while he counted out the dirty bills and put them in my hand. He asked, "Brandy now or Venus miss?"

I asked for brandy and got it, a good stiff shot—probably what the boys of the old Wild West days two hundred years ago would have called three fingers. Only they never heard of Venusian brandy and the kick it carries.

I sipped a little and put the glass down. "What do you know about regeneration?" It wasn't a foolish question, because if he didn't know, someone else here would. I had a distinct hunch this regeneration business carried a wallop as potent as the brandy he served. And Sargasso City wouldn't miss a trick.

"Sorry. Poor relation so idiot. Know nothing. Try professional?"

Sargasso City had professional everythings, from street-walkers to lute players to rumor-mongers. I said I'd be glad to.

"Good. Smart. This way, please."

He called over a mousey-looking girl who scurried behind the bar, picked up a dirty cloth and began to wipe glasses. They didn't look any cleaner when she finished.

"Professional busy-busy. You make

appointment?"

I handed over *five of the solars*. "I'll see him now."

"Other appointment suddenly went cancel," my guide muttered, leading me past a dirty straw mat which hung across the entrance to an alcove. On the other side, there was a desk and two chairs. The breed sat down behind the desk, offered me the other seat. I remained standing, said: "Okay, where's your professional?"

He smiled. "Do not be surprised. I assure you that you are in his presence right now, but if one has to keep up appearances outside, you can forgive that, can you not?" Quite a cultured accent, a bit of Oxford and something of Upland U., and I assure you that the Venus boys coming out of these are no dopes.

"Okay, you fooled me. You're the guy who's supposed—"

"I am a man gifted with something rare enough to make it expensive. Photographic memory, total recall. Please." He extended a hand, and I covered it with solars. "Now, what is it you wish to know about regeneration?"

"Anything you can tell me. A man is struck with a heavy weight, both his arms are broken. Probably some ribs too. A few minutes later he gets up and walks away, as good as new."

"Ahh! I understand. Shall I have your brandy brought in now, Mr. Hastings?"

CHAPTER II

UNDER MARTIAN MOONS

I LEANED across the desk and grabbed his dirty white shirt front. "You'd better talk now," I said. "And fast. Where'd you hear that name?" A card in a pocket, not taken very seriously for a couple of years. Until a girl mentions that name, until

someone tries to kill me, until a little uplander-Jap who happens to have a total-recall memory mentions the name too. John Hastings.

Me?

"Please, Mr. Hastings. Release me. I abhor violence. My ancestors here on Earth abhorred it too, except for one foolish, abortive mistake back in the last century. My ancestors on Venus likewise detest it, except for a few smaller mistakes, equally abortive. Now, you want to know about regeneration...."

"I want to know about the name John Hastings!" I said, releasing him. "Talk!" I think I was a little frightened. I know he wasn't.

"What can I tell you about your own name that you don't already know?" Then the dour face creased into a frown. "Of course. John Hastings disappeared several years ago. Nothing was heard of him, he was assumed to be dead. Now he returns—a victim of amnesia?"

I shrugged hopelessly, said: "Who am I?"

"As I have said, John Hastings. By the gods of Karn, but this is interesting! I have seen pictures of you, but now, in the flesh, after they gave you up for dead...."

"John Hastings was an archaeologist who specialized in the asteroids. There is talk, you know, of an ancient civilization which flourished when the asteroids existed as a single unified planet, before they were rent asunder by we know not what."

I told him no, I did not know.

"John Hastings is also a product of Jupiter training. Two-and-a-half gravities to fight in childhood, he became a man of mighty strength, yet he devoted his young life to a strange discipline. Archaeology of the asteroids. Tell me, John Hastings—why?"

Well, they'd billed me as the Strong

Man of Jupiter, and there'd been some truth to that, although probably Dufree and the others did not know it. "Better send for that brandy," I said, and the man rang a little bell. I went on, "I don't know a thing about that. Until today, I didn't even know my name was John Hastings. Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"No. You disappeared out among the asteroids, after passing along some hints concerning a startling discovery. A culture old when time was young, an eerie place of ill-remembered life. Ahh, here is the brandy!"

I swallowed it in one burning, stinging gulp, and the girl hustled out for some more. "It sure took an awful lot of luck to get me here to you on the first try," I admitted.

HE SHOOK his head deprecatingly.

"Not at all. Anyone in Sargasso City knows of John Hastings and the mysteries of space which he almost—but not quite—unfolded. Every now and then an expedition searches the asteroids to look for him. Someone else could have told you the same story.

"But there it ends, for I pieced things together, bit by bit, until I developed a theory concerning you, John Hastings. Would it surprise you if I told you my hobby consists of John Hastings?"

"How's that?"

"You're a legend, a myth. I spend my spare time on that myth. I probably know as much about you as you would know were you not...ill. I hope you don't mind." He smiled politely. "Further, I believe that the disappearance of John Hastings and the mystery of instantaneous regeneration of tissue are directly related. Wait, don't jump like that! Remember, I'm only a hobbyist."

The mousey girl returned with an-

other glass of brandy. "Maybe you'd better tell me all about your hobby," I suggested.

He leaned back, telescoping out one of those long plastic reeds which pass for permanent Venusian cigarettes. He started to say something, I don't know what. Then, outside our little alcove, someone yelped. Other people must have liked the idea, because they took it up and soon the *Port O' No Return* was filled with one roaring din.

The uplander-Jap seemed alarmed. He got up from his chair and crossed rapidly to the straw mat, pulling it aside and peering out. From over his shoulder, I caught a quick glimpse of chaos—chairs and tables overturned, men and women on the floor, tumbled grotesquely about like rag-dolls. At first there seemed no purpose to it all, but organization and planning sometimes has a way of losing itself in a bar-room brawl.

Presently a handful of men fought their way toward our alcove, and my companion thrust the hanging back into place, darted to the rear of the alcove, fumbled with a catch on the wall. He didn't make it.

Half a dozen men crowded into the alcove, and before I knew it I was in a fight; a wild, free-swinging affair. Don't ask me why, but there it was. They wanted the uplander-Jap, I stood in the way. And so we fought.

I sent two of them reeling back past the straw hanging, whirled to face a third. Another pair had the uplander-Jap on the floor, squirming and twisting furiously, yelling something in a Venusian dialect. Something—the sort of God-given impulse which can save a jungle animal from destruction—something made me turn around again. From the direction of the ceiling, a heavy chair-leg flashed down. I flung an arm up and felt it go numb

as the bludgeon struck, bounced off, descended again. It exploded against the side of my head, threw me to my knees. I tottered that way for a while, saw dimly the uplander-Jap being carted away.

Then I pitched forward on my face, catching the straw hanging with one outstretched hand and bringing it down on top of me. I don't remember hitting the floor....

THE MOUSEY girl was busy applying a cold compress to my temple when I awoke.

"How do you feel?"

"Lousy, thanks."

She was American, a plain sort of kid like the kind you might see working in any soda fountain. Well, you can find anything in Sargasso City.

"They took Togoshira Suuki, you know."

I told her I didn't know. I said, "Who the hell is Suuki?"

"You sat talking with him, so I guessed you were his friend. Suuki, our master."

"Oh, Suuki Kid, I don't even know what happened."

She withdrew the compress from my temple, looked at me almost haughtily, for all her plainness. "In that case, maybe I'm wasting my time." And just like that she got up to go.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her back. "Hold on a minute. If they took Suuki, I want to get him back." That was the truth. The girl at the side-show knew me. The girl went to Mars. Suuki knew me, and Suuki was abducted. I think right then I'd have fought my way quite cheerfully through the nine pits of Hell to rescue him.

"Yes," she agreed. "We all loved Suuki." Almost like part of a religious ritual.

"Kid, I'll be frank. I didn't love Suuki. I hardly knew him. But Suuki has something I want and he seemed willing to give it to me—"

"Suuki is benevolent."

"Yeah, sure. Benevolent. Who took him? Why?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"I mean I don't know, that's right. I don't know. I just got into Sargasso City tonight."

"Umm-mm. How can I explain it? You know your history? Remember the Tong wars of Chinatown, New York, a century ago?"

I said I remembered.

"This is much the same, only worse. Sargasso City is more like the old Casbah in Algiers than it is like Chinatown. Here the police do not enter. It is an unwritten law. But there are the same internal clashes for control. Togoshira Suuki rules Sargasso City. Togoshira Suuki represents the Venusian clans." She let it fall like that, stacatto, one brief sentence after another. "The Martian clans don't like Suuki. The Martians have taken him...." She held the back of one pudgy hand to her mouth, as if for the first time she realized the extent of the situation.

"Okay, cheer up. When can we start getting him back?"

"You don't understand. They took him where they can keep him safely. They took him to Mars. From there they can dictate terms to the three Sargasso Cities, with Suuki's life in the balance."

YOU HEAR a lot about the Sargasso Cities, how they control the destinies of more than their own squalid environs. It can be overdone, I guess. Government power doesn't rest in the hands of the Tri-World Council. It belongs to the men who rule the Sargasso Cities by gun and

knife and wile. Things like that.

I said, "How sure are you they took him to Mars?"

"Don't ask me how I know, you would only waste your breath. But they took him to Mars. Togoshira Suuki."

"Can we go?"

"We? You mean the good folk of Cedar Rapids Sargasso?" She snorted. "It isn't necessary. Our agents on Mars can do the job as well."

Sargasso City—with agents on another planet. My head started to swim a little. That, and a man who could pick himself off the floor with half a dozen broken bones and walk away as good as new a few minutes later. And a cockeyed story about something old and something ancient which held the asteroids together and then blew them apart. And a damned fool named John Hastings who didn't know what was going on and who only found trouble when he tried to find out.

All connected? Neatly, like the pieces of one of those tri-dimensional puzzles that everyone tinkers with these days? Maybe. I didn't know, but I intended to find out. Otherwise, someone else might point his needle gun at my chest some fine day, and that time I might not see.

I told the mousey kid she could forget about her compresses, I felt fine. Then I asked her if she knew of any way I could get to Mars.

"In a month or two, if you have the money."

"I don't want to wait a month and I haven't got the money."

Suddenly, I found her staring at my head queerly. As if she had seen it for the first time. Some gesture again, back of pudgy hand to mouth.

"That bad?" I grunted, fingering my temple. I felt nothing. No lump, no cut.

"I don't understand. I don't under-

stand. A few minutes ago, you had an ugly gash on your head. Swollen, bleeding—ooo! Now there's nothing. Look, not even a scar."

From somewhere, she got an ornate mirror and held it up for me. Well, she'd exaggerated, because there was a scar. If you looked closely, you could see it, a thin white line. But nothing more. A scar which might have told of a wound several years old and fully healed. I felt fine, too, almost as if nothing had happened.

I scratched my head. "I don't get it, kid." I didn't want to tell her I was thinking of a man who walked away from a three-hundred-pound hit-and-run act without a scratch.

"Togoshira Suuki would understand. The flesh that regenerates itself. . . ." She made that sound like part of a religious ritual too. "Listen! Will you promise to wait right here? Don't go away. Don't move an inch. I'll be back soon."

I nodded, more than a little confused, and she disappeared out through where the straw mat had hung. Some semblance of order had returned to the *Port O' No Return*, but it wasn't very crowded now.

She came back in about half an hour. She looked excited. "They will see you now."

"Who will see me?"

"Don't ask questions. We have no time. You said you wanted to go to Mars, didn't you? To rescue our Suuki?"

THEY SAT in a big room down in the basement of an old dilapidated building across the street from *Port O' No*. Two Earthmen, one stocky, one rapier-thin, both middle-aged. And two Venusians, older, bent and tired, long flowing beards almost flaxen against their deep olive skin.

The mousey girl whispered, "This

is the Uplands Brotherhood."

"Uplands, eh? So why two Earthmen?"

"Must you always ask questions? The Brotherhood started out small, and grew. Suuki brought a new purpose to it, and new members. A quarter of a million, all over the Solar System. These four men, with Suuki, are the leaders."

The stocky Earthman grunted something to his companion, then turned to the girl. "This is the man?"

"Yes."

"You're sure about the regen—"

"I am sure."

One of the Venusians stood up, his wobbly legs sheathed in broad, oversized pantaloons. "He looks like the pictures Suuki has with him! By the gods of Karn, and so he does—like that Earthman, that archaeologist, John Hastings."

More people knew me. . . .

The other Venusian said, "You will swear allegiance to the Brotherhood, naturally."

I shook my head. I didn't know what was going on, but I wasn't going to swear allegiance to anything or anybody, and I told them that.

"That complicates things," the thin Earthman admitted.

"I have my own personal business," I told him. "Your man Suuki happens to be part of it. If you think I can help, I'll try to rescue him, but that's all."

"What is this business?"

Again I shook my head. "Uh-uh. I said personal."

One of the Venusians muttered, in English as good as Togoshira Suuki's: "Don't you understand, boy? If you don't take an oath to us, we can't trust you, not fully. Oh, I won't lie. After Anna's story, we decided you might help us. But it will be limited, for if you don't swear allegiance, we

can't tell you everything that could relate to the situation—"

"Nevertheless, I take no oaths." You couldn't blame me. I'd found myself, found John Hastings, after a couple of years of life without any real personal identity. And life in bondage to an oath might turn out just as odious as the other extreme, life in a kind of vacuum. I wanted no part of it.

The stocky Earthman said, "I'm for forgetting the whole thing. He doesn't trust us, we can't trust him. For all we know, he's in with the Marties—"

The mousey girl, Anna, almost shouted. "Maybe he can bring back Suuki! If he can do that—"

"He'll go," the first Venusian said, "provided he wants to. What do you say, boy?"

"Sure. Sure I want to go. But with no strings attached."

"Fair enough. Are we agreed?" Three heads nodded, and Anna almost jumped up and down. The stocky Earthman sat there growling to himself.

His human companion smiled. "It might work. It just might work. The Marties know our agents, yes—but they don't know you, Hastings. Probably they know of you, but so what? Point is, they won't know you're working for us."

"Don't forget," I reminded him, "I'm not. Our plans happen to cross each other, that's all. I want Suuki, you want Suuki. It may not go any further than that. Okay?"

"Okay. But you'll be working pretty much in the dark because of it. Here, take this." The thin Earthman gave me a card, really half a card, yellowish, with nothing written on it.

I turned it over in my hand, scowled. "What's this for?"

"You'll notice it's torn haphazard-

ly. A man on Mars has the other half. They fit, and you're identified."

"How do I get to him?"

"You'll find him in Lake of the Sun City. There's no lake there, and it isn't really a city. Just a dirty little desert town. But that's where you'll find him. He runs a curio shop."

ONE OF the Venusians took it up from there. "Can you leave tomorrow?"

"Huh? Tomorrow? There's no ship out for several weeks!"

"Not out of America, there's not. But a small passenger vessel leaves Rio de Janeiro for the moon, day after tomorrow. A week later, there's a Moon-Mars liner. You'll be on it."

That left some twenty-four hours until I'd have to board the jet for Rio. I soon found that these men of the Brotherhood were not willing to let me out of their sight in that time. A room upstairs over the *Port O' No*, meals brought to me by Anna, who was a faithful lap-dog watch-dog combination, because she knew I might find her precious Suuki. . . .

Well, I had some time on my hands and I suppose morbid curiosity got the better of me. I had been struck on the head—hard. Maybe hard enough for a skull fracture. But I healed, almost in a matter of minutes.

Anna brought utensils with my first meal, and they included a small sharp knife. I waited until the girl left my little room. Waited till I heard her footsteps going down the stairs. Then I toyed with the knife for a few long moments, idly twisting the keen edge around in my fingers.

"What the hell!" I said aloud. "If you want to do it, do it."

I jabbed the point of the knife home, piercing the tip of the index finger on my right hand. A small

globule of blood came to the surface, bright red, and I brushed it away. I washed my finger, studied it. No mark. No tiny hole. Nothing.

I tried again, with the same results.

When you're bewildered, you can get angry. More than anything after that, I think I was angry. I used the edge of the knife, cutting an inch-long gash across the back of my forearm.

It hurt, but only for a moment.

It bled—for a moment. I smeared away the blood, then washed it off, scrubbing hard. No cut. Not even a scar.

I had to check a wild impulse to slash the blade across my wrist, across the veins which bulged when I tightened my fist. Indestructible? I didn't know, but my heart thumped a furious jig inside my chest when I tried to get some sleep.

FOUR HOURS by jet express to Rio. Two days from there to the moon, almost a third of that time spent in the deep acceleration chairs. A checking of credentials at Tycho Station, and that frightened me for a while, but the Brotherhood had given me some neatly forged documents.

Then the Mars rocket, ten days of thumb-twiddling. For company, a couple of professors bound for Syrtis Major College, two technicians who thought they could find tritium down near the South Polar cap, half a score of eager tourists, and some Martians, homeward bound. The Marties kept pretty much to themselves, as Marties generally do.

I didn't realize my mistake until we landed at Syrtis Major. The usual quarantine followed, while we were sprayed with antibiotics to ward off Martian diseases which otherwise would encroach upon virgin territory with a nasty insistence. I made my way from the lab to the men's locker room to pick up my gear, and some-

thing made me look through one of the aft ports. I don't know what, call it an impulse, call it a hunch—but I looked.

The Marties were leaving, five of them with their dry, parchment-like skin and stooped shoulders. They carried something, a large crate, depositing it on a waiting sand-sled. With it they whisked away across the rust desert.

Just like that, only I'd been an idiot to end all idiots!

Sure, the Brotherhood had spoken of Suuki being taken to Mars. They'd spoken in the past tense, as if it were already an accomplished fact. Except that the Moon-bound ship from Rio was the first vessel off Earth, and the Luna-Mars rocket the first one to reach the red planet....

Which meant Togoshira Suuki had been abducted right under my nose!

I'd brushed against the polite, aloof Marties a dozen times on shipboard. They'd had Suuki trussed up in the baggage room all that time. I sighed wearily as I got back into my clothing. I guess I wasn't cut out to be an undercover man.

Outside, the cold desert winds whipped in over the spaceport like howling demons, and when you haven't been on Mars for a while, your first breath of Martian air always makes you think you're going to strangle. You get used to it after a time, though, and if you keep exertion down to a minimum, you can get along well enough.

I asked the Martian female at the travel desk if she knew anything about the Marties who'd just left the ship. She was polite, but she was adamant.

"Earth sir, you know we are not permitted to divulge such information."

I frowned. "You haven't answered my question."

"Then, if I must, no."

"Well, where did they go?"

Borrowing a mannerism from the Earth tourists, she shrugged her bony shoulders. She was young, maybe ten Martian years—roughly twenty years old, Earth style—but she didn't look it. I think even Martian infants must look senile, although I've never seen a Martian infant. Mostly, it's the skin, dry and wrinkled and withered from birth. "Again, Earth sir, I don't know. They had a private sled waiting for them, as you may have observed. Now, can I arrange transportation for you?"

"Yes. I'd like to reach Lake of the Sun City as soon as possible."

"That is a long trip across the desert."

"I know Martian geography. When can I go?"

"There is a helicopter in five days—"

"Five days! I haven't the time."

"A sand-sled today, if you want it."

"Sure," I said. I didn't like the idea of a bumpy ride across the rust deserts by sand-sled, the jets kicking up a fine spray of sand which makes you half-suffocate. But I'd arrive in Lake of the Sun City in two days that way, and I was in a hurry. Suuki was one thing, but I hadn't forgotten the girl who'd called my name at the sideshow, triggering off everything with it. I kept a special place in my Martian itinerary for her. . . .

The Martian clerk jabbed a long finger at a bell on her desk, rang it. In a moment, a scrawny Martian appeared, removing his cowl and glancing quizzically at us.

"Yes?"

"This Earth sir would like you to take him to Lake of the Sun City—at once."

"At once," said the Martie. "Of

course. One hundred solars."

The Brotherhood had stuffed my pockets with money, and I reached in for a hundred-solar note, gave it to him. He pocketed the bill greedily, motioned for me to follow him outside.

The jet sled is ten feet long, maybe twelve. You sit up front, the driver sits behind you at the controls. In that way he gets the brunt of the jet-spray, but the prow of the sled dips in and out of the red Martian sands with the thrust of half a dozen obsolete jets, and the ride is one choking, coughing torment.

But fast, for the Martian barrens present a surface more level than Earth's Daytona Beach or the salt flats of Utah. A hundred miles an hour is average, one-fifty is not really exceptional, and on wide-open stretches some sand-sleds have been known to pass the two-century mark. Add that speed to the thin Martian air, and you have a problem. You simply can't breathe the tenuous air fast enough to stay alive.

THE MARTIANS have solved it like they solve everything else. Secretly. No one quite understands the mechanism, but you're given a sort of insulated leather pouch. Some say it holds a combination of liquid oxygen and inert gasses. I don't know. All I know is this: you hold the pouch down near your waist with a long plastic straw protruding from its top, and you sip through that straw, somehow sucking up air—no longer liquid, no longer cold—and breathing it through your mouth. The pouch is fastened around your neck with a thong of leather, but you'd better hold it tightly, for you'd be an oxygen-starved wreck in a matter of minutes without it.

Anyways, I found myself zooming

across the flat Martian tundra on a sand-sled. Behind me I could hear the wheezing sound which passed for breathing among the Martians. The desert sands roared up from the horizon and then swept away on both sides, and when some of the fierce Martian winds blew the wrong way I could get a quick whiff of the acrid jet fumes.

Late morning gave way to early afternoon, and we stopped to eat some dried beef from Earth, washing it down with precious Martian water. Then my Martie grumbled something, and we were on our way again.

A chill wind crept up in the late afternoon, and by sunset it grew cold. Well, in half an hour or so we'd reach one of the way stations and spend the night there, underground. Soon I could see it looming out of the darkness, a small opaque dome with a beacon light blinking on and off atop it.

The Martian did not stop.

I turned to stare at him, but he had his head tucked deep down inside his cowl. I tried to yell something above the roaring wind, gave it up as useless. The cold knifed in and I grew numb, felt the plastic straw slipping from my lips. I bit into it grimly, held it there with my teeth. The Martie could have been laughing. I thought I heard him, but probably the wind was playing tricks.

So numb...and stiff...

Hands probed at the back of my neck, suddenly. I tried to fight them off, found it difficult to move. Soon the leather thong dropped down over my shoulders. Something prodded the leather pouch which had fallen to my lap. It teetered there for a moment, then fell away, slowly, end over end, as in a frozen dream...

We sped on, and I began to choke—

I don't know for how long, but I did not lose consciousness, not entirely. And after a time the sled screeched to a stop. Soon I'd be able to breathe again, and when I got my hands on that damned Martie...

I felt myself rolled over helplessly, off the sled. I lay there gazing up at the Martian moons, Deimos no more than a bright star, Phobos a tiny sliver of light off near the horizon.

The Martie was a dim bulk in the darkness, kneeling by my side and laughing. I reached up feebly, stiff with cold, weak with suffocation, and he thrust my hands away, leaned over my chest.

He held a knife, its polished blade barely visible by Phobos-light. Would it all end, then, so soon—under the pale moons of Mars, with the light of Phobos gleaming faintly off a long steel blade? A crazy thought, but it hammered over and over again at my brain; it wasn't fair. I knew so little of everything, of myself most of all.

I felt the knife slip in, slowly. He must have taken great pleasure from it. Grating against my ribs, sliding in between them, twisting....

I think I screamed once, and that was all.

CHAPTER III

REGENERATION

"HE'S WAKING."

"Impossible! He should have died two weeks ago. Frozen stiff out on the desert, a knife hilt-deep in his chest—"

"See for yourself."

"I see, but I—"

Voices in a swirling vortex of sound, fading and coming closer, fading again. I tried to sit up, but someone pushed me down.

"Take it easy, young man! You died once, you know, as far as I can

tell. Why don't you live a bit more slowly this time?"

One minute. Two. I began to feel better. Three, four. Almost strong again. After five minutes, I sat up. I was hungry, and I told them.

Two white-garbed men stood there, one scratching his bald head, the other turning away, plainly frightened.

"How do you feel, son?"

"Fine. But hungry. Man, I'm hungry."

A nurse came in with some instruments. They took my blood pressure. They fluoroscoped me. They listened to my heart beat. They did five or six other things that doctors always do.

The bald man said, "He's well."

"He's *what*?"

"Well. Healed. All better. We could discharge him today—if we didn't want to study him."

"Wait a minute! I've been a doctor forty years. They find this man out on the desert a couple miles from one of the way-stations. He has no heart-beat. He's frozen solid, like a block of ice. They take him to the morgue here in Syrtis Major and he starts to warm up. His heart begins to beat, feebly. They pull the knife out. Next day the wound disappears, a thin white scar taking its place.

"Okay. Okay! That can't happen, but we saw it for ourselves. Estimate—two weeks on the desert. Warm days, sub-zero nights. No food. No water. Probably not even breathing in all that time. Somehow, his body forgets to decompose.

"We bring him here. And that was yesterday. Today, he opens his eyes for the first time. He sits up, says he's hungry. A few minutes pass, and he's fit as a fiddle. Elkins, I'm scared."

"Listen," I said, "my name is Has-

tings. John Hastings. Does that mean anything?"

The frightened old man in surgeon's gown shook his head, hardly listening. The other doctor, Elkins, was still scratching the bald spot atop his head. "Does it mean anything? Hastings? I'll say! Did you hear that? He said he's John Hastings!"

"**H**ASTINGS? HASTINGS? *Hastings!*" The older doctor sat down on the foot of the bed, cupping his head in his hands. "John Hastings died three years ago out among the asteroids. They found his ship, a gutted ruin. Full of food and full of water. He could have taken none of it with him, and he disappeared. How do you live on the asteroids without food and water, not to mention air?"

Elkins smiled. "Hastings did a pretty good job of it on our Martian desert, don't you think?"

"I don't know what to think. I don't know. I almost wish they'd never found him. It isn't easy to throw forty years of learning out the window. Here's a man who should have died twice, not probably, but definitely. Only he looks strong as an ox."

I didn't know what was going on, but I laughed. "And hungry," I reminded them.

Elkins sent the nurse out for some food, then turned to me: "Son, how would you like to stay on here for a few months?"

"You said I was well."

"And you are. But when medical science finds something like this, it wants to study! Also, maybe you can tell us what happened out among the asteroids. It's been quite a mystery, you know."

"Don't ask me. I don't remember a thing. I don't even remember being an archaeologist. About all I know right now is this: my name is John Hastings. When people find that out,

they make a big fuss. But the answer to your question, doctor, is no."

"No? You can't refuse!"

"Sorry. I'm going to."

"Wait. When you said you remember nothing, does that mean you have amnesia? Loss of memory, is that what you mean?"

I nodded, dug into the food when it was brought.

"In that case, you've *got* to stay on! With the new hypnotic treatment we could probably restore your memory."

"Probably, eh? How long will it take?"

"Depends on you, Hastings. Six months is a good figure."

"Not for me it isn't! I haven't got six months to spend on it, doc. Maybe some day, if things work out the way I want them to, I'll tell you the whole story. That is, if I ever learn it myself."

I'D BEEN thinking fast, and I came to the conclusion that the man who ran the cūrio shop in Lake of the Sun City, or enigmatic Suuki, or the girl who'd first spotted me—any of these might turn out a lot quicker than hypnotic treatment. "Where's my clothing, doc?"

"You mean you'll leave? We can't be responsible! You might have a relapse—"

"I doubt it."

"Frankly, so do I. As for your clothing, uh-uh. It was frozen solid. We had to peel it off you in strips. You'll have to get some new duds, I'm afraid."

I jumped out of bed. "Hey! Did you find anything?"

"In your clothing, you mean? Yes, we did. A thousand solars, also ruined. We've turned them in to the government, and you'll be reimbursed."

"Nothing else?"

"Like what?"

"Like half of a little card?"

Elkins shook his head "No. Nothing."

"Nuts," I grumbled. "There goes Lake of the Sun City and a guy who maybe could have helped me."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Hastings, but is there anything I can do?"

"No. No, thanks. Wait—hold on a minute! Just how much of a big-wig are you around these parts?"

Elkins smiled. "I'm chief surgeon here in Syrtis Major Hospital. That makes me the ranking medical man on Mars."

"Well, those thousand solars are yours if you can do something for me."

"I don't want your money, Hastings! But this whole thing does intrigue me. Submit to our treatment and I'll do what I can."

I said no at once. "That wouldn't work. The whole idea is for me to save time, and the treatment would delay me. How's this for a compromise? If I ever get this whole mess straightened out, I'll tell you. I'll let you know all about it—if I'm still alive."

Elkins chuckled softly. "I don't think you could die even if you wanted to! Okay, it's a deal. What can I do for you?"

"Just this. About a month ago, the *Martian Queen* left Cedar Rapids for Mars. Have you access to the passenger list?"

He told me he could get it.

"Good! Bring it to me, along with copies of the passport pictures. There's a girl—"

"Yes, sir!" Elkins grinned. "Yes, sir!"

I said something about not meaning to order him around, but he laughed. I think he was enjoying the whole thing.

I TOOK a room in the *Red Sands Hotel*, and that night Elkins came to me with two things. First, he had a packet of money—one thousand solars which the Earth government office in Syrtis Major had passed along for me in return for the thousand ruined solars. Second, he had the passenger list, complete with pictures.

It took less than a minute. "That's her," I said, jabbing a finger at one of the photographs.

"Pretty little thing," Elkins mused. And I agreed. A tumbled mass of chestnut hair, a pert little nose, sparkling blue eyes, the suggestion of a dimple in one cheek.

"Here's the biog," Elkins said, handing me a sheet of paper. I read:

Crewson, Ellen. Age, 25. Height, 5'5". Weight, 120. Color of Eyes, blue. Associate Professor of Archaeology, Syrtis Major College. Appointed June last. References, check President Matthew P. Ryder, S. M. C. Period of stay on Mars, indefinite.

Bright and early the next morning, I found myself walking along the campus lanes of Syrtis Major College. Most of the students I observed were Marties, but a fair sprinkling of Earth youth could be seen, and an occasional Venusian shivered inside his furs, struggling against the unfamiliar cold of the Martian desert.

At the registrar's office they told me where I might find Associate Professor Ellen Crewson. It seemed she would be eating breakfast at the Campus Coffee Shop, very much an Earth-sounding name for a Martian college.

I found her, too—or rather, she found me. As I pushed in through the door she jumped up at once from a nearby booth and gave a little squeal of joy. "John!" she cried. "It really is you, John Hastings!"

Just like that, she leaped into my arms. A good leap and a strong one, and it nearly carried me over backwards. Then her arms were about my neck and she was kissing me, sobbing all the while. I must have reacted clumsily, for soon she disengaged herself and began to blush. She still held on to my hand, leading me back to the booth and plunking down beside me.

"I—I'm sorry," she said. "You don't remember, do you?"

I shook my head. "From the way you act, I think I'd like to remember."

THAT DEEPENED the blush on her pretty face, but when she smiled, the dimple I'd seen in the picture seemed more pronounced. "Tell me, were you that—that Bok-kura in the sideshow?"

"Uh-huh, that was me."

"I knew you were on Mars. All the morning papers carried it; how they found you out on the desert, how they took you to the hospital, how—"

"All the papers?"

"You bet! Front page stuff, too. You're a pretty famous guy, John. I don't know a professor here at the college who wouldn't give his right arm to talk to you."

"That's no good. The last thing I'd want is publicity. If all the newspapers feature it, my enemies will know, too."

"You sound so melodramatic. Your enemies? Who?"

I shrugged. "I wish I knew, Miss Crewson. I wish I knew."

She began to giggle, softly at first, and then she was laughing quite heartily.

"What the hell's so funny?"

"Miss Crewson, you said. Miss Crewson! Would you believe that a couple of years ago you were on the

verge of proposing? Miss Crewson..." The giggling turned to sniffling.

I felt a lot like a would-be strong man trying to clean-and-jerk his first barbell. "I'm sorry," I said. "I remember...nothing. And say, Miss Crew—Ellen—that's why I'm on Mars. I want you to tell me what you know. Everything."

"I'm a dope," she told me. "A real first-rate dope. It looks like I've been carrying the torch for you all this time, and you don't even remember. What am I supposed to do now, just—"

"Hey! It's not that way at all. Didn't you read the papers? I haven't forgotten you alone of everything. I forgot. The works. The boys at the hospital call it amnesia."

"Don't mind me. I said I was a dope. Of course, I should have known."

"Ellen, how well did you know John Hastings? And don't mind if I speak in the third person that way. John Hastings still sounds like something out of a story book to me."

She pouted. "I knew him better than anyone else did. I knew him well enough for him to ask me—"

WE WERE getting no place fast.

Every time she thought of the past, she thought of her love for John Hastings. And while looking at her I could readily see why the vague and shadowy John Hastings could have returned that love, still, right now I had other things on my mind. I drove that point home, ruthlessly. I had to.

"Sorry," she said, sitting up very straight. "We'll forget all that, John. Now, what do you want to know?"

"Like I said: everything. Where was John Hastings going before he disappeared? What was he looking for? Did he find it? What happened

to him? Did he let you know anything about regeneration of tissues or something like that? Did he—"

"Whoa! I see what you mean. Everything. You know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think I'm going to cut my classes today and give the students a day off. There's a park I know down by one of the old canal beds. We can take a picnic lunch there and I'll keep on talking until you run out of questions. Fair enough?"

I told her that would be fine, said I'd meet her at the park by twelve-thirty. Then I strolled back leisurely across the campus and into Syrtis Major City. Picking up a couple of newspapers, I brought them up to my room and ordered a potful of coffee and some donuts, Earth-style. I began to read.

By the time the coffee had arrived, I was cursing Dr. Elkins volubly. Damn the man! In his enthusiasm to get everything across to all the people who wanted to hear the latest episode in the John Hastings mystery, he'd really spilled the works. The esoteric John Hastings had turned up on Mars. Dead, but then he came back to life. He-didn't remember much, but he had a lead. Associate professor Ellen Crewson of S.M.C. The readers were advised to wait for startling developments, for Miss Crewson, it seemed, had been close to John Hastings years ago, before everything started to happen.

I thought I'd call Elkins and tell him what he could do with those newspapers. But I reconsidered. Looking back on it, I knew I hadn't told him to keep anything a secret. So it wasn't really his fault—but that didn't matter much. Point was, he'd probably opened the floodgates of trouble.

I put a call through to Ellen Crew-

son, waited. In five minutes the operator called back, told me Miss Crewson hadn't been seen by her Martian landlady all morning. Alarmed now, I got the address from the college, took one more mouthful of coffee and went downstairs.

ALL MARTIANS look withered and old, but the landlady of Ellen Crewson's boarding house seemed old even for a Martie. Her wrinkled, folded skin could have passed for coarse burlap, her rheumy eyes squinted out from two cavernous holes above her cheek bones.

"Miss Crewson," I said. "I called a few minutes ago."

"Not here." Her voice was the shadow of a croak.

"Do you know where I can find her?"

"No message."

"I said, do you know where I can find her?"

"No."

"When did you see her last?"

"Don't remember."

I took out a fifty-solar note, gave it to her. "When did you see her last?"

"Forty, fifty minutes ago, she leave."

"Alone?"

"No."

It was like pulling wisdom teeth with your bare hands. "With who?"

"Man."

Fifty more solars changed hands.

"Who was he?"

"Not of Earth."

"A Martian?"

"No."

"Damn it, then who?"

"Venus-man. She go out with big Venus-man. She look plenty scared, yes."

"Why the hell didn't you try to stop them? Why didn't you call the police?"

"No one tell me to. Big Earthman take her—"

"I thought you said Venusian!"

"Venus-man, yes. Sorry. He—"

I placed my hands on her shoulders, and it felt as if nothing but the tattered cloak covered her bones. I shook her and she made a rattling noise. "You got all the money you're going to get! Now, who was it?"

She cackled. "I fool you for a time, yes?"

"Who was it?"

"Martian man take her. Remove hands, please. Ahh—better!"

"Did you know the man? Wait. Before you answer, consider this: if I think you're not telling me the truth, I'm going to call the police. Now, did you know him?"

A pause, then: "Live down street. Three brudders. Oldest take her. Two brudders sleeping there now, work nights. You find." She mumbled the address. "Now go from here, Earth-fellow?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm going. But I'll be back if you lied."

"No lie. Brudders hate Earth-fellow. Hate Venus-man too, but hate Earth-fellow better. They kill you in little slices. Goodbye."

I used her phone to call the police. I told them that Ellen Crewson was missing, but I did not mention the three brothers. The police would find that out for themselves in due time, and meanwhile I wanted to call on the brothers—undisturbed.

THE PLACE stank. More a shack than a house, it squatted bare and ugly between two sandstone buildings. It smelled of liquor, the Martian rot-gut which can make Earth moonshine taste like tea. It smelled also of unbathed Martians, but I wasn't aware of that until I threw open the door and strode inside.

Two Martians sat up in their cots,

blinking at me. When one spoke it surprised me, especially after the old hag's pidgeon-English.

"All right, wise guy, just who the hell do you think you are busting in here like that?" Thick and heavy-set for a Martian, he sounded like he'd be aggressive even in his sleep. The other one, the younger of the two, seemed more than willing to let his brother do all the talking.

I said, "I'm looking for the other one. There are three of you, aren't there?"

The thick-set Martian got up and lit an Earth cigarette. He gestured at the empty third cot. "He ain't here."

"I can see that. Where can I find him?"

"You with the police?"

Maybe the old hag could give me the run-around, but not these boys. I took a quick step toward the Martie and hit him, not really hard, but hard enough to jar him. He fell back with the blow and sat down on his cot, but his brother jumped up like an uncoiled spring.

I hit him, too. Harder. He fell down and he lay there on the floor, breathing hard. I was plenty sore, at myself as much as anyone else. I felt responsible for Ellen Crewson, and Ellen might be anywhere. . . .

"Before I'm finished you'll wish I was the police," I said. "Where's your brother?"

"*Braaak!*" The chunky Martian stuck his tongue out and made a loud blubbering noise with his lips.

His brother came off the floor fast, with a knife. I've got fast reflexes—they paid me for that, as Bok-kura. I kicked out, caught his wrist with my foot, sent the knife clattering across the dirty floor. By the time it struck the wall, I had the Martian down on his face, my knee pressing

against the small of his back. I forced his right arm up behind him until he began to yell. "Now talk!"

The other Martian was shouting. "Hold your horses, bud! He can't speak a word of English. Me, I worked fifteen years in the New York spaceport, but he don't know the lingo." The Martie tensed, ready to spring for the doorway, but I had his brother on the floor just this side of the threshold, and he thought better of it.

"Okay, then you talk; or do you want me to break his arm?"

HE HADN'T given up yet. He looked furtively across the room at the knife. "Hold it," I said. "Make a move in that direction and your brother will be wearing a lot of plaster for a long time."

That stopped him. The Martians are notoriously clannish, and he'd have felt the broken arm as much as his younger brother.

"The third one," I repeated. "Where is he?"

"He ain't here."

I made his brother scream.

"All right, cut it out!" New York slang, sure enough, almost twentieth-century variety. It sounded strange from the thin lips of a Martian. "Our brother left for the desert this morning."

"It's a mighty big desert," I informed him.

"Lake of the Sun City, that's where he went."

"Not alone. Don't try to tell me he went alone."

"I didn't say nothing. He had a girl with him, an Earth girl. That's all I know, honest, Mr. Hastings."

His mistake was in using my name. If he knew me, then maybe he was in on the whole thing. In that case, he could warn the Marties at Lake

of the Sun City in advance.

I let the other brother up and he scrambled off the floor, threw himself down on a cot and began to sob. The thick-set Martie brought him some wine in a dark leather pouch, and he gulped it greedily.

I said, "Have you got a sled?"

"Yeah, sure. That's our business. Sledding."

"We're going to use it, the three of us. Right now."

"Where we going?"

"I'm going to Lake of the Sun City. Okay, where's the sled?"

"Right out back. I guess we can start now, but I don't like it. I got a lotta business signed up for tonight, on accounta this is the only all-weather sled in the neighborhood. You can't just—"

"I can and I am, so don't waste your breath." The Marties didn't know it, of course, but I was angry enough to kill someone at that moment.

We went out together through the doorway, walked around behind the shack. I looked at the sand-sled and smiled. It seemed all set to go, complete with half a dozen breathing bags. Three big metal hoops trisected its length, too. Covered with stout leather, they could offer considerable protection against the night's cold. And that meant I could drive straight through to Lake of the Sun City without a stop. Well, just one stop. . . .

I had the Marties bring along plenty of dried meat and a canteen of water. I wouldn't be sitting with my back to any Martians on a sand-sled, not this time. I had them give me instructions concerning the controls, and we were all set to go.

Driving through the crooked streets of Syrtis Major, I got used to the jet sled. Actually, there wasn't much to it. One lever for starting and ac-

celerating, one for braking, one for turning. By the time we left the city behind us; I had the sled zooming over the sands of Mars at a good clip.

We'd done better than a hundred fifty miles in the first hour, and then I stopped. "Climb out," I told the Martians.

"What do you mean?"

"You walk from here. You can walk back to Syrtis, you can walk seventy miles to the nearest way-station." I jabbed a finger at the parchment map and showed them our approximate location.

"I thought you was taking us along—"

I grunted something, watched them trudge away from the sled. They'd fare all right. A Martian can go a long while without food or drink. Meanwhile, I'd reach Lake of the Sun City long before they could give any warning.

As I remember it, I was feeling pretty sure of myself then. The older brother was taking Ellen to Lake of the Sun City. If mayhem had been on his mind, a jaunt across the desert would be meaningless. Togoshira Suuki's Brotherhood had mentioned Lake of the Sun City as a key point, too. Thus, it looked like I might be able to tie things together for the first time out at the ancient Martian town, which some say once was the capital of a mighty Martian empire.

CHAPTER IV

LAKE OF THE SUN

THE DOOR to the curio shop tinkled as I opened it, like any door on an Earth curio shop might tinkle. The proprietor was all smiles and politeness, a young Martian woman who might have had some Earth blood in her veins. I couldn't be

sure, but the mixture often comes off Mongoloid, and she almost could have been a daughter of one of Genghis Khan's Noyons.

"Yes, sir?" she said, in more than passable English. That's one thing about travel on Mars or Venus. If you stay on the well-beaten tourist trails, you won't have any language difficulties. I suppose the natives know on which side their bread is buttered. The girl continued, "Ours is the only curio shop in Lake of the Sun City. Here you will find items of last—"

"I know all that. Sorry, but I'm not interested."

The smile was a fixture on her face. "What then, Earth sir?"

"In Cedar Rapids Sargasso, I met a Venusian named Togoshira Suuki. He was abducted. His friends thought I might be able to find him, so they sent me here."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look. First, Suuki was abducted. I came to look for him, got an Earth girl named Ellen Crewson involved, and they took her too. I'm here to look for both of them, and I won't take no for an answer."

The smile still lingered on her lips. "I am Gurra dor Beta. I run a simple, honest business, and when I do business with someone, he calls me Beta. If you have business with me, you may call me that, but if you do not, I wish you would leave."

"They gave me half a card, but I lost it. Maybe you read the papers, I don't know. I'm John Hastings—"

For the first time, Gurra dor Beta looked doubtful. "Hastings! If I dared believe. . . Have you any proof?"

"No. But there's an old picture of me in the papers."

Wordless, she scurried through an archway, returned in a moment with

the *Syrtis Major Chronicle*. Finally, she extended her hand. "It's not a very good likeness, John Hastings, but you're the man. What can I do to help?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "They merely told me to contact you. But this may be a lead. There are three brothers in Syrtis Major City; one of them speaks English like a man from the slums of New York. They run a jet-sled business—"

"I know them! The brothers Karnjud. What have they got to do with it?"

"The oldest brother took Miss Crewson from Syrtis Major and brought her here. I have a hunch he'd also know where to find Suuki."

"Perhaps. We've thought for a long time that Karnjud tor Ig— I guess you'd call him Ig Karnjud—we've thought that he worked with the Martian League."

LET'S GET this straight. Upland Brotherhood on Venus, Martian League—and I suspect regeneration fits in there some place too. What's going on?"

"Don't you know?"

And, after I shook my head: "It's quite simple. Rumor had it that John Hastings discovered the secret of regeneration of tissues. The three planet governments have scoffed at it openly, but they've worked furiously in secret to either confirm or refute the rumor. Think about it: who controls regeneration controls the Solar System. What are injuries to an army? A man is hurt, he heals. He loses an arm, he'll grow a new one. He dies, and regeneration brings him back to life again.

"And that isn't all. Who is to say that a man whose tissues regenerate themselves is not gifted with eternal life? Tissues run down, fail to replace

parts, become old and useless. Senility results. But what if those tissues continuously recreated themselves, remaining young and hardy—*always?*”

My tongue clove to the roof of my mouth, but I managed the one word, “Immortality!” I healed like that. Me, John Hastings! I didn’t know why, I didn’t know how—but I’d seen it happen. *And did that mean I’d somehow been vouchsafed a veritable godhood?*

“...so, John Hastings, if you can tell me—”

“It’s true,” I said. “At least, I think it’s true. Regeneration exists somehow, somewhere. Suuki thought that, didn’t he?”

“Of course. The Brotherhood thinks so. Also the Martian League.”

“Where do you fit in?” I wanted to know. “I mean, you’re a Martian, yet you work with the Brotherhood.”

“My grandmother was a woman of Earth. Her son, my father—lived his life on Venus. It is only natural—”

“You have a Martian name,” I persisted.

“I wouldn’t be an effective undercover agent without one, would I? Anyway, we stray from the subject. What can I do?”

“That’s simple. Just tell me where I can find your friend Iggy.”

“Who? Oh, Karnjud-tor Ig! And he’s no friend of mine! Well, the Martian League preys on the superstitions of the Martian people. Karnjud-tor Ig is a sort of priest, and he does a good job of it. They mix science with religion, satisfying the people but still getting out of it what they want. Probably he’ll make a religious fiend of Suuki, and one of your Earth girl as well. He’ll torture them, extract the information he desires—and the Martians will approve. The Martians will get Suuki and the girl after that....”

“All right. When?”

“Tonight! The nearer moon goes through its phases rapidly, and the moon is now full. A night for the Elder Gods of Mars, John Hastings. A night for the cults to assemble in Lake of the Sun. A night for mystery and the ancient rites—and death.”

“You say Lake of the Sun like there really was a lake. I thought it dried up thousands of years ago and only the old name remained to tell of it.”

“Lake of the Sun never disappeared! Fed by underground streams, it once covered this entire desert basin, more an ocean than a lake. But the air of Mars grew thin and Mars was parched. The old Martians hollowed out the caverns whose streams fed Lake of the Sun, and you’ll find the lake there. Underground. A lake not of the sun now, but of the nether regions into which the sun’s rays never penetrate. It is funny. Lake of the Sun...”

“Not so funny for Suuki or Ellen Crewson,” I told her. “How do I get there?”

“You don’t. They’d kill an Earthman on sight if they caught him during those rites. You’re halfway around the planet from Syrtis Major, John Hastings, and Earth law doesn’t reach this far. May I make a suggestion? Good! I said you cannot go, and that is true. But a Martian could.”

“You don’t mean yourself?”

“Not alone, no. But I will join you. You will go, John Hastings, but you will be a Martian.”

SHE WASN’T kidding. She led me through the archway, returned for a moment to the outside room, closing her shop for the day. Then she went to work, and she was an expert.

She injected a bubbling, frothy stuff

high up on my right arm, piercing the veins near the armpit with her needle. I felt nothing more than a little giddiness, but when she let me look in a mirror, John Hastings didn't scowl back at me!

Parchment-like skin. Dry, withered, almost ready to flake off.

"My God!" I cried. "This isn't permanent, is it?"

"No, stop worrying. Twenty hours and you will be normal again. Meanwhile. . ."

Next, she applied a sort of flesh-like putty to my face, building the cheek-bones high and gaunt, developing the brow, making the chin protrude. A drop of liquid in each eye, and I found I had to squint like any sand-blown Martian.

Beta stood back with hands on hips, surveying her work. "You will pass," she said, almost proudly, very much the master artist. "Now, all we'll have to find for you is a smelly old cloak, a tattered cowl, a little information on the local customs. . . ."

I told her I hoped the boys at Lake of the Sun would fall for it too.

They did. After sundown, Beta and I entered an unimposing little cave and started down a long winding tunnel. I got the impression that the way led us deep into the bowels of Mars, for although the slope was gradual, it never leveled off.

High up in niches in the wall, flambeaux lighted our way, showing quite clearly the scores of Martians who plodded down the tunnel with us, cowls set low over their faces, shoulders hunched. Moisture dripped off the walls, made the rough stone floor slippery underfoot. Dank, subterranean moisture—on arid Mars!

Ahead, I became aware of a faint, faraway chanting, almost one with the dripping of water. Eagerly, Beta shuffled forward, and the uneven rock

flooring gave way to a spongy carpet of moss. The flambeaux no longer lighted our way—but we could see, for a strange glow filled the air, dancing motes eddying around the unseen currents of wind.

ABRUPTLY, the tunnel opened out into a huge cavern. The further wall was lost in dimness, the ceiling hid behind a veil of the dancing motes. Hordes of Martians streamed in from other passages, gathering together at the shore of an iridescent lake.

Lake of the Sun. . . .

The tiny glowing motes which had given light to our path streamed up from the surface of the lake! Lake of the Sun, indeed, with a million, million tiny suns gleaming up from its still depths!

The Martians clustered on the lake shore, chanting and beating their feet against the rock, rapt eyes intent upon the surface of the waters. We joined them, Beta and I, and my guide knew the chant, lending her own voice to it, stamping her feet in slow cadence. I think I felt more completely the intruder than any man who'd ever set foot on a far planet.

Something sparkled far out on the glowing lake, came closer. A barge, big and squat and riding low in the water. On it three figures.

Not until the barge drifted in some fifty yards away did I see them clearly. A Martian, tall for his race and strong, and I heard Beta whisper, "That's Ig Karnjud!" And two others, bound to a pole which rose up from the center of the barge.

Dour Togoshira Suuki. And Ellen Crewson.

Ig Karnjud raised his hands on high. The chanting faded away, and only the gentle lapping of water against the barge's hull broke the impossible silence.

Karnjud's voice boomed out across the cavern. I turned to Beta, said, "What's he saying?"

"Shh! He asks if anyone would speak before the ritual begins. And I would speak!" She cried out across the waters in Martian, her voice a plaintive wail. Cowled Marties stirred restlessly all about us.

I didn't understand a word of it, not the old Martian dialect. But wildly I realized my own name had been spoken. John Hastings, she called that out to the still figures in the barge!

Rough hands grabbed me, tore the cowl from my head, ripped the robes from my body. I stood there in jumper and leatheroid jacket, and Beta was laughing! "Fool!" she cried. "Fool, fool! Did you think for a moment that I would help? Did you in your vanity conclude that I—"

I WASN'T listening. She'd tricked me, utterly. No longer wrinkled and withered and parchment-yellow—my skin was the skin of an Earthman! She'd gained my confidence, given me a disguise to quell my doubts completely—then led me to the slaughter. Suddenly the words of the members of the Brotherhood came back to me. A man would be waiting in Lake of the Sun City with the other half of my torn card. A man! Somehow, the Martians had put one of their own in his place.

I grabbed the cowl of the nearest Martian, tugged him close, lifted him overhead. He was screaming when I hurled him at his fellows, and for a moment they cowered back, licking their wounds. Beta still laughed.

They came for me slowly, creeping up on all sides, in no great hurry. They seemed to relish every moment of it. Or perhaps no one wanted to reach me first.

You always gain a momentary ad-

vantage if you do the unexpected. I didn't wait for them. Instead, I hurled myself forward, came into contact with the vanguard of their ranks, flailed my way through. Panting, I stood on the edge of the lake, my back to its silent waters. I turned away and dove into the gleaming wetness, felt it close around me.

I broke surface, gasped a lungful of the moist air and set out in a crawl for the barge. The water hissed violently all about me, great jets of steam puffing off its surface. Some of the Marties had blasters!

I dived under, employing a frog-kick and breast-stroke. The water, gleaming with its endless tiny motes of light, offered almost no visibility, but far ahead a vague shadow led me on. The barge, I hoped. No Marties came swimming after me, and I soon realized that none would. Few are the desert nomads who can swim, and Mars is an arid wasteland of a planet.

My head spun, my chest burned for air, but I could imagine the Marties waiting patiently on shore with their blasters, and I did not come up for air. If I could swim around behind the barge, if only I could do that.

First, the Marties would have no target to shoot at, and that would suit me fine. Also, Ig Karnjud would wait for me on the shoreward side of the barge. Swimming around to its other side, I might gain its deck before he knew what had happened.

Somehow, I made it. I broke surface weak and panting, but the barge rocked up and down gently—several yards closer to shore. I paddled toward it, hardly using more than my hands, conserving strength, regaining my breath.

No more than four feet off the surface of the water, the deck waited invitingly. I reached the hull, found no

hand-hold. Four feet...

I swam along the side of the barge, found halfway to the stern what might have been an anchor chain. Grasping it, I pulled myself out of the water, clambered up, stood dripping on the deck.

ELLEN SAW me first, whimpered a little, but Suuki—who stared at me a moment later—didn't make a sound. And as I had expected, Ig Karnjud stood at the other side of the craft, his back turned, peering out over the water. At that moment, the Martians on shore must have spotted me, for they commenced shouting and screaming. Too many of them tried to cry instructions at once, and I don't think Ig Karnjud understood until the very end.

He turned to face me and from somewhere a knife appeared in his hand. He lunged wildly, but I parried the blow with my forearm, felt the knife rip through my jacket-sleeve. Then I hit him. Once and once only, but my right fist caught the point of his chin, threw him bolt upright. He stood there, waving his arms wildly, and then he fell over backwards, hitting the water with a splash.

He screamed, churning the lake into white froth with his arms and legs. Like most Martians, he could not swim—and perhaps that is why these ceremonies were conducted on a barge. Mighty impressive, preaching from the middle of a lake, on a planet where swimming was a rarity and water an awesome spectacle.

Karnjud went down once—and again. I guess I could have gone over the side and hauled him in, but some of the Martians on shore were firing their blasters dangerously close, and I could do nothing but watch the currents carry Ig Karnjud away—and under.

"Thank heaven you came, John!" Ellen cried. Reaction must have set in, for she began to whimper. She'd been very close to death, and she knew it.

Suuki smiled grimly. "We are still not out of this, you know. What do you suggest next, John Hastings?"

Wordlessly, I unbound them. Ellen came down from the pole limply, fell into my arms. We stood that way for a moment, and then I sat her down on the desk, rubbing her wrists and ankles to restore circulation. Dour Suuki had fared much better. He swung around the barge almost jauntily, none the worse for wear.

"There is an old trick," he explained. "You tense the muscles when they bind you, and when you relax the ropes are not particularly oppressive. But what now?"

"Hell," I told him, "just start this boat going, that's all. Right back to where it came from."

"Yes? How?"

"What he means," Ellen told me, "is that there doesn't seem to be any controls. Look for yourself."

I did. A flat barge and nothing more with apparently no way to get down inside.

"Well," I persisted, "how did Karnjud move it?"

Ellen shrugged. "Search me. It just went."

"Do we stand here and wait for them?" Suuki wanted to know. "In time they will get another boat, you know."

I shook my head. "Can you swim, Suuki?"

He grinned. "You forget, John Hastings, that mine is a watery planet."

"Good. Ellen?"

"A little. No great shakes, John, but a little."

"Suuki, how far would you say this

boat came?"

"Merely several hundred yards. There is a dock on the other side of the lake, guarded only by an old caretaker."

"Right. In that case, we'll swim for it."

"What good will that do?" Ellen demanded. "They can follow much faster around the shore—"

"No. You're wrong. They're standing on a little beach, but that's the only shore on this side of the lake. It dips away pretty fast, and sheer rock walls come down to the surface of the water. No one will follow us, Ellen. At least not for a good long while."

Suuki stood poised on the edge of the deck. "In that case, what are we waiting for? They say on my world that a man who delays is—but never mind! Not understanding the language, you'd miss a beautiful play on words. Shall we go?"

Not waiting for an answer, Togoshira Suuki dived overboard. Ellen looked more than a little frightened. Wordless, I took her hand and led her to the side. "Jump," I said. Still holding hands, we leaped.

THE DOCK surprised us. It was an ancient quay jutting out into the lake, but beyond it an underground city loomed in the half-darkness, throwing sword-edged spires up through the phosphorescent murk. Some of the buildings must have been constructed from obsolete spaceship hulls, for they stood poised on their tailtubes now, seemingly ready to blast-off toward the high-vaulted ceiling of the cavern.

"Apparently religion is a big business with the Martian League," Suuki observed matter-of-factly.

"This kind of religion never did anyone any good," Ellen told him.

After that, there wasn't much time for talking. A narrow stone roadway snaked around the edge of the city on a six-foot ledge of what looked like sandstone, and I let Ellen and Suuki use my back as a step-ladder to reach it. I caught on with my hands and clambered up after them. Where my hands groped in the gloom, I found a coil of thin but tough rope, and slung it across my arm on the hunch that it might come in handy later. Funny how such hunches can sometimes pay off.

Then, quite suddenly, it began to grow cold. A chill wind swept in off the lake, and that wasn't so bad in itself. But we still wore our drenched garments, and I could tell when I took Ellen's hand in mine that she was shivering.

"Strip," I said.

"What?" Ellen's voice was almost a shriek. I could hear Suuki's dry laughter as he complied.

"Strip," I told Ellen again. "You'll feel warmer if you do." And, when she just stood there: "That's an order."

I turned away and peeled off my own wet clothing, then faced them once more. Ellen's skin gleamed wetly in the half-light, and Suuki laughed his dry laugh once more when she tried—and failed—to cover herself with her arms. Suuki pounded his ancient, withered flanks with delight.

When the voice boomed up at us, it sounded like the crack of doom in the utter stillness. "Halt! What was that? *Skarda! Key simlot!*" The guard was bilingual, issuing his order in both English and Martian.

He came into view soon afterwards, a big, hulking half-breed in a fancy dress uniform which must have signified Martian League soldiery. They had quite an organization, all right. The guard carried a blasting rifle,

stood with his feet planted wide right below our position on the ledge.

"Is anyone up there? *Slok kor tini mot?*"

He began to turn slowly as Suuki faded back silently into the shadows. I stood there with Ellen. Both of us naked, unarmed—and helpless. Unarmed? It was almost at the last instant that I remembered my coil of rope.

I EASED it off my shoulder, looped it. I'd have one chance, no more. A blast from the rifle disemboweling me if I didn't cast straight.

I let the rope fly.

Ellen gave a little yelp as it landed on the big man's shoulders. Then I tugged, felt the rope tighten, saw it climb up his neck as I pulled, and fasten just below his chin. I twisted. His face came half-around in the murk, and I could tell he was trying to scream. No sound escaped his lips. When I let the rope go, the guard slumped to the sandstone, his hands still clawing feebly at his neck.

Then we were running along the ledge without looking back. Finally, we came to a hoary staircase old as the sandstone itself—a twisting staircase which spiraled up dizzily until it disappeared above our heads. A little hut stood at its foot, and this I entered cautiously. Someone inside snored deeply and steadily, and I didn't disturb him. But I came out again with enough evil-smelling Martian clothing for the three of us.

The stairs seemed interminable. We took the garments with us and dressed on the first landing, where Ellen told me my knees were knobby for a Jovian Strong Man. I began an objective discussion of various points of her anatomy, stopped when she threatened mayhem. She somehow extracted a promise from me not to mention our nakedness together again.

Not unless...well, not unless I could remember some of the things John Hastings would have remembered. I nodded quick assent. I'd heard enough about this particular angle of John Hastings' past to want a change of subject—and fast.

From the top of the spiral stairway, a sloping passage led to the surface, and we soon found ourselves on the outskirts of Lake of the Sun City. A bitter night wind whipped in off the desert, bringing flurries of sand with it.

"Venus is such a pleasant place," Suuki muttered. "Even your Earth has its advantages. But this barren mess of a planet—bah!"

We could have remained in the caverns until the sun came up and warmed the desert, but the Martians would not have remained idle. When I told my companions that, Ellen said: "Granted. They'd have us surrounded by morning. Still, we won't get very far in this cold. *Brrr!*" She shivered as a particularly icy blast of wind hit us.

"We don't have to," I told her. "I parked a jet-sled outside the city, maybe a mile from here. I don't know if we can find it in the darkness. We can try..."

And we stalked out into the desert.

PROBABLY Suuki fared the worst. Accustomed to a tropical jungle with tepid waters and steaming swamps, he found himself out on the sub-zero barrens with nothing but a cloak and a cowl to keep out the frigid winds. And the abrupt change in temperature from day to night whipped up a series of never-diminishing sand-storms, driving tiny pellets against us with almost hurricane force.

After a time, it became a blinding, stinging nightmare. It was an effort even to pick up your feet and push

them forward for the next step. I grew numb all over, not slowly, but within moments after we had set out. The winds howled, the sands whirled high in furious little eddies which blotted out the stars.

We trudged on half a mile, maybe three-quarters—and then Suuki collapsed. I could barely make out Ellen's face in the darkness, but I could see that she looked down at him helplessly.

"We can't leave him," she said. "He'll die. But we can't stay on here. John—Johnny, I'm frightened."

Suuki gasped, "Go—ahead. Foolish—to stay. A shame... John Hastings... for there—is so... much we could have—told each—other!"

I smiled. "Will you still feel like talking if we can get back to Syrtis?"

He grunted an answer, but it was lost in the shrilling winds. I lifted him off the sands, slung him over my shoulder. Here on Mars with its lighter gravity he didn't carry much more than half his real weight, and I plodded on, letting Strong Man Bokkura do the rest.

Ellen grasped my free hand with her own stiff fingers, and walking that way we reached the jet-sled—parked near a monument which proclaimed Lake of the Sun City to be a peaceful old settlement which reminded one of the old days of Mars, with boats floating serenely down the canals, men and maids carousing in the warm sunshine, and nothing more than an occasional gust of balmy wind to stir the tranquil scene....

CHAPTER V

FAT MAN ASTEROID

"**H**OW DO you do?" Dr. Elkins said. "So you're Togoshira Suuki, the famous Venusian asteroidologist."

Suuki smiled. "I'd be nothing at all

if Hastings hadn't carried me off the desert two nights ago. I think I am very glad the man was my hobby."

I laughed. "Be gladder still that I played a Jovian Strong Man for a couple of years. You don't weigh as much as those barbells, Suuki."

"So *that's* where you disappeared! How did it come about?"

"I don't remember—remember?"

"He's stubborn," Dr. Elkins said. "If he'd submit to treatment, we might have his memory back inside of six months."

"I'd like that," Ellen admitted. I held her hand and, warm now, her fingers were pleasant to touch.

"The answer is still no, doc. I got what I came to Mars for—Suuki here. There's a lot he can tell me, so if you think he's well enough—"

"Certainly he's well. The cold sapped his strength, but the man's heart is as strong as a machine. Don't worry about that." And Dr. Elkins put away his stethoscope confidently.

Suuki sat up in bed, smoothing the covers over his scrawny chest. "About three years ago," the uplander-Jap began, "the whole solar system waited breathlessly for word from you. You'd discovered an asteroid which allegedly contained artifacts of a culture which existed before a planet between Mars and Jupiter exploded.

"Your last message to North American University was optimistic. You'd uncovered the artifacts, all right. Now, all you had to do was interpret them. But you were never heard from again!

"Months later, they found your ship, a derelict, floating free outside the asteroid swarm. No John Hastings. No written records. Nothing. But plenty of food, air, and water. You met with an accident, it was assumed. And obviously, you'd met death out there on some uncharted

asteroid. Expeditions set out to find you, came back empty-handed. John Hastings was forgotten.

"But the mystery of the asteroids wasn't. The old Martian civilization somehow connects its myths of the asteroids with a doctrine of eternal life. And rumors spread. You'd found that, John Hastings—the secret of regeneration, of eternal life—and you'd perished with it. Is it any wonder that people sought you?"

"Earth-government scoffed at the whole idea, but the navy maintains a carefully guarded operation, Project H. H.—for Hastings! Venus and Mars have their underground agents at work, too, and the Sargasso Cities hold the spotlight, because government men can work outside the law there, without the necessity of reporting back officially. Venus wants the secret—hence the upland Brotherhood, with some Earth members too, since some of your planetees feel that the Brotherhood can put the secret to better use. Mars wants it—hence the League. And Earth is determined to get it."

"When I came to Mars," I said, "someone tried to kill me. How can you explain that?"

Suuki shrugged eloquently enough. "Sargasso City. Intrigue and counter intrigue. News of your arrival came to Mars before you did."

"And one of your agents in Lake of the Sun City—a woman named Beta something—turned out to be in cahoots with the League."

"The same. It's difficult to maintain vigil over an underground organization which covers three planets and the Jovian moons as well."

ALL RIGHT, answer this one. Before I knew what was going on, a man on Earth tried to kill me. He was injured—severely. And

walked away a few minutes later."

"Regeneration," Suuki mused. "How else can I explain it? Does it mean the rumors are true?"

"It does," Dr. Elkins said. He told Suuki how they'd found me out on the desert.

I shook my head. "That isn't what I'm getting at. A man tried to kill me, almost succeeded. But where did he fit into the picture? How did he know me back there at the sideshow, when no one else did? Remember, Suuki, at the time you didn't know I was alive. We can assume the same for the Martian League. But some other force knew, found me—and wanted me dead. But why? The Martians tried to kill me so I couldn't reach you. I guess they were afraid of what we could do about this regeneration stuff if we ever got together. But otherwise, the Marties would have wanted me alive. The same goes for your Brotherhood. What I want to know is this: why did that someone else want me dead?"

"What you're asking," Dr. Elkins said, "is something like this: one particular party, and one only, did not want you alive. A dead John Hastings couldn't return to the asteroids, let alone lead a new scientific expedition out there. Thus, someone wished to put a stop to the whole thing." He frowned. "I can't make anything out of that part of it either."

Ellen spoke for the first time. "Maybe I can," she said. "We'd been in radio contact almost to the end, Johnny. Every day you got more excited, I remember it almost like it was yesterday. But you couldn't tell me anything concrete, not really concrete, because you feared someone else might cut in on the frequency, and what you'd found was dynamite. Also," she blushed a little, "you were kept much too busy telling me how

much you loved me!"

I felt like a damned fool, for I remembered nothing. It isn't easy, people telling you what you did, what you said—and everything is an absolute blank to you. I cleared my throat self-consciously, told Ellen to continue.

"WELL, YOU spoke about that old Martian myth, regeneration of tissues. I think, above all, that you wanted to impress upon me the fact that it wasn't so far-fetched. 'Look,' you said, 'a man gets a cut, it heals. An abrasion too, but sometimes there's a scar. A broken bone will knit. But that's only half the story. Plants regenerate their tissues all the time. Did you know that a plant doesn't really stop growing until it ceases to live? Or take some of the more primitive animals. On Earth, cut an arm off a starfish and it will grow a new one. Same for a lobster and its claws and, to a lesser extent, for the insects. Same on Mars, and it holds true to an even greater extent among the primitive life-forms of Venus. There's nothing odd about it, nothing smacking of the supernatural. It's nature's way of protecting some of its species, and there's no reason to believe that advanced science couldn't extend regeneration to man as well.

"I'll be able to prove that soon," you said. "And don't be surprised if I bring the proof back in a mighty shocking form. Tell me, kid, would you be willing to marry a super-man?" Ellen crimsoned slightly. "Oh, maybe those weren't the exact words, but you said something like that. I never heard from you again."

Suuki smiled grimly. "It all points to one thing. John, you must find that asteroid again!"

"Sure," I said, "just like that. One asteroid out of ten thousand, only I

can't remember which one."

"It is not impossible. First, you must return to the asteroid belt—and then let's see if your memory can't pick up the lost threads. I believe—"

"By George!" Dr. Elkins cried. "What a glorious challenge. The power to change mankind at your fingertips, if only you could remember. I will go along."

I told Suuki: "All I want to know is this: how are we going to get there?"

"My friend, the Brotherhood is not without its power, even here in Syrtis. We can raise the money; with it we can buy a ship; and then we'll see."

Dr. Elkins grabbed his hand impulsively. "Suuki, if this works out, science will remember you as a great man."

The uplander-Jap chuckled dryly. "I'm far more interested in the Brotherhood."

"I only want Johnny to regain his memory," Ellen said.

And that seemed to be that. Each of them had his reason for wanting to reach the asteroids with me in tow. Well, I had my reasons too, but somehow—as Suuki began to make preparations—a cold chill crept over me. Between Mars and Jupiter, a broad sector of space which, according to the famous law of Bode, should have been the orbit for a great planet. Instead, the thousands of asteroids spun out there in their cold dead vault, mute remains of a planet which existed—how many millions of years ago? And something out there had taken my memory from me, had given in its place something nameless, something which branded me for all the worlds to see: "*This man is more than human!*"

Was that something still lurking out in the cold bleak marches of space?

MARS FADED behind us, a swollen ochre and crimson globe. Ahead, the tiny motes which were asteroids caught the sunlight, held it, threw it back at us—a thousand thousand points of light. The rockets of Suuki's battered, second-hand cruiser throbbled dully from somewhere deep in the bowels of the ship. Elkins was asleep now, and Suuki. I stood with Ellen in the control chamber, plotting an aimless course.

"Where will we go?" she wanted to know.

"Search me. Suuki thinks it ought to be haphazard at first. Maybe something will strike a familiar chord for me."

"I hope so, Johnny. I hope so."

Mars-light flooded in through the huge quartzite windows, suffusing everything with a delicate saffron glow. Deep space encroached on all sides trying, it almost seemed, to force its way in through the windows, through the observation dome overhead, through the ports with their translucent coverings. But there was something of comfort within the ship, of security, of that unnamed thing which through the ages has permitted mankind to thumb its nose at the perils of a hostile environment.

I didn't know what at first. I suppose it's different for every man, for each his own private, inviolate sanctuary. And mine?

Ellen came to me slowly, the saffron highlights gleaming in her hair. Her eyes were big and wide and pleading. They said, *remember, Johnny! Oh, can't you please remember?*

She brushed against my chest, the faintest suggestion of a touch, and then I'd folded my arms around her, pulled her in close, felt the arch of her back grow stiff for a moment, then relax. I touched her hair with my lips, her brow, her eyes, the

smooth supple curve of her neck....

A small voice, almost that of a child: "Johnny, Johnny—you remember!"

I kissed the words from her lips, softly at first. I held it a long time, that kiss, not softly any longer. Toward the end it must have hurt her.

For Ellen, a ghost from the past, phantom no more. For me, the first sweet-brutal kiss of new love. "Johnny, you *do* remember!"

"Do you mind terribly if I don't?"

"I—I don't understand you."

"I remember nothing, not now, not yet. I only know that suddenly I had to do that. Not to remember anything, Ellen, but just for now, for today—and—"

"And what, Johnny?"

"And for tomorrow, too. Ellen—you hear it so much, you read it in books, but then when you try to say it yourself, it doesn't sound right. It sounds corny. It—hell, I don't care! Ellen, I—I think I'm falling in love with you. No, wait. Not the old John Hastings who everyone wants to remember. But me, right now, today. *I* love you, Ellen. I love you!"

"Johnny—"

It couldn't last. Something had to break the spell. An instant later I plummeted from the heights to the depths—and it looked as if I'd stay there for a long time. Maybe permanently.

The two remaining brothers Karnjud stood in the doorway, blasters in their hands.

"**SIT** RIGHT there," the English-speaking brother said. "Don't move. Don't make a sound. I'm warning you."

Ellen whispered, "I know them! Their brother took me, that Ig Karnjud...."

They stalked into the control room,

grim as pallbearers. Maybe they'd heard of their brother's death, maybe they somehow got wind of our expedition, hidden themselves aboard the ship. I didn't know, not then.

They ignored Ellen, marching forward grimly until they stood right in front of me.

"You rotten, stinking bastard!" the older brother cried. "You killed Ig—"

He slashed down with the blaster, bringing the tube end down across my cheek, opening it to the bone. I stumbled back, swung wildly with my right hand, but Karnjud side-stepped easily. Don't try that again, Hastings. My brother will kill you."

He meant it, and all I could do was stand there and take a beating.

He swung the blaster down again, handling it gracefully, more like a whip than a gun. It crashed against the bridge of my nose, cut further and ripped my lips. I heard Ellen whimper from far off, dimly saw her throw herself against the Martian. He muttered an oath, hurled her off into a corner. She got up again, yelling like a banshee, but the other Karnjud clipped her jaw with his fist and she tumbled over backwards, falling in a heap on the floor.

"Damn it, leave her out of this! Yeah, I killed your brother, but she had nothing to do with it!"

"Ain't that lovely. He wants to protect her!"

The blaster slammed down once more, crashing against my temple, stunning me. I stumbled, slumped half-forward, felt something explode against the back of my neck. It sent me all the way down to the floor, and I hit hard.

I had time to roll over on my back, to hunch up and tense my muscles. By then, the older Karnjud had forgotten all about his blaster. I saw him leering down at me through a bloody

haze, saw his brother's blaster, unwavering, pointing at me.

A foot lashed out and I tried to ride with it, but it caught me down near the kidneys, I think, and a wave of agony washed over me. Again, higher up this time, digging into the ribs. Still higher, numbing my shoulder. When the heavy boot started for my face, I was drifting away on a sea of crimson fog. The boot seemed to hang suspended in that fog, but it stalked me. . . .

Far away, Suuki's voice: "What's the meaning of—"

Then the boot struck.

"GET UP!" Something prodded my face, urgently.

"On your feet, Hastings. Come on. The way your body can regenerate injured tissue, you're not hurt."

As a matter of fact, I wasn't. I hadn't been unconscious for long, but it had been sufficient time for me to heal. Wipe the blood away, and I'd look like new. I felt it, too. Almost chipper. Hell, let them do what they want, they couldn't hurt me, not really.

Them!

The first voice belonged to Karnjud. The second was Dr. Elkin's!

I stood up fast, the Karnjuds waving me off into a corner with their blasters. Mars had faded behind us and the ship's pale blue spacelights cast harsh shadows across Dr. Elkin's mild face. He smiled coldly. "I suppose you are surprised, Hastings."

"You're damned right I'm surprised!"

"You needn't be. The Martie who attempted to take your life out on the desert was a member of an extremist group. I am not an extremist although, frankly, I was hard put to keep the Karnjuds off you after what happened to their brother. I merely

work, through the Martian League, in the interests of science—as I can apply it. What is science, Hastings, unless one can apply it, twist it for his own purposes, mold it to make a better world for himself?

"We want you alive! We want you to find that asteroid for us. Unfortunately, your friend Togoshira Suuki desires the same thing, but the Brotherhood claims an altruistic motive. I put it up to you, Hastings: altruistic, bah! In science one learns that there is no such thing. Each creature, each species, functions only in terms of its own survival. If something has survival value, it is good. If it does not, it is evil. Do I make myself clear?"

"Damned clear," I said. Mild-mannered Dr. Elkins, an egocentric creature who hid his self-importance behind a garb of modest scientific endeavor. But I knew he could be the most dangerous sort of antagonist, for he believed in his own warped creed.

"Where's Suuki?" I asked him. I think I was a little afraid to ask about Ellen.

"He's well, don't worry. And the girl, too. Suuki has knowledge which may aid us, and the girl might possibly help you remember. For now, Hastings, they have survival value. Don't misunderstand me: I hold no hatred for you. I believe I said I was intrigued once, and I meant that. But you have survival value as well: and so I need you. And don't you forget it."

IT DIDN'T help much to think about it now, but I'd been an idiot. Seemingly on a whim, Elkins had given up his Syrtis Major medical practice to come with us on this jaunt through the asteroids. He'd planned it that way all along, which also could explain his original desire

to help me regain my memory. Scientific interest, sure—but directed toward his own ends.

"You've got the deck stacked all the way," I told him. "How's it going to be dealt, Doc?"

"You'll see in a few hours, Hastings. We're nearing the asteroid belt now, and there is an advanced base which our organization holds in readiness. According to the Karnjud boys, our leader will be there. Can you believe that I've never met our leader? Strange, for I am the prime cog in our not-very-small machine. Perhaps our leader has other ideas. Perhaps... We'll see.

"Meanwhile, I leave you with the brothers Karnjud. As a word of advice, try nothing foolish. I believe I have impressed upon them the necessity of keeping you alive, but they remember their brother and the Martians are a peculiar people, placing vendetta over survival value. Well, good day." And he walked from the room, still a mild-looking little man.

The place, I realized, was a storeroom, deep within the ship. You had to speak loudly over the insistent *throb-throb-throb* of the rockets. The older Karnjud locked and bolted the heavy metal door, spoke for a time with his brother, in Martian. Then he turned to face me.

"Luka thinks I ain't treating him right. He says I knocked hell outa you before, he didn't. He wants to do it now. You know what, Hastings? I think I'm gonna let him. No, stay back! Just get off in that corner, that's right. I'm standing right here, see, and don't you forget it. My brother Luka is gonna wade into you till he gets tired. If you so much as raise a finger, I'll kill you."

Grinning inanely, Luka shuffled forward, somewhat on the tall side and incredibly thin, even for a Martian.

I don't think he weighed a hundred pounds, but I had a hunch he'd know how to wield the butt of a blaster.

I didn't wait to find out.

HIS BROTHER wasn't kidding—he'd gun me down if I tried anything. Only what he did not realize was this—Luka stood between us.

Luka raised the blaster in his thin fingers, brought it down. I moved in quick, caught his wrist and turned it. He howled once, then fell in toward me. I spun him around, got one hand on the back of his belt, one on the collar of his shirt. He came up off the floor easily, and I hurled him at his brother.

Karnjud fired his blaster instinctively, its beam searing Luka. His howl became a gurgle which bubbled from his throat. His chest and stomach scorched to a blackened ruin, Luka was dead before he hit the floor.

Karnjud knew it without bothering to look. He whimpered frightfully, an animal sound. He fired again, but by then I'd ducked behind a packing crate which the beam kindled to quick flame. I got away fast, but Karnjud hardly seemed aware of the fire licking up at us. "Luka," he mumbled over and over again. "Luka, Luka, Luka. . . ."

He hardly saw me. He criss-crossed the room with raw energy, bringing angry flames wherever the beam touched. Smoke made it difficult to breathe—and to see. Karnjud stood at the bolted door, firing his blaster and screaming, firing and screaming.

Somehow, I got to him, took the blaster from his fingers, pushed him aside. I turned my attention to the door, reaching out for the bolt and then drawing my hands away. The door was red-hot!

Gibbering now, Karnjud sat down near his dead brother, near the broth-

er he'd killed with his own hand. "Luka, Luka! Say you're not dead! Luka, speak to me. Luka—"

I tried to drag him away, but he kicked out at me, scurried like some midnight rodent to the other side of Luka's corpse and stayed there. He sat that way, a ring of flame closing around him, and I couldn't argue, not unless I wanted to become a part of it.

I ripped a strip of cloth from my sleeve, bound it around my right hand. With this I tackled the scorching bolt and soon I'd thrown it back, opening the door. I looked once more into the storeroom, now a roaring, raging inferno. Of the dead Luka and his brother I could see nothing.

Outside, I shut the door, gulped in great lungfuls of fresh air. Then I ran forward.

Suuki and Ellen sat in the control room, bound to two of the pilot seats. Dr. Elkins was busy at the controls.

"Close off aft!" I cried. "Fire!"

"Fire?" Elkins snorted.

"Damn it, that's what I said."

"This ship is fireproof," he told me blandly.

"The storerooms aren't. Karnjud is back there with his brother, dead. The whole place is one roaring mess of flames!"

Smoke drifted into the control room, and Elkins jumped to his feet. "What section?"

"Four," I told him.

"Well, we'll shut it off. This ship is compartmented, no harm will be done. The fire will burn itself out, leave a hole in the hull. But we have nothing to worry about."

"That's what you think. Section four lies adjacent to the engine room. The heat's liable to fuse the softer metals down there and turn us into a derelict."

FOR THE first time, Elkins appeared alarmed. "Wh—what do you want me to do?"

"Like you said, shut off section four. Then we'll have to high-tail it for the nearest asteroid. I hope we make it!"

Elkins pressed a stud, and from somewhere back in the rear of the ship, great metal doors clanged shut. "The nearest asteroid is our advanced base, Hastings. But will we make it? My God, will we make it?"

"Survival value doesn't look so hot now, huh, Doc? I don't know, how long will it take?"

"Umm-mm. Another hour at top speed. I don't know if we can stand the acceleration."

I told him we'd have to, but when he made no move to throw the rocket levers all the way home, I thrust him away from the control board and sat down there myself.

He'd forgotten all about the blaster in his hand. "I don't want to die," he said. "Not burning up like this in space. I have so much to do."

Full-rockets jarred me, squeezed me back in my chair. I heard Ellen whimper, saw Suuki's acceleration-distorted face. Elkins had fainted at the first new thrust.

The pressure was bad enough, but with it came heat, burning, blinding heat. I stuck grimly with the controls, but I began to feel we'd never make it. Then I heard Ellen trying to say something.

"Sil-ly. Don't shut... off section... four! Open it—to space... instead. No oxygen... to burn—with!"

Of course! Neither Elkins nor I had thought of that, but it was the obvious thing to do. Open a port-hole in section four, let all the air *woosh* out, and you'd have no more fire.

I pushed the rocket-lever back to the right, felt acceleration ease off

gradually. Then I stood up, crossed to the repair cabinet, took out a spacesuit. Made to withstand all extremes of temperature, it could take me safely through the roaring flames of section four.

The rest was easy. Wearing the spacesuit, I ran back through the companionway, worked the manual levers on the compartment doors, entered the cauldron of fire which was section four. Once and once only I struck out at one of the ports with a gauntleted fist, watched the quartzite shatter and fly out into the vacuum of space. Air rushed out after it, sucked from an area of pressure to one which lacked it altogether. When I looked again into the storeroom, the fire had vanished. Utterly, as if it had never been. Smoke had rushed with the air through the port, flames had subsided instantly with no oxygen left to support combustion.

Charred, blackened horrors were the Karnjud brothers had lain...

I got out of my spacesuit in the companionway, marched up to the control room with it slung over my arm. Elkins was waiting for me, and this time he did not forget his blaster. He held it firmly and it pointed at my chest and he said: "Come in and sit down. I can be wrong about survival value, Hastings. Don't try me."

Maybe he'd counted on the brothers Karnjud for some support when he met the unknown leader. I could sense something there, something which might help us later. Without knowing him, Dr. Elkins hated this man who presided over intrigue on three worlds, who held the whip-hand in a game which Elkins wanted completely for his own.

Wearily, I sat near Ellen, smiled into her eyes. She looked tired, but she smiled back.

Suuki was sound asleep.

I ASKED Elkins' permission to release Ellen from her bonds. He granted it readily enough, but refused to offer the same freedom to the sleeping Suuki.

Ellen whispered, "It all happened so fast before, you didn't have time to finish what you were saying, did you?"

"No," I told her. "You're wrong. I said all I wanted to say. No strings attached, kid. I love you."

"Then you must remember! Surely you must remember something."

"I only wish I did. But no, it isn't like that at all. I fell in love with you, and it's still as if the old John Hastings never existed. Hell, I don't know. Maybe a part of my mind which I can't understand remembered. But only you, Ellen, and how I feel about you. Everything else is a complete blank."

She pouted. "What I don't understand is this: your body can regenerate itself, right?"

And, after I'd nodded: "Well, how about your mind, your memory? Why can't that do the same thing?"

"Don't look at me. I haven't got the slightest idea how this thing works. So—since I don't remember—I guess it doesn't include that."

We rambled on and on, about everything, about nothing. We lost all track of time. It came pretty much as a surprise when I heard Elkins talking excitedly into the radio.

"Yes, that's what I said. We're with the League. I have Togoshira Suuki on board, a prisoner. Right. I suppose that does take the sting out of the Upland Brotherhood. And I have another surprise for you. John Hastings is on this ship, also a prisoner. I am Dr. Ronald Elkins—ah, you know of me! Unfortunately, I can't say the same concerning you. What? Yes, I suppose I will see you in a

few minutes. Will I know you? Umm, you don't think so, eh? Well, I can't help being curious."

THROUGH the observation dome, I could see a great slab of rock tumbling along through the void. That's one thing you can't get used to about the asteroids. All of them aren't round. Oh, there are mathematical laws which insist that the larger ones, like Ceres and Vesta, assume spherical form, but some of the smaller baby planets can come in the damndest shapes. Twisting end over and several miles in space, headquarters for the Martian League looked a lot like a pock-marked coffin.

"I suppose you don't know your astronomy," Elkins commented smugly. "That planetoid is Eros, twenty miles or so in diameter. And look, look there! See that shining thing? The league built a pressure dome there! It will be just like home under it, unless the leader happens to be a Martian. Then it will be just like Mars."

"Did he sound like a Martian?" I asked.

"No. No, he didn't. Earthman, I'd say. But I've never heard his voice before, that's a certainty. I wonder who he is."

Well, I was wondering the same thing, too. And I had an odd hunch that I'd know the man. Nothing I could put my finger on, but it kept insisting, that hunch—and it said, plainly enough, *you'll be in for a surprise.*

We landed some three or four hundred yards from the huge quartzite dome, and Eros was a weird place. Pock-marked and scarred like the surface of the moon, covered with a powdery, virgin-white pumice, it stretched out unevenly in all direc-

tions. Off to the left, the horizon jutted up in a wild profusion of rocky crags not more than a hundred yards away. Twenty miles long, Eros was no more than two or three miles wide, and we stood near one edge of its rectangular surface. Straight ahead, however, we could see for miles, except where the quartzite rose out of the pumice and obstructed our view.

ELKINS watching us carefully, we climbed into our spacesuits, set our gravity equalizers, stepped out on the surface of Eros. In a matter of minutes we reached the dome, shuffled forward into an airlock, waited till a red light blinked on and off telling us that pressure and atmosphere had been built up within the lock. We took off our spacesuits, hung them along with many others on the pegs which lined one wall. Then we walked through the inner door and inside the dome.

Very pleasant. Earth temperature, perhaps sixty-five degrees. And a delicious fragrance of growing green things which was like heaven after the parched air of Mars and the canned air of a spaceship.

Half a dozen Marties met us, uncomfortable in what was to them a thick, soupy atmosphere. Apparently Elkins knew the Martie in charge, for some civil words passed between them. They ushered us forward, past a row of hastily constructed barracks, down a wide, tree-shaded lane. Evidently this Earthman leader of the League liked his terrestrial comforts!

The big house at the end of the street did not show signs of hasty construction. It had been done carefully, painstakingly, a big sprawling structure of some nameless white stone. At the entrance, a Martian houseboy met us, told us to wait. He

returned in a moment, said: "My mas-ser see you now. Please to wipe feet if dirty."

How prissy could you get on a fly-speck of a frontier world!

The leader of the Martian League sat at his desk in a large study. His back was turned to us, a huge back, very wide and very fleshy. Sweat stained the back of his gray shirt a darker color, despite the pleasant temperature. I could just see the side of his jaw, and it worked up and down, up and down. He chewed noisily, his fat arm rising and falling into a bowl of fruit. I couldn't be sure, because we only saw his back from where we stood—but I'd have bet he weighed close to five hundred pounds.

He turned slowly, indolently—and faced us. I let out an audible gasp, and I suddenly felt weak. Dr. Elkins' place in the Martian League order of things had come as a distinct shock. This was worse.

Sweat streaming down his face as he swiveled around in his chair, fruit juices staining the corners of his blubbery lips, the leader of the Martian League chuckled softly. He was Lope Perez, the Fat Man of Venezuela!

CHAPTER VI

PEREZ' STORY

"SURPRISED, Bok-kura? Or should I say John Hastings?" The same syrupy voice which I remembered so well. How long ago had it been? "No, I guess it will remain Bok-kura, eh, Boky? Well, say something! Don't just stand there like an idiot. Ahh, these synthetic nectarines are good!"

I mumbled a word or two about not understanding, and Perez snorted, "Bah! I can believe that. Give a man a sound body and he'll forget all

about his mind, permit it to atrophy. But make him too big or too small or malformed in some other way, and he'll have to use his brain. You're a fool, Boky!"

Dr. Elkins shook his head. "I don't agree," he said. "The mind and the body work together as one. The best combination offers the best possible survival value."

Perez snorted once more. "And just who the hell are you, my little popin-jay?"

"Elkins. I radioed—"

"Ah, yes. Elkins. Will you be good enough to shut your mouth and let me talk?"

This wasn't the Perez I had known, not the weak, sniveling mountain of a man. Oh, the flesh was there, and the propensity for sweating, and the appetite. But Lope Perez had played a different role entirely in Dufree's sideshow, and I told him that.

He said, "Don't you think I'm aware of it? Don't you think I hated every moment of it? Parading around for the gawking hicks who came to watch, taking orders from everyone in the company, living in filth? Bah! Many times I thought I should have to quit, but I always saw you there, Boky, and so I remained."

"**P**ERHAPS you wonder why I helped you that last day, perhaps you wonder about that and a lot more. It was a long haul and a thankless one, but that day I knew you were on your way. You had to go free, don't you understand? If the police took you, if they allowed Dufree's trumped-up charge to stick, you might still be in prison. But you escaped, and things began falling neatly into place after that.

"I found you at the spaceport long ago. I found you, not Dufree. You hadn't forgotten everything yet, but

your memory was fading fast. You told me many things. And then you lost consciousness. When you came to, you remembered nothing. But you'd said enough to whet my appetite, Boky. I had to find out the rest. I knew of John Hastings, almost everyone did. If you lived too public a life after that I knew the government would find you, and that would be the end for Perez.

"On the other hand, there would be nothing to trigger your memory if you lived in seclusion. Dufree's sideshow was the middle of the road. Someone might recognize you, yes—but I could act before official circles. And that is precisely what happened. You became the strong man, I the fat clown. No, I don't begrudge the fat part of it, Boky. If a man loves food inordinately he will grow obese. It is the price he has to pay"—munching on another juicy piece of fruit—"and I say it is worth it. But I played the buffoon. I, Perez, played the buffoon, and that I did not like!"

"Want to keep talking?" I said. "I hope so, because I'm still all mixed up."

"Why not? If I expect you to help me I suppose you must learn at least part of the truth. You landed on Earth with another man, with a freight captain who'd found you out here in the asteroids. Evidently he shared in your secrets, for he too had the powers of regeneration. He tried to kill you that last day at Dufree's. Ah, you remember? The way I connect things, it happened like this: somehow, you lost your ship out here. You were stranded on an asteroid, and by a thousand-to-one chance that man found you, shared in your secret, took you back to Earth. Apparently he wanted to exploit what you'd found, you did not. A fight ensued, and somehow he won. Perhaps by trickery.

At any rate, you received a nasty bang on the head, and amnesia resulted.

"The other man escaped. When he found you by chance that day at Dufree's, he did not know you had lost your memory. He was determined to kill you, to keep the secret for himself. How could he expect to kill you knowing that you shared with him the powers of regeneration? I don't know. Maybe he acted foolishly in spite of it. Although I rather suspect the power has its Achilles' Heel. Perhaps the needle gun he tried to use, perhaps something else. All I know for sure is this: that man is now dead, and he had this power of yours."

"Dead?"

"Yes. I went looking for him, figuring he could answer everything you could. I found him, and he ran. We had him trapped in a farmhouse, we fired the house to force his surrender. He got caught, couldn't extricate himself. When the fire burned itself out, he was dead—burned to a crisp—and there was nothing left to regenerate. So you see, Bok-kura, you are not invulnerable. I would suggest you remember that."

SUUKI JOINED the conversation for the first time. "Then there yet remains one thing—"

"Umm-mm, you'd be this Brotherhood, Upland-hood, whatever it is—you'd be their leader, Togoshira Suuki. You realize, of course, Mr. Suuki, that the span of your life is limited precisely by what aid you can offer me. As the expression has it, we play on opposed teams."

Suuki chose to ignore the threat. "As I have said, one thing remains. We have not yet located the asteroid on which all this happened."

"No?" Perez smiled. "Perhaps your Brotherhood hasn't. We of the League

have. Our archaeologists have been able to make nothing out of it, I am ashamed to admit. All they know is that they have found the seat of a very ancient civilization. Better minds than theirs are needed."

"Suuki," I said. "You'll need Suuki."

"Wrong. We'll need *you*. Your friend will have to prove his worth in some other way if he desires life instead of death."

"No, you're wrong. I forget all my technical training. I didn't even know I was an archaeologist until someone told me. You'll need Suuki, like I said."

"Don't dictate to me! I'll—well, we'll see. Further, what do you suppose I'm going to do with the girl?"

I took an angry stride toward the Fat Man, but Elkins waved me away with his blaster. Suuki said, "You will do absolutely nothing with Miss Crewson. Otherwise, we won't lift a finger to help you. You find your hands tied, do you not?"

"Forget it, Suuki," I said. "All we can do is wait for something to happen."

Suuki nodded slowly. "I suppose you are right, my friend. He can leave all of us on an airless little coffin of a world after we do his work for him."

I DIDN'T say anything. Suuki was right, of course. But I knew that I'd kill Perez if he as much as touched Ellen.

"...so," Perez was saying, "that leaves absolutely nothing. After this ability to regenerate is in my hands, nothing will stop me! Do you realize what it will mean? The old will come to me, the crippled, the feeble. Everyone. They'll pay anything, they'll sign their lives away for a touch of it."

Dr. Elkins shouted, "No! No,

that's all wrong! That's not the way I planned it."

"You? And who do you think you are? Do you think you count?"

"I have plans," Elkins persisted. "Selfish plans, yes—but I insist that we go about this more slowly, experimenting, determining just what this regeneration can do and what it cannot. Perhaps after ten years—"

"Ten years! You're insane. I'll control the Three Worlds inside of a year!"

"In that case, you'll do it without me."

There Elkins made his mistake. Somehow, he felt he was important, felt in some obscure way that the whole business could not proceed without him.

Perez began to laugh, the fat under his chin wagging from side to side, jiggling up and down. "You are quite sure, Dr. Elkins?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"You won't change your mind?"

Elkins had not seen it, but Perez' fat hand had crept to a button on his desk. Three Marties came into the room, soundlessly. They stood behind the bald doctor and they waited.

Perez said, "You will take this man outside the dome and kill him." He munched on another nectarine, smiling when Elkins began to lift his blaster. He never got it all the way up. Strong hands pinned his arms from behind, lifted him off the floor, bore him away. He didn't begin to scream until they had shut the door quietly behind them.

"**N**OW THEN," Perez told us, "we will leave for your asteroid tomorrow, Boky. You, me, Suuki here, the girl. I suggest you all get a good night's sleep."

"What happens afterwards?"

"Boky! Boky, don't you trust me?"

"You know God-damned well I don't."

"It doesn't matter. What happens afterwards is my concern, entirely my concern. For now, will you come here, Boky?"

I walked to his desk, stood there. He reached into a drawer, came up with a knife which he probably used to pit his fruit. "I've always wanted to see how it works, Boky. Do you mind? There's a good fellow, put your arm on the desk, please."

Ellen began to sob, but I heard Suuki quieting her. I extended my arm, watched while Perez brought his knife close, placed its point just above the large veins on my wrist. With a quick motion, he slashed the knife across my forearm. He'd severed the veins, and blood began to pour out at once. Soon it slowed to a trickle, stopped altogether. Grunting his satisfaction, Perez wiped it away with a cloth, looked at my arm. A thin white scar—nothing more.

"Wonderful, Boky! Utterly wonderful. Do you realize that with your secret I shall be able to—well, no matter. I am tired and I wish to nap before eating. My men will show you out."

"He's a megalomaniac," Suuki whispered as we left the room. "Did you see that? He knows he needs you, John, but his mind is so tightly wrapped around this regeneration process that he had to see it for himself. Had he underestimated its powers, you might have bled to death."

"I knew nothing would happen."

"Yes, I know! But that fat man—what's his name, Perez? Thank you. Perez did not know. He took a chance, foolish one. We should keep that in mind. I think that if the opportunity presents itself, we may put that to use."

I nodded, but I wasn't listening.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow we'd visit the source of the mystery. I'd found something there once, and I'd almost perished. Perez had been helpful, he'd explained a lot. But I wasn't entirely satisfied, and although I was eager, I also was afraid of what the morrow might bring.

Ellen must have sensed it. She took my hand and squeezed it, and sometimes the way she looked at me she could say "I love you" without uttering a sound.

BEHIND us, Eros tumbled along through the void, a great stone coffin spinning end over end. Perez sat at the controls, three of his Martians lolled about the control room. I paced back and forth and Suuki paced with me. He said, "I'd have liked to approach this asteroid differently, John. I'd have liked to approach it with the trained archaeologists of the Brotherhood. Now—now we're in the hands of some common thugs, and a madman wants to use regeneration for his own ends."

I smiled. "Maybe it won't be as bad as all that, Suuki. Perez doesn't know archaeology; sure as hell none of his Marties do. So he needs us. When we get there, well—we'll see."

Perez called triumphantly from his seat: "We're coming! There it is, just ahead. Look if you'd care to, and remember it was I, Perez, who discovered—"

"Rediscovered, you mean," Suuki told him. "John Hastings found the place originally, provided you have the right asteroid."

"Oh, it's the right one, don't you worry about that. See for yourself."

Interested, Suuki crossed to the port, and I saw Ellen get up and follow him. For a while I hung back. I felt all choked up inside, and when Ellen saw I wasn't going to watch

with them, she came back for me.

"Hey, don't tell me the man responsible for all this doesn't want to be on hand when—"

"I don't know. Maybe it's not the right place. Maybe it is. Maybe I'm scared..." You couldn't blame me. Without knowing how or why, I'd been made something more than a man at this asteroid which now swam up rapidly in the port. And someone—or something—had left a message in my pocket. *Have caution, John Hastings, they may try to kill you.* Sure, men like Perez would cheerfully kill for the secret of regeneration, but that wasn't it. Who had left the message? And why?

Well, I'd come a long way to find out, and when Ellen walked back to the port I followed on her heels.

IT HOVERED off in space, that asteroid, black as jet. It should have been entirely invisible, for it shed no light at all. But behind it the stars of deep space formed a speckled backdrop and it stood starkly silhouetted against them, darker than the night side of Pluto. At first I couldn't guess its size, but Perez had started deceleration—and that meant we were close. It also meant the asteroid had a maximum diameter of perhaps two or three miles. Utterly black and utterly round.

Artificial?

Perez was fat and he didn't look like much of an astrogator, but he knew how to bring that ship down. We landed with scarcely a bump. The three Marties stood off at one side of the control room, muttering among themselves.

Perez looked at them, snorted. "All right! Don't stand there all day. Get a move on."

"Masser," said one, "old story long before Earthman come talk of small

black planet. Much mystery. Much death. No good."

"We're going outside. You're coming with us."

"Masser, Mars men have much fear. We stay." Then hopefully, "We stay?"

"The devil you'll stay! You're coming outside—now."

The Martians jabbered in a desert dialect, gesturing outside every now and then and shaking their heads nervously. But they shuffled forward in single file and headed for the airlock.

Suuki, who'd sought the black asteroid with an eagerness to match Perez', needed no prompting. He said, "Where do you keep the spacesuits?"

"We don't have any," Perez chuckled.

"Don't have any? How are we going outside?"

"**W**HY DON'T you just leave that to me? I told you I was here before. That black globe outside has gravity close to Earth-norm, and it has a good, breathable atmosphere."

Suuki scowled. "You wouldn't want to march us out there to suffocate us, would you?"

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm going with you. I told you the place has air."

"That's impossible."

"Yes? So are the Marties, and you Venusians for that matter."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, consider. On Earth, the dominant life form is human. What would you say were the odds against that happening on Mars as well, and on Venus?"

Suuki scratched his head. "I never thought of it that way. Now that you mention it, it does sound almost an impossibility."

"All I'm trying to say," Perez continued, "is that the impossible can happen. And perhaps if we knew all

the facts, it wouldn't be impossible at all. There are slight physical differences, but men of the three worlds are essentially the same. Could it be that long ago the seeds were planted on each world which would, in the natural course of events, evolve into something human? Could it also be that whoever—or whatever—planted those seeds also put this asteroid here? Outside you'll see pictures of Earthmen, of Marties, of Venusians. But the asteroid is older than any of our races. Then I say that means they knew humanity was coming. If you set a tree shrew down on Earth sixty million years ago, you'd know that in the natural course of events its progeny would become human. Over a long path and with a lot of false starts, but once the pattern was set mankind became inevitable. The same holds for Mars and Venus.

"Don't ask me how, don't ask me why. But whoever did that planting also planted this asteroid."

"It does look artificial," Ellen agreed.

"Of course it is! I figure they made it just before their planet exploded. You know these asteroids all once were part of a planet out here, perhaps one the size of Mercury or Pluto. But this thing is different. They left it here and I say that they knew it would one day be found. It has—and it's mine."

You couldn't argue with Perez' logic, nor with the blaster he held in his hand.

UNTIL WE actually stepped outside, I think Suuki still doubted. But the air was warm and good, although it had a musty smell. And Suuki—who'd doubted until he saw for himself—came up with the answer. Suuki was like that. "Naturally," he mused. "How could we have missed

it? If the atoms of the upper atmosphere were somehow stripped of both protons and electrons, what you'd have left would be the inter-atomic forces which bind them together, or—"

"A perfect force-field for holding in the atmosphere!" Ellen finished for him.

It didn't mean much to the Martians. They clung close to the light fanning out from the nose of the ship, but this soon became a feeble glow lost behind us and the Martians cowered back toward it.

Perez bellowed: "Come on up here! Come on now! Snap to it."

They came, mumbling apologies. I looked at Suuki, Suuki looked at me. "I don't get it," I said. "They're scared stiff, but they obey Perez like he's a god."

Ellen laughed. "You don't know Martian custom. Look at it this way: the planet is one big rat race. There isn't enough water, there's even less food. Most Marties are scrawny bags of skin and bones. If one tribal chieftain becomes really powerful, he can eat well. He takes advantage of it. He gets fat, and because that clearly speaks of power, he becomes more powerful."

Suuki held his sides, roared with laughter. "That's rich!" he cried. "That's rich! I see what you mean. Perez is the fattest man the Marties ever saw. Obviously then, to them he's a mighty ruler, and thus they obey him."

"Shut up," Perez growled back over his shoulder. "I heard that. If you think it's so funny, maybe I'll have the Marties flay you alive. They'll do that too if I ask them, you know."

"Nice guy," Ellen said.

I shook my head. "Cut it out. Perez isn't joking."

That brought us back to the situa-

tion in a hurry. Perez could kill us—and would—if we caused him any trouble. On the other hand, he needed us. He knew that and when the time came it might stay his hand, but megalomania carries with it feelings both of power and persecution, and Perez could be a mighty deadly captor.

NOTHING gave underfoot as we walked. Nothing crunched. Instead, our boots click-clacked over a polished black surface, hard as marble. Perez snapped on a hand search beam and swaggered forward confidently. We came behind him, Suuki, Ellen and I—and in our rear were the Martians.

"We might jump him," Suuki hissed, bringing his head close to mine.

"We might, and it might not work. But that isn't the point. Perez looks like he knows where he's going. Okay, we'll follow."

Ahead of us, Perez had stopped. He probed about with the light for a time, grunted something unintelligible under his breath. He fastened the light to his belt, got down on hands and knees. In the glare of the search beam, an uneven splotch of paint gleamed dully.

Perez turned briefly and looked in my direction. "You don't remember, do you?"

"N-no."

"You made this, Boky, when you were here a couple of years ago. It marks a—ahh!"

Perez broke off in mid-sentence. His fat, clumsy fingers began to do a jig on the smooth black surface. Something clicked, faintly audible in the complete silence. Perez stood up and dusted off his hands.

The three Marties looked like they half-expected a fire-breathing dragon to push its way up from the rock. Ellen glanced at me for some signs of

returning memory, but I shrugged and she turned her attention back to the surface of the asteroid. Suuki whistled.

A ten-foot section of polished black stone slid away!

CHAPTER VII

SECRET OF THE BLACK GLOBE

A SOFT amber radiance pulsed up through the aperture, apparently set off by whatever opened the trap-door. A flight of stairs led down.

Perez called to the Martians. "All right. You first."

"No, masser. We stay."

Perez snorted angrily, then shrugged. This time, even his impressive bulk couldn't sway the Martians. I think he could have threatened them with death and their refusal to venture below would have remained unshaken.

He said: "You first, Boky. Then the girl, then Suuki. I'll follow."

Seven, eight, nine—I counted them. Nine steps. I heard Ellen start down behind me, but for a moment I forgot all about her, forgot Suuki and Perez and everything else.

Across a short hallway a mural had been painted on the wall. Half a dozen people, naked. An Earthman and his mate. Two Martians, male and female. Two Venusians. Completely realistic, all of them. They stood near what was evidently a spaceship of some alien design.

Suuki had reached bottom. "This must have been done recently," he said. "How else can you explain—"

"Don't be ridiculous!" This was Perez. "Don't you understand? See? See, they are pictured without clothing. Sixty million years ago the seed was planted, it was known humanity would develop on each of the three

planets. It certainly could not be known what sort of clothing they would affect."

Ellen nodded. "This is ancient, Suuki—impossibly ancient. Johnny told me that in one of his messages, before he vanished."

Impatiently, Perez motioned us ahead of him down the hallway. We passed the mural, walked further, came to a wide archway. Beyond it was a great vault of a room. Tier upon tier of machinery lined the walls, climbed to the high ceiling.

Everything waiting, in repose—for sixty million years?

The strange machinery did not clutter up the place. It stood back against the four walls, polished, shining. In the center of the room rested a cup of metal, as wide across as the height of a tall man, and to this Perez ran eagerly.

"Do you remember, Boky? Think man, you must remember something!"

I DID. IN a haze, like a dimly recalled dream, I remembered. "Yes," I mumbled, almost a part of that forgotten dream. "I stood here and I looked. I studied it, thought I understood. I remained down here—a long time. Somehow, I—I think my ship got loose from its moorings, floated off into space. Someone found me—"

"That's not what I mean!" Perez cried. "Do you remember anything about this place?"

"That—that's part of it, too. I remember the cup, the thing there in the center of the room. I sat in it. Yes, I sat there. I think you'll find a lever on the left side. I pulled it. I—that's it! I sat in the cup and I pulled the lever and then things started to happen..."

"It gave you this power of regeneration," Perez shouted triumphantly. He

waddled toward the cup, peered at it for a moment, circled it, came back.

"I'm going to try it," he said at last.

It had a headache. Something was nagging at my brain, saying *remember, remember!* But it was there and then it was not, like the tides ebbing and flowing. "Don't," I said.

"Eh? Why not? I know—you're afraid someone else will get the power too!"

"N-no. I don't think so. I just know that you shouldn't, not before we understand this machine as I understood it once."

"Bah! You're lying." Perez lumbered back to the cup of metal, placed both hands on its rim, clambered up. He was panting when he finished, but he squatted within the cup.

"You're right, Boky. A lever on the left side. How I've waited for this."

He made a motion with his left hand, kept the blaster pointed at us with his right.

A richer amber glow filled the inside of the cup as the banks of machinery along the four walls whined and grumbled into action. Wheels grated against wheels. Sparks flashed. Perez' laughter boomed through the vault as the amber glow bathed him, caressed him.

ABRUPTLY, it was over. The wheels stopped their turning, the glow faded. Perez came down from the cup and stalked ponderously across the room. "I feel wonderful," he said, still laughing half-hysterically. "I never felt better in my life. You don't believe me, eh? Then watch!"

With trembling fingers, Perez took a knife from his pocket, opened it, ran the blade across his wrist.

"He's insane!" Suuki cried.

"No." I shook my head. "Look now."

The blood began to flow, slowing to a trickle almost at once. When it stopped altogether, Perez wiped it off his fat arm with a handkerchief. Only the vaguest shadow of a scar remained. He held his arm up high so we could see it, waving his hand overhead almost like a victorious fighter. "See?" he demanded. "See—I'm a superman. You're a superman too, Boky—only you don't realize. There is so little that can destroy you, so little to keep you from owning the Three Worlds with the power that resides within this room."

"Yes?" demanded Suuki. "Then tell me how."

"Fool! I'll sell to the highest bidder. 'You too can become invulnerable,' I'll tell them. Provided they can pay. Oh, I'll make them pay. They'll beg the money, they'll steal it, they'll kill for it. But they'll pay."

It wasn't a pretty picture. Chaos would sweep the solar system, and I think Perez knew it. Here was a veritable immortality—if even only for a lifetime. Armies would fight for it. Brother would kill brother. And if Perez could somehow maintain control, he'd get his wish. He'd be lord and master of the entire Solar System.

IT WAS then that I knew he had to be destroyed. The thought did not come melodramatically. I felt nothing of the hero in me, nor of the noble urge to kill that others might live. The thought was just there, completely objective, and Perez had to die. Suuki nodded his head slowly, as if in some mysterious way the thought had passed between us.

But Perez had other ideas. "You will observe," he said slowly, "that I no longer have need for you. I thought you might in some way help me, but I was mistaken. It remains only to destroy you." He still held the blaster

in his hands, toying with it, but he spoke as if to himself. "The girl I can kill and the breed, but what can I do with you, Boky? Eh, that is a good question! I can't be sure, but I think that if I sear you completely from head to foot... Yes!"

He was the megalomaniac completely now, talking to himself, strutting about on his thick legs. "I believe I will let you decide. Which one is to die first?"

Ellen took my hand in hers, squeezed it. "Johnny, he isn't fooling. Johnny! I'm afraid—"

Suuki said, "I am not one to wait around. I grow bored. If you like, you may kill me first." He walked off half a dozen paces, folded his arms across his chest, waited.

Perez chuckled, pivoted to face him, the blaster raised. For a moment, that took his eyes off me.

The slightest motion would attract his attention—and also death. He stood three yards away, sighting at Suuki's stomach, saying something about making it painless. I could do only one thing.

I left the floor completely and dove at him.

He whirled at the last instant, firing his blaster. Its beam seared air inches from my head, brought brief, burning pain with it. Then my shoulder jarred against his huge belly and we both tumbled to the floor.

I'M STRONG— but I got the shock of my life. You hear so much about people fighting like madmen, and you don't believe half of it. A cliché, that's all, with no more truth than—

But Perez *did* fight like a madman. His fists were everywhere, pounding, pummelling, gouging. He used his feet, kicking with them and bringing his knee up at my groin. He butted with his head, jarring my teeth. He

bit and clawed and scratched.

Dimly, I heard Ellen screaming. The blaster had clattered off somewhere across the floor, but she couldn't find it. And reaction had set in for Suuki. He had been near death and he knew it, and for the moment he couldn't stir a muscle.

My knuckles were bruised and bleeding. I struck his face, hard stinging blows, any one of which should have been enough to end it. I sat on his chest and beat at his head with both hands, but he turned and threw me off, jumped on me, held me down with his tremendous bulk. His hands sought my neck, found it, closed. His face swam in the amber light, back and forth, back and forth.

I reached out wildly, got the fleshy part of his jowls between my fingers. I tugged until I thought his face would come off in one piece. But I grew weaker every moment, a hollow, burning sensation flooding up from my starved lungs.

Perez laughed, howled, then laughed again. He screamed horribly and rolled over and away. I had time only for one deep breath, felt the wonderful cool air soothe my aching chest. Then I was on him again, hammering blows at his face and stomach while he kicked and bit and clawed and writhed. I hit him until my hands lost all sensation, I hit him with the two numb, swollen things attached to my wrists. He sighed, shut his eyes, lay back unconscious.

Long ago I'd bathed in the metal cup. Perez had followed me into it this day. In five minutes we both felt fine, and we looked it, too. Except for the blood.

WE SAT in the control room of Perez' ship. It hadn't been hard to round up the Marties with Perez' blaster. We'd trussed them up

neatly and tucked them into a store-room.

Suuki said, "I still think we ought to kill him. He can't be permitted to live, not with the power he's got, and the ideas."

I nodded, but Ellen shook her head for the hundredth time. "No. You can't do it, that's all. This is the twenty-first century; men don't go around killing one another. There are laws for that."

"He can't live," Suuki persisted. "Please."

Suuki had been too stunned to act back there in the vault. My hands had remained swollen for a few minutes. Thus, it had been Ellen who took the blaster from the floor and rounded up the Marties. Now she held it and she said: "Everything both of you say is true. Except for one thing: he goes back and he gets a trial. I think it can be proved that he killed Dr. Elkins, anyway."

Suuki shrugged, relented. "Well, I suppose we can't argue with you. We might as well—"

Perez chuckled. "You won't be able to prove a thing about Elkins. I . . . uh . . . had the Marties who disposed of him destroyed immediately after that. And since Marties are always killing one another with their vendettas—well, you figure it out."

Sanity had returned to Perez. He spoke rationally, objectively, without passion. Unfortunately, he knew what he was talking about.

Ellen told him to sit still and behave himself, prodding the flesh of his arm with her blaster. I guess Perez wanted to keep in her good graces. He shut up.

"Now, Johnny," Ellen turned to face me, "do you think you can piece everything together? What was that place?"

"An asteroid," I said. "But an arti-

ficial one. Near as I can figure it, this is what happened. Millions of years ago, this Solar System of ours was visited—from outside. They came, whoever they were, and they lived on the fifth planet, which now is a mess of cosmic debris. Okay so far?"

"Okay."

"They got busy fast. They planted on Earth, Mars, and Venus certain strains of animal life which insured, in each case, the ultimate arrival of humanity by old Darwin's process of natural selection. Their evolutionary science was a great one, they could even tell what the future humans would be like—and they drew pictures to prove it. Maybe their job was to travel around the galaxy planting the human seed.

"Anyway, some time after that, something happened. War or some form of cosmic disaster. Their planet was destroyed, exploding completely, becoming the zone of asteroids that we know today. They left a record, that artificial globe. Don't you think it's significant that their picture showed the humans entering a spaceship? Somewhere in there is the secret not of interplanetary flight—but of interstellar flight. When we were ready, they figured, we could come out to the stars and visit them.

"**O**KAY SO far? Good. One of the secrets they left in that globe had to do with regeneration, with tissue that grew young again. Maybe it's tied in someplace with star travel, I don't know. But the last time I made a mistake. I should have informed the government right away, and I didn't. This time we'll let the brains of the solar system figure it out.

"Finally, there was a card put in my pocket last time. That puzzled me at first, but I think I can figure it

out. One of those machines in there could read my mind, decipher the language it used, give me a written message in it. Sure, people would try to kill me. I'd have to be careful because I'd uncovered a mighty potent secret. The builder's of that asteroid had wisdom beyond ours, and they knew it. They..."

I must have liked the sound of my own voice. I kept on talking and talking. But suddenly Ellen screamed.

She was staring at Perez, and I looked too. I don't know how old Perez was—thirty-five, maybe forty. Sitting on the floor of the control room, he looked sixteen!

Still fat, but baby-faced. Now he said, "I don't understand. What's happening? God, what's happening to me?"

His voice was in the changing stage, squeaking on every third or fourth word.

Shuttered, the port windows make good mirrors. Perez staggered to one and we didn't stop him. He looked—saw the reflection of a fat boy of sixteen.

No—fourteen. Twelve.

As we watched, he grew smaller.

Smaller.

A child of seven, still extremely fat!

"Please!" he moaned in a high childish treble. "What's happening?"

He became too small for his clothing, stepped out of it. He was crying, big tears rolling down his pink cheeks.

"By the gods of Karn," muttered Suuki. "What on—"

"I remember!" I cried. "I remember!" No one paid me any heed. They were busy watching the small boy Perez grow smaller. And younger. "See?" I said. "I remember. I studied the machine that first time. A small dose meant regeneration. A larger dose meant *rejuvenation*. Same process,

tissues rebuilding themselves instantly. Perez took too much. It will go on and on..."

A tiny infant, naked and very pink of skin, lay crying on the floor. Its face looked intelligent, but it was a very fat infant. It looked like it wanted to say something, but all it could do was scream.

The ugly pink face grew smaller, the eyes clamped shut. The infant rolled over on its side, legs and arms curling up, assuming the fetal position. Then the body grew smaller, but the head didn't. Something long and thin protruded from the abdomen, like a slender pink strip of rope.

sobbing, Ellen threw herself into my arms, buried her face against my chest. "Oh Johnny, Johnny! How awful!"

I stroked her hair, took her to a chair and sat her down gently. When I returned, Suuki's face was very white. The infant had vanished.

"It got smaller," Suuki mumbled to himself. "And smaller. It didn't look human any longer. It shrunk to a tiny glob finally, amorphous, then small and round I think. It got smaller. It disappeared, I think—I think I shall be sick, John. I hope you do not mind. Perez was more than rejuvenated. Perez kept right on going. He became an infant. A fetus. Less than a fetus. He became—nothing..."

WE LANDED at New York Space Port, and I've never seen anything that looked quite as wonderful as the rolling hills of Westchester.

"The Government will send men out there," I told Ellen as I helped her down. "They can find a lot that's good or a lot that's evil on that asteroid. It depends upon their own point of view. But one thing I know."

"What's that?"

(Concluded on page 162)

THEY FLY SO HIGH

By Ross Rocklynne



Skutch hadn't been bluffing; the time bomb went off right on schedule!



It started out simply enough: an officer bringing back a prisoner to stand trial. But the wrong man knew the right science!

DORNLEY, seated in the galley of the galloping spaceship with his prisoner, was struck with a queer impression. Actually, Dr. Waldo Skutch was not worried that he had been ousted at point of gun from Callisto.

"I could vacuum out another cup of coffee for you, sir—" Dornley had been taught to be polite at the Space Academy, even to dangerous criminals—"but then you *don't* seem to be nervous or worried, do you?" The best way to get at the subject.

Besides, August Dornley felt he *did*

have an inquiring mind. Skutch, the authorities said, was planning the overthrow of the entire human race. Why? Where was his criminal base located? What was the nature of the secret arsenal of new weapons he was making? Good questions. Find the answers. Get into Skutch's confidence.

"Nervous?" boomed Skutch, transfixing Dornley with his pale strange eyes over which the cliffs of gray hair hung: "Worried? My dear young Lieutenant Dornley, worry is a special affection of the human race, an unnecessary evil of the mind for which

they have great love. Worry is of the future; I, Skutch, am of the present." He touched his barrel-chest with a large, curved thumb.

"You don't consider yourself of the human race, sir?" This certainly was a question some clever interrogator would ask Skutch when he faced trial.

"I am of the human race; my physical body proves it, unfortunately. But as long as my mind functions, my chances of becoming unhuman are excellent, most excellent!" Skutch let go of his coffee cup to tap his great forehead, over which the dissheveled coarse grey hair hung. "Brains, young man, brains. You are of the human race, and no doubt proud of it. But what have you done with your brains?"

Dornley would not let himself be irritated by this old man with the strange eyes. He smiled. "I got through the Space Academy in record time with top honors," he said. "If I hadn't had some kind of unusual merit, I would have been sent to the front lines in one of the war-ships. Instead, I was ranked up to Special Duty."

"And of that use of your brains you are proud!"

"Well, let's see," said Dornley, touched off a little. "I tracked you down to Callisto. I fooled you into leaving your ship. Then I set up a random-firing booby-gun, and caught you from behind. When it comes to a question of brains—"

Skutch threw back his great tattered head and laughed. His laughs were muted, gleeful squeals. Finally he stopped.

"Don't you think I knew I could not escape capture?" he demanded. "Now, let me ask you what happened to *your* ship."

Dornley's healthy tanned face

showed a flush. "You blasted it," he admitted. "So what's the difference? We're using yours."

SKUTCH abruptly leaned across the table on his elbows, staring intently at Dornley. "You do have brains," he said in the gentlest tone he had used so far. "But you have not been taught to think. *Think*, young man, *think*. I, Skutch, do not worry about the future. But that does not mean that I do not consider the possibilities and the probabilities of the future. Now, can you *think*?"

Dornley was nettled at first. Then he felt distinct alarm. His training made him sit quietly, but it also made his hand inevitably grip the handle of his Biow thermo-gun.

"I'll make a guess," he said steadily. "This ship itself is a booby-trap."

Suddenly he did get up, leaning his lank body over his chair to reach the galley vision disks. Jupiter showed one sweeping section of its baleful perimeter. He widened the aperture. Jupiter jumped back, showing itself in its entirety as a bulky, mottled orange. Around it stars lay thickly. Dornley rotated the pick-up through 180 degrees for all three coordinates. Japetus lay twenty minutes behind. The other satellites shone dimly.

Along the bottom of the disks, no pips of brilliance showed. There were no other ships in the area. Attack was ruled out, but so was the possibility of rescue.

He shut off the mechanism, faced Skutch quietly.

"So it's in the ship. Probably an explosive that you rigged into the fuel beforehand, primed to trigger off after a certain interval—unless you were free to unrig it." He could feel sweat trickling down his armpits. "I can also assume that there's nothing to be done about it at this

late date, otherwise you wouldn't have tipped me off."

"Now," said Skutch, grinning widely, "you are thinking. But not enough. You really don't think I would arrange my own death. Actually, I would. My work is well on its way. It is left in capable hands. I wouldn't be missed for long. So I am prepared to let the ship blow up with us in it if you do not move quickly."

Count to ten. Dornley said evenly, "You virtually admit you are conspiring against humanity. This doesn't sound very much like the idealized picture of yourself, Dr. Skutch, as a superior human. Earth uses science to make war, a war that is inevitable and must be fought. You plan to use superior science to overcome both victor and loser. Is that correct? Am I *thinking*?" He tossed the last out with bitter sarcasm, then turned on his long legs and went aft fast. He came back with two boxed pressure-suits, the supra-lux type that would withstand, if necessary, fifteen thousand atmospheric pressures.

"You are thinking," said Skutch, frowning heavily at him as he ripped open the boxes, "with the lower half of your body."

Dornley, thin-lipped, ignored him utterly. Skutch rumbled on: "Science! Pah!" He almost spat. "Science is a toy, a plaything. And I am a criminal because I desert my enforced task as toymaker. I am tracked down because it is feared I am conspiring against authority. I am to be tried and sentenced and forced to conceive of more ingenious toys. Tried by men who are unconscious automatons, men who think with the thoughts of others." He fell silent.

THE BOXES opened up; the pressure suits came out, fat dull things looking like blown-up corpses.

Skutch surveyed them interestedly. "Perhaps we do not have enough time," he said gravely. "Will five minutes do?"

Dornley worked twice as fast, sweating, checking air vents and controls, examining the pins of the gravity units, making sure the food and water units were full and operating. Skutch observed this thoroughness with great approval.

"You can think," he said, nodding his great grey head. "But, here without a spirit of revenge motivating me, perhaps you have here an excellent example of how the free individual can manipulate the Universe. I, Skutch, am manipulating you, am manipulating this ship, am manipulating events—even though I am chained to this table. Wouldn't you give much for such an accomplishment?"

"I'd give much if you'd shut up, Dr. Skutch," Dornley said firmly. Skutch shrugged his heavy old shoulders. "Now, get into this suit."

Dornley unchained him and helped him in, bolting down the solid, transparent supra-lux visor. Skutch choked a little. Dornley readjusted the intake of oxygen. Thirty-nine seconds later they shot out from the airlock and Skutch, handcuffed to Dornley, was dryly complimenting him for a fast piece of work. Ten seconds later, several large cracks abruptly appeared in the slim black ship's hull. Through these cracks, and through the shattered ports, was seen a glow of fuming violence. Bilious yellow gases escaped under pressure, swiftly expanded to the point of invisibility. The numerous cracks in the hull became a little larger, that was all. They began moving, under their own velocity, farther and farther away until the derelict was gone.

Dornley was depressed and silent. Actually, he could blame himself and

a certain amount of inexperience for having fallen into a trap. Skutch was a wise old bear; and, it appeared, he understood human nature. Looking down at giant Jupiter—that immense planet did determine where *down* was—he was almost sure it would have been better to take a quick death in the ship.

“Jupiter,” mused Skutch. His voice came through the radio receiver with its booming quality strained out. “Jupiter, giant of the System, a mighty creature, an aged old man. Jupiter, my friend, I salute you. Soon we shall meet.”

Dornley said nothing. Skutch said, “You did not know, I suppose, that Jupiter is alive?”

DORNLEY turned his head until his face was against Skutch’s. He was sure he was looking at a crazy old man. But Skutch grinned hugely, his grey whiskers protruding around his mouth like those of a tiger.

“I have trapped you, young man. You are, it would appear, much worse off than I expected. You would make the statement, flatly, that Jupiter does *not* live. Your mind is fettered. You are chained to dogma. Other minds tell you what to think. Perhaps I should discard you.” He sighed heavily, but calculatingly.

Dornley said flatly, “Jupiter is *not* alive.”

“You see?” Skutch’s free arm appeared to the cold stars. “If only he had said ‘I do not have sufficient material on which to base an opinion. Jupiter *may* be alive.’”

Dornley smiled wanly. “Men have landed on Jupiter. They’ve built Jupiter City up near the Red Spot. They haven’t detected a heart-beat, or breathing. But I’ll grant you the point. He might be alive in other ways.”

“Good, good,” applauded Skutch. “You are showing signs of improve-

ment. Understand me, young man. Sometimes I make flat statements which I do not know to be true. But these are merely for testing people.”

“Which people?”

“All people,” said Skutch solemnly. “I have my life work which you do not yet know about. I am, you would say at your present level of understanding, creating an ultimate weapon, a weapon so powerful that none will stand against it. For this I would be damned, sentenced to death if the Terrestrial Court ever got hold of me, which they shall not. We are falling now.”

They were indeed falling. The planet’s powerful drag had finally overcome their momentum outward; the meter in the wrist of Dornley’s pressure suit, accurately judging the changing shifts of satellite and planetary gravities, gave them an accelerating velocity. They would, at this rate, hit the planet’s atmosphere in eight hours. No good. Every hour, at least, they would have to adjust the gravity units built into the suits to cut their speed down.

Dornley, attached to his strange companion, stared down at that broad orange, yellow, and red monster of the sky. Vagrant fear-thoughts floated to the surface of his mind. He knew he should be screaming with terror. They were alone out here, detached from things, living with a finality equal to death. His heart beat a little faster; his breathing stepped up. He began to think of himself as still a young punk, with a long and satisfactory life not yet ready to be cut short. He sweated.

“Dr. Skutch,” he said hoarsely, “how do you do it? Why aren’t you afraid?”

“Afraid?” Skutch’s voice was astonished. Then it became very soft and gentle. “I understand, young man,”

he said. "You are worried. You think we will not live. And why is this?"

The question was gently probing.

Dornley bit his lip. "It's obvious. Jupiter has caught people before. Ships unable to fight free of the gravity. They've sent distress signals that were picked up. No rescue ship could get to them in time. And we don't even have sending equipment."

"Aha!" Skutch's teeth clicked triumphantly. "We come to the core of mankind's woes. Man looks back on past occurrences, and plans the future accordingly. The future therefore is thought of as a carbon copy of the past. This is definitely not so, young man. Your no doubt excellent brain is using identity thought. What a dangerous thing! Understand this: *no one* event is identical with another. What is happening to us now has no relationship whatever with anything that ever happened to anybody else. This is a new situation. We can make of it what we will without letting past events dictate to us. Do you understand?"

"It makes sense," Dornley said wearily. "But it still scares the living daylight's out of me."

"My dear Lieutenant Dornley,"

Skutch snapped with asperity, "that is because you are, if I may say it, not alive. You are not *being*. Look around you!" He made a great, enthusiastic, sweeping arc with his free arm. "Would you be dead like most of mankind? Here you have beauty! Here you have majesty! Here you have depth and mystery and awesome ideas to contend with! There is joy out here, not terror. Young man, I command you *to be!*"

IF THERE had been anything to sit on, Dornley would have sat up at the sternness in Skutch's voice. At any rate, he felt some kind of bells

ringing in his head, and he did look around. It was beautiful, he decided forlornly—if you didn't worry.

Skutch was looking through Dornley's visor at him. He grinned widely. "That's better. Young man, I have a suggestion. Go to sleep. I shall be sure to adjust our falling speed so that we shall not strike the atmosphere fast enough to create heat."

Dornley did go to sleep, as if Skutch had used positive suggestion. He slept long, solidly, and potently. When he awoke, it was because he and Skutch were pinwheeling through a thickening atmosphere. Skutch muttered something about not knowing where the stabilizer controls were. Dornley found them for him; soon, the tiny gyroscopes whirring, they were falling feet first.

There was little light. Starlight could not penetrate this incredibly thick skin of gases that covered Jupiter. A red glow, originating from the reflection of the Great Red Spot halfway around the planet, afforded hardly any illumination. Dornley turned on the search-beam unit in the breast of his suit to read his meters. Twelve hundred miles to go to get to the surface. He spoke to Skutch. Skutch muttered groggily. Dornley said nothing more, and let Skutch fall asleep.

The vigil could have been full of terror, but Dornley reflected that some of Skutch's strange philosophy had gotten through to him, and no doubt would keep him pepped up for awhile. He frowned. A strange experience, a strange man, who *was* working on an ultimate weapon, and *did* have conspirators working with him, by his own admission.

Something didn't jibe. What? No answer.

They fell. Dornley thought, so this was a new situation? Hmm. But it was

the same deadly planet. But maybe not. Old Man Jupiter was a guy with many faces, many mysteries, ninety-nine per cent unknown.

Two and a half times Earth gravity; fifteen thousand times Earth's atmospheric pressure!

Dornley grimaced down through heaving blackness. "Jupiter, old man," he prayed as an experiment, "let us down easy. And if we get away free, and I get Skutch where he belongs, I promise. . . ." *Could go to church every Sunday; but Jupiter doesn't care.*

Five hundred miles. Dornley didn't dare take his eyes away from the set of meters. One hundred miles. He kept his eyes glued to them. Ten miles. He tried to wake up Skutch. Two miles. Skutch would not waken. One thousand feet.

"Skutch!" screamed Dornley. Three hundred feet. But fractional readings didn't work. Twenty-five feet below his search-beam glanced off a liquid, gleaming surface. Dornley, robbed of the time to do things properly, wasn't able to throw Skutch's gravity reactor over; he could only shove over his own. Result, not enough gravity decrease. They hit hard and went under.

Under.

Thank you, Old Man Jupiter.

Skutch was muttering as they floated up. Floated up was not the best description of the process. They were being carried up. Nor did they break surface. The surface was under them.

IN ANY event, the movement ceased.

Dornley's chest-beam was still on. It illuminated what at first glance seemed to be a smooth circular cavern exuding a greenish, a gorgeous radiance. The radiance was, of course, the dispersed radiance of the beam.

Skutch muttered again. Dornley tried to move. He was flat on his back,

locked tight against Skutch. Like a vice. His helmet was held down; he could barely move his head inside it. One arm was lying free against his chest; he carefully kept it that way. His legs were clamped together, and in turn locked to Skutch's. His other arm was squeezed in tight to Skutch's. Strange.

Silence. Skutch spoke. "Well, young man? You are thinking?"

Dornley *was* thinking—rather detachedly. He was thinking of two men alone on an uninhabited planet—uninhabited except for an inaccessible domed city halfway around the planet. Two men thinking of impossibilities, in terms of hope and escape and rescue.

So he should think. What he should do was reach over with his free arm and tune the great Dr. Waldo Skutch's oxygen intake to zero.

Skutch's sigh came. "I am disappointed in you, Lieutenant. An unchained mind already would have diagnosed the situation and be devising solutions. The free man manipulates the world; the world manipulates the slave. Are you slave to your own pessimism? That is the important problem, not whether you will continue to live."

"However, I shall start your enslaved mind to working. The 'cave', as you have already misnamed it, is not a cave. Listen to the Jupiter wind." A wind did sound, outside somewhere, a whining, gusty thunder that rose, fell, augmented, diminished. The gorgeously green 'cave' expanded and contracted correspondingly, sometimes as much as two or three feet.

"You see?" Skutch chuckled. "Jupiter is breathing. We have fallen into his mouth and are enveloped in a bubble of spit! One's imagination could make much of this. But let us stick to fact, fact at least as the mind

of man knows it.

"Fifteen thousand atmospheres press on a lake of strange liquid metal. A unique distortion occurs on the surface of the lake. One could say that a surface tension thousands of times one would think possible is almost certain to be created. *Now* you are thinking?" Skutch's voice was hopeful; he was like a man who has primed a pump and is sure water must come out.

"Hell," muttered Dornley rebelliously. He was thinking of two needles locked together on a surface film of water. So how does one free the two needles so they can eddy around for awhile with a certain amount of freedom? Stir up the water around them, maybe. Not that exactly...

"Don't worry, I'm not exactly dead," he told Skutch. "I've got a free arm. I've also got an idea."

HE COULD reach Skutch's gravity unit rheostat with some effort; his own was easy. He turned both rheostats on full; instantly, their weights increased and they sagged below the surface of the liquid stuff, lying in a sort of deep hollow.

"Get set," he told Skutch. He turned both rheostats suddenly back to the zero mark, which equalled one-half a gravity. Dornley's breath whooshed out as the sag in the surface of the lake bounced back in place, snapping the two men a half-dozen feet into the air.

There was a breaking sound. When Dornley came to, he was sitting cross-legged a half-dozen feet from Skutch. Skutch had fallen on his back, helpless again, arms and legs forced together. But he was chuckling delightedly, and told Dornley that when he came this way, he could pull Skutch to a sitting position too.

Dornley was about to remonstrate that he intended to stay where he was when he noticed that inevitably the strengthened surface between them was drawing them together. Well, anyway, the handcuffs, brittle in the sub-zero cold, had snapped, and Dornley was arm-free, so there was that much gained.

A moment later, the two men were sitting knee to knee.

Dornley now looked around with greater interest.

"It's a bubble, all right," he admitted. "Big babies. There's a gas seepage in the bed of the lake, I'd say. The wind causes change in pressure outside. That's a good aerodynamic principle that works on any planet. The bubble gets bigger or smaller accordingly."

One section of the bubble became a flat wall.

"Interesting," commented Dornley, so fascinated he didn't know his worry about the future had momentarily slipped away. "Another bigger bubble bumped into it."

Skutch surveyed him with an extremely friendly smile, but he said nothing, being speechless for the first time.

Dornley tentatively tugged his Biow thermo-gun from its holster, and after some hesitation took a pot-shot at the two bubbles' connecting skin. It turned a brighter green in one spot, but didn't break, so Dornley turned the temperature up a little. This time there was a crack of thunder, and things happened. Dornley and Skutch were tossed around, and when things quieted down, they were again being forced together, and a bubble four times as big arched over them. The two bubbles apparently had merged.

Dornley grinned, and Skutch grinned back.

"You see?" Skutch spread his hands as if life itself had been explained. "One plays with toys, but one does not allow toys to play with him—unless he wants them to. In this way, free men master all that is within and without them. Now, my dear Lieutenant, I am sure you have determined our next step, the means of securing escape from this lake? His shaggy brows went up.

Dornley surveyed him thoughtfully. He was beginning to get certain ideas, very strong and intuitive ideas.

"I have not determined it," he stated.

The shaggy face behind the visor smiled broadly. Skutch reached out a hand. "Let me have your gun, young man," he commanded.

Instead of doing that, Dornley brought the gun up and centered it on the chest of Skutch's pressure suit.

HE SAID conversationally, "Dr. Skutch, if I were to turn the heat intensity on this thermal weapon up to full blast, it would take me five minutes to burn a hole in your suit and let fifteen thousand atmospheric pressures in."

Skutch's face was wrenched with a bitter surprise. He snarled. "Why?"

"I've been a good boy, Dr. Skutch. I didn't lose my temper when you began...uh...manipulating me. I treated you like a prisoner of war, with courtesy, with great courtesy. Believe me, I shall continue to be courteous. But I am still a member of the Service, and I have my duty. We are *not* friends."

Skutch relaxed visibly, his tiger-look vanishing. "Oh, that." He shrugged contemptuously. "Duty. Courtesy. Catchwords. Other men's thoughts again. They mean nothing."

"That's not all," said Dornley determinedly. "I have certain beliefs re-

garding you. One is that you *are* conspiring to overthrow not only the Earth government, but the governments, eventually, of the other planets as well. The enemy planets."

"Enemy!" Skutch raised his hands to invisible gods. "There he goes again! Whose enemy? Not his enemy. The enemy of the higher-ups who think for him. You have learned nothing from me, young man, *nothing?*"

Dornley felt his thinking apparatus going haywire.

"Furthermore," he went on distractedly, "you *do* have a base, a headquarters, and you have many men under you. This has been suspected too. But not until now has anyone been convinced of its location. That base, I am convinced, is on this planet. And not too far from here! Else, *why* are you so optimistic?"

"Again, by your own admission to me, you, a genius in the field of science, are working with your men on a weapon so powerful that it could not be withstood by any power. Of this I believe you are capable.

"Dr. Skutch, I can be optimistic too, under certain conditions, but I *know* we can't reach Jupiter City. And I cannot allow you the possibility of escape to your headquarters, even if I die.

"I am sure I should kill you now."

Skutch grunted. "Why don't you?"

Dornley sweated. Skutch grunted again, almost disinterestedly. "You don't believe half of what you're saying, Lieutenant. That's why. You're waiting for proof from me. I'll give you proof. My base *is* near here—only three thousand miles. You do think. And I do have many men—and women—and children—under me. And I am creating a super-weapon that is intended to destroy! Tell me, Lieutenant, how would you like to

see that super-weapon in operation?"

Dornley clamped his teeth together. "I would, but—"

"Excellent!" Some of Skutch's ebulliance came back. Then his stare became bright and penetrating.

"Lieutenant, what possessions do you have?"

The direction of the conversation was going out of control. Dornley felt loggy. "None," he said wearily. "I'm in the Service. A few papers, old letters, some civilian clothes, a number of books. That's all. Why?"

"You're not married? You have no children? You have no relatives you are tied to?" At Dornley's lack of replies in the affirmative, he cried, "Excellent, excellent, excellent! Lieutenant, how would you like to take a trip to my base, my so-called militant headquarters, and watch the rays of my deadly weapon at work?"

DORNLEY felt himself crumbling. He suspected some kind of equivocation here that would put him in a still worse position. But worse from whose viewpoint? He was tired of thinking. Well, answer the question. From the viewpoint of duty, from the viewpoint of oaths, from the viewpoint of the men who bossed the men who bossed the men who bossed the men, who in turn got their ideas and their convictions from official papers written by the last generation, or men ten generations dead, who had written books and conceived traditions and rules. . . . A tanglework of convention and protocol and axiomatic falsehoods that had a bad beginning. War, poverty, pain, violence, science, more science, better science, super-science, war, poverty. . . . Super-dooer science. . .

Pensively he looked beyond Skutch. Life was wrong. Yes, drastically wrong somehow. He was in a po-

sition where he should kill Skutch—but he couldn't. What then? He had to go with Skutch. That too was being forced on him. Go with Skutch! Find out, at least, what he was up to. Get a look at this so-called super-weapon, at his Base, at the people he worked with. And then—

He shook his head regretfully. "I can't kill you, doctor. I'll go with you, if we can make it. If I don't like what I see, I promise I'll leave and won't say anything. That goes against my oath, but that's the way I'll stand."

"But if you do like it?" The question was probing.

"You'd want me to stay? Give up Earth?"

"Bah!" Skutch rocked back. "You never had Earth. Earth had you. No, no, young man. You'd go back. Someday we'll all go back—if we want to. But not for long."

Dornley gave him a fleeting, worn smile, said nothing. Skutch's breath came out in a long, sustained sigh.

Dornley looked at his gun. "As for getting to 'dry' land," he mused, "that should be easy. A spot heat should reduce the tension and give us a pull in the opposite direction."

He destroyed the gently vibrating bubble with a single blast. It disappeared in thunder, though for a second great drops of it rained down. Dornley waited until he and Skutch once more swung together, waited until he had accustomed himself to winds that had the push of undersea currents. He then adjusted the gun to maximum aperture. This gave him a fanning beam, which he played on the surface film to his left, adequately lessening its tension.

THE SURFACE forces to Dornley's right being greater, they contracted continuously, pulling him and Skutch smoothly away from the heat-

ed surface. Dornley, wanting to be sure they did not move in a circle, turned up the stabilizers.

After an hour, what would roughly be described as a "beach" appeared. Strong cohesive forces, however, caused the lake edge to sweep upward in a sharp curve, a dozen feet high. Dornley surveyed that obstacle distrustfully, but apparently the strength of the contracting film was enough to overcome gravitational pull. They swooped up, poised. Skutch clawed at the rocky ledge of the beach and got free. Dornley was poised on the lip. Skutch got him under the arm-pits and heaved him out.

Dornley looked questioningly at Skutch as they stood free with ammonia-methane winds moving sluggishly around them. Skutch motioned him to sit down.

"They'll come for us," he said complacently.

"They know we're here?" Dornley was incredulous.

Skutch grinned hugely. "Why not? Science is not an end, but it is a tool." He picked up two slate-colored rocks, knocked them together. "Sounds travel, and do not stop. Instruments pick up vibrations. They'll be here. We do have ways to move about the planet."

THERE WAS silence. Then Dornley saw that Skutch was looking at him, intently, purposefully.

"You will live with us," Skutch said slowly. "You will learn. There will be girls there. There will be girls

who will fall in love with you—if they want to. You will lack for nothing. But you must learn.

"When I say Jupiter is alive, you will say maybe it is alive, and try to find out why I think it is alive. When I say apple trees will thrive in a glass of water, you will question the concept. You will reexamine every tradition, every convention, every idea that has been thrust at you and which you have been forced to accept. You will ask why you *must* do such and such. Who said so? You will begin throwing out hundreds of false ideas, but *you* will use *them*, they will not use you. You will examine your fears, your guilts, your jealousies, your envies. Eventually, you will compel them, they will not compel you. No thing, no one, no idea, will ever use you again. Unless you want it to."

He rocked back on his haunches, hands on his spread knees, grinning his tiger's grin.

"The prospect frightens you? Do not let it, young man. Already I have used my secret weapon on you. Its rays are deeply imbedded in your body. Already you see how easily one's own personal bubbles can burst. You will never be the same.

"But not for a thousand years will we, or those who come after us, be ready for humanity itself."

The winds moved sluggishly. Time passed. Dornley sat stricken, wondering what he could discard, wondering what he could keep.

IT'S NOT TOO LATE!

If you neglected to get your copy of
the DIFFERENT science-fantasy magazine

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LIFEBOAT IN SPACE



THE LITERATURE AND lore of science-fiction are about something that hasn't happened yet, even though we speak of them in the past! No rocket has yet left the Earth, but already there is a rich lore of rocket flight just as if had happened a hundred years ago. Probably no other human experience-to-be has had this history. People didn't consider the technical details of automobiles and aircraft a hundred and fifty years ago. But we are well into the technical details of rocketry even though we are still chained to Earth by gravity.

This is a healthy sign of our optimism, but sometimes it leads to inconsistencies. More often, it does not. Thus, we know for a certainty that air will be supplied and renewed on rockets by means of hydroponic gardens containing varieties of plant growth. We are well aware of the chances of meteor collision. We know pretty well the principles of interplanetary astrogation. We even know the details of rocket engines, that is, all except the nature of the final fuel.

Space navigation has subconsciously and automatically been compared with

seafaring. In one instance this has led to a minor inconsistency, one concerning the frequently written about "space-boat". Science fictionists visualize huge rockets with interiors much like present-day ocean liners and, invariably, along the sides of the rockets, located in their respective airlocks, are the "lifeboats". Well, that may be eventually, but the immediate future of rocketry doesn't involve lifeboats. The rocket itself—small, compact, jammed with gear and equipment, built as well as men know how, has no room for excess baggage and a "lifeboat" would be that. Any event capable of causing men to abandon their rocket would certainly be so catastrophic as to preclude the use of a so-called "lifeboat". In addition, the lifeboat (we see it as a miniature rocket) would be unable to carry fuel or equipment to do much good. We can conclude, therefore, that the lifeboat of space, "the spaceboat", will be a development of rocketry a long time in the future. For the near-future, a lifeboat of space is a contradiction in terms—*the rocket itself is the lifeboat!*

—Tom Lynch

ALL WE NEED IS THE ENGINE!

THE DRAMATIC flight of the Douglas Skyrocket, the experimental rocket plane which flew at better than sixteen hundred miles an hour, manned and human-piloted, epitomizes the limiting factor of today's rocketry. The plane operated under its own power for no longer than fifteen minutes. At the end of that time its fuel was gone and it landed in a tremendous glide, a spent and exhausted vehicle.

Unfortunately the future—in terms of such chemical fuels as powered it—promises no relief.

Of course the only answer to this apparently insoluble problem is atomic power. It affords the only energy source that can satisfy the gigantic requirements of such speeds, altitudes and masses. The fact that no one has made a workable device of this kind does not bother the experimentors. Theoretically it can be made, and that's enough.

The hypothetical engine, as seen through the eyes of the rocketeers, is nothing more than an atomic heat source into which can be fed any vaporizable material—and out

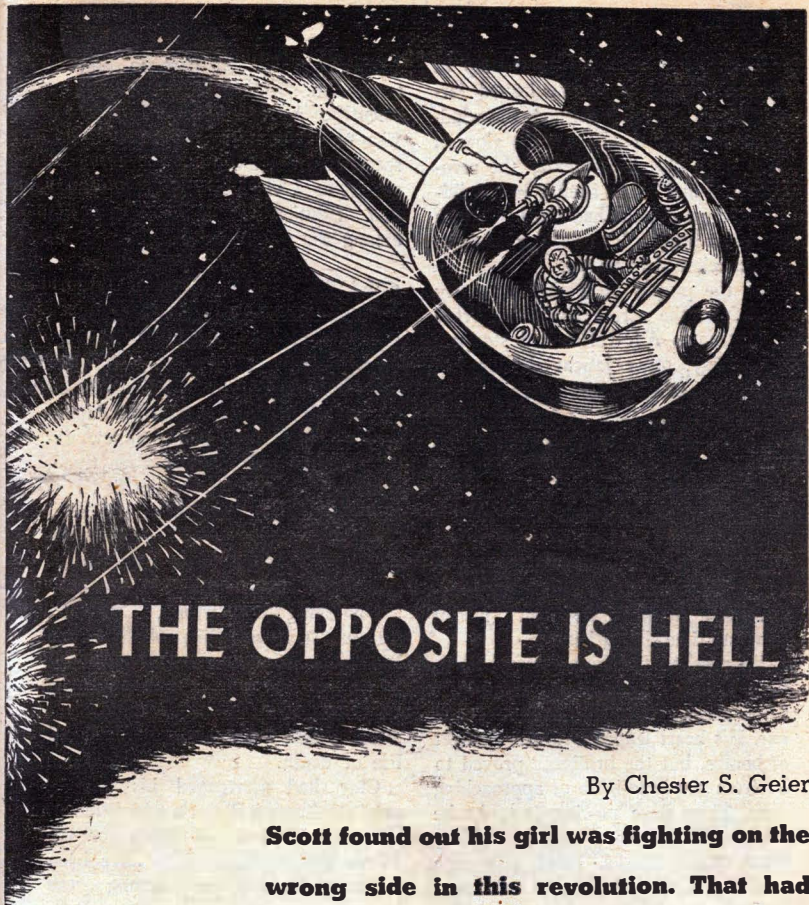
the rocket motor's mouth this thrusting substance will flow, be it hydrogen gas or old shoes. Just provide the heat engine powered by atomics—that's all anybody asks!

All that remains is for the Atomic Energy Commission to authorize some vast-scale program of aircraft-engine development (they may even now be doing so and the problem of aerial, interplanetary and perhaps interstellar flight is solved. No one can peer into the minds and activities of the AEC, but the chances are very good that they have not neglected at least to consider this aspect of their program. About the only real question is: how much energy and effort are being devoted to pushing it? If the fly-fly boys and the rocketeers had their say, every second and every sou would go into that sort of work regardless of the weapons aspect of AEC's work. Decades seem like eternities when you're just approaching them, but they go before the atomic rocket engine will materialize, and it won't take many more of them to terialize—we'll see it!

—Jack Winter



It was going to be close! Already one of the figures had almost reached safety



THE OPPOSITE IS HELL

By Chester S. Geier

Scott found out his girl was fighting on the wrong side in this revolution. That had to mean he was dead no matter who won

“FREEDOM—OR DEATH!” The shout, rising abruptly at the far end of the street, was followed by a sustained roar of gunfire. Then there were the sharp blasts of grenades. Somewhere in the midst of the hubub a man screamed thinly.

Scott Clay swore and jerked at the wheel of his little jet car. The sounds

of struggle up the street had made him suddenly aware that this part of Mars Base City was not a healthy one at the moment. He'd had no idea that a few die-hard members of the recklessly fanatical Martian Independence Movement still remained in action. He'd thought their revolution had been smothered beyond any possibility of another flare-up.

Drawing the jet car to a stop at the side of the street, he leaned forward to peer warily through the windshield. He could now see the glow of flames up ahead. Evidently the revolutionists had taken shelter in a building and guardsmen had fired this with atotherm bombs. The roaring of guns had quickened in tempo.

In the purple dusk that was day on Mars, the street looked deserted and strange. All traffic had stopped. Like Clay, other jet-car drivers had pulled up at the curbs on both sides, waiting with their running lights switched off. Pedestrians had taken shelter in the buildings, and lighted signs and windows were going dark.

Clay shook his head. He wouldn't be able to take the short-cut to the spaceport after all. And if he had to be saddled with the handicap of unnecessary distance, he didn't intend to waste time sitting here.

He reached for the starting button, then froze as a sudden blaze of light filled the pressurized interior of the car. His heart leaped with the thought of bombs, but the brilliance proved to be from the headlights of approaching cars. They were moving fast. As he watched, they roared past him. They were Guard trucks, filled with men and weapons and headed at full speed toward the battle that was taking place.

Poor little revolutionists, Clay thought wryly. And poor Naomi. But there was no wryness in him as he thought of the girl, only a swift ache. He knew where her sympathies lay—they had quarreled over the Independence Movement too many times. The failure of the uprising no doubt had hit Naomi hard.

The street was clear again. Starting the car with a jolt of motion, Clay turned it in the opposite direction and set out with gathering speed. The utilitarian glass brick buildings of

Mars Base flashed past in blurred succession. Originally a military and scientific headquarters, Mars Base was now the red planet's capital, a sprawling, booming metropolis that served as a vital trade link with the new frontier recently opened up among the satellites of Jupiter.

CLAY'S EYES were narrowed in a frown as he drove. Old Asteroid Blaine had landed at Mars Base spaceport several days ago, but for some reason Blaine hadn't gotten in touch with Clay. Nor with his daughter Naomi, apparently. Clay knew, despite the hard feelings between them, that Naomi would have notified him of her father's return. It had remained for an acquaintance of Clay's at the spaceport to supply him with the information.

Something was wrong, Clay felt certain. It wasn't like old Asteroid Blaine to stay away. The old man knew how much Clay was depending on the result of his trip. For Clay it was, in fact, a matter of professional life or death.

Clay had mortgaged his salvage outfit to finance Blaine's expedition to the Asteroid Belt, to search for the *Venus Queen*. Believed to have been wrecked somewhere among the treacherous rock mazes of the Belt, the *Venus Queen* had, at the time of her disappearance, been carrying a cargo of jovium worth several millions of interplanetary exchange units. Many had sought the missing ship without success, and of these many had failed to return.

Old Asteroid Blaine had come up with what to Clay had seemed an excellent idea for locating the *Venus Queen*. Clay had been confident that Blaine could do it, if any one could. A veteran of countless prospecting trips to the Belt, Blaine knew the laws and vagaries of the rock sea as did no

other man in his field—a fact acknowledged by the nickname he had been given. Dogged by a streak of bad luck where salvage business was concerned, Clay had been willing to gamble on anything that gave promise of swinging fortune's scale in his favor. He had gambled on Blaine, and now...

Perhaps the old man had failed in his search, Clay thought with a sudden sick feeling. And ashamed to admit failure where so much had depended on success, he had gone into seclusion.

But whatever the reason, Clay was determined to find Blaine and put an end to the mystery. The first place to look was the spaceport, where Blaine had landed the *Griffin*. There was the possibility that the old man might still be aboard.

THE FLOODLIGHTED expanse of the spaceport came into view. Clay found that the area was being patrolled by Guard vehicles and aircraft. As he approached the gate, a couple of guardsmen trotted up to his car with ready weapons.

From the audio unit came a barked command: "Out of the car, mister! Emergency inspection."

Clay already had the air pump in operation, equalizing the air pressure within the car to that outside. He ignored the respirator which was a part of his insulated coverall. He didn't expect to be out in the open long and knew he was sufficiently Mars-conditioned to stand it.

Climbing out, he submitted to a quick yet thorough search of his person and the car interior. In the week since the abortive revolution, he had grown accustomed to the military measures that had been put into effect.

After scrutinizing Clay's identifications, one of the guardsmen spoke into his helmet radio. Then he grinned at Clay and gestured.

"All clear, mister. Go ahead."

"There was some shooting in town," Clay remarked as he prepared to climb back into the car. "But it looks like the whole trouble is over now."

The guardsman shook his head. "My idea, mister, is that it won't be over until we get the brains behind it."

"Yes, there's that angle," Clay said reflectively. The identities of the ring-leaders of the revolution, he recalled, were not known.

He drove to the administration building, received the field clearance necessary to avoid danger from incoming or outgoing spacecraft, then continued on to where the *Griffin* was berthed. The ships stood in long, wide-spaced rows, like metal towers, each within a square formed by thick blast-walls. The squares were numbered, and Clay sped down a paved lane between the blast-walls until he found the number he sought. He steered his car through a masked entrance, then slowed to cross the cracks and gaps in the square's glassy surface, a surface made molten with each departure or arrival of a ship.

The *Griffin's* space-scarred length loomed above him as he approached. A couple of viewpanes up near the nose were lighted, an indication that somebody was aboard.

Clay was so absorbed in this fact that not until he was quite close did he notice the car parked near the *Griffin's* tailfins. And the car held an occupant.

As Clay drew to a stop nearby and climbed out, the burly figure of a man emerged from the other car. The man hurried over to one of the arching tailfins, pounded on it with something, and then strode toward Clay.

BEWILDERMENT mounted in Clay. The man was a complete stranger to him. He could think of

no reason why a stranger should be waiting beside the *Griffin*—or why he should sound a warning at the approach of others. That pounding on the tailfin, Clay realized, had been intended to alert persons inside the ship.

"Who are you?" the man asked in a sharp, aggressive voice. "What do you want?"

The object in his hand, Clay saw now, was a gun—a needler. It was a vicious weapon, and was being pointed at him.

Clay said slowly, "I don't exactly see why I should tell you anything. Just where do you get the authority to point guns and ask questions?"

"I got orders," the man said. His manner was that of a professional tough. His deep-set eyes had the steady stare and his heavy features, the set, wooden expression. "You don't want to talk to me, Captain, you can swing ship and blast a course right out of here."

"You got orders, eh?" Clay said. "If old Asteroid Blaine gave those orders, you can stop jet-lipping. He'll want to see me."

"Wrong guess, Captain."

"I see," Clay muttered. "All right, I'll talk to whoever it is in the ship that gave you your orders."

"Not if they don't want to see you, Captain. You tell me who you are and what you want, and I'll find out."

Clay felt certain that those aboard the *Griffin* would not want to see him as badly as he wanted to see them. And he wanted to see them very badly.

He took a deep breath. He looked intently at the man opposite him, then suddenly swung his eyes up toward the air-lock, some two-thirds of the way up the *Griffin's* length.

The burly tough's head jerked in the direction of Clay's glance. Before

he had time fully to realize he had been taken in by a feint, Clay swept the needler aside with one hand and hit him with the other. It was an accurate and well-timed blow, and Clay had plenty of weight of his own behind it.

The man staggered back and went down. Scooping up the fallen needler, Clay crossed the remaining space to the *Griffin*. The ground extension part of the ladder that led up to the air-lock had been let down, and Clay mounted swiftly.

AS HE drew level with the open outer door of the air-lock, he found a reception awaiting him. That was not too surprising in view of the alarm sounded by the burly tough a short while before.

The first thing Clay saw was a needler thrust close to his face. Then he looked at the bent figure of the man behind it. The hand in which he held his own weapon was at the moment in a position on one of the ladder rungs where he could not use it without an awkward—and fatal—movement.

Clay recognized the man above him. He had once met Max Seybold in a business capacity, and had heard a great deal about him both before and since. Seybold was numbered among the celebrities of Mars Base; he was a dashing and somewhat mysterious figure. He was known officially as a prosperous and influential promoter, and it was rumored that his control reached into almost every important enterprise on the planet.

Clay's first encounter with Seybold had not been any more pleasant than the one taking place now. Seybold had always struck Clay as being much too smooth, using this quality as camouflage for an unscrupulous nature. Refusing to be deceived by Seybold's smoothness during their previous con-

tact, Clay had avoided being drawn into a sharp-dealing arrangement, with the result that he had received no subsequent business from the man.

"Well—Scott Clay, the rough and ready salvage expert," Seybold said in his rich, resonant voice. "I might have known it was you from the way you laid out poor Hutch."

"You ordered him to ask too many questions," Clay said. "It sort of makes people reckless."

Seybold's smile was wryly sardonic. "Certain people, let us say. Next time I shall instruct Hutch to shoot first and ask questions afterward."

"I'll remember that—next time," Clay promised.

Seybold nodded coolly. "An excellent idea, though I doubt if your luck will last. Hutch doesn't make the same mistake twice. Well, Clay, since you won't be using the needler you have there, you might hand it over."

"I want to talk to you, Seybold."

"If you wish. After you hand over the needler."

Clay extended the weapon. At Seybold's gesture he climbed the rest of the way into the air-lock. Seybold, who had moved back into the chamber, now pressed the buttons that would close the outer door and open the inner one. He watched Clay with sardonic amusement during the few seconds' wait, a tall, somehow distinguished figure even in his enveloping insulated suit. His long features had a chiseled, patrician cast.

THE INNER door opened, and Seybold motioned for Clay to precede him up the central companion-way. Following directions, Clay climbed toward the control room.

His mind seethed with puzzled thoughts. What was Seybold doing aboard the *Griffin*? Where was Asteroid Blaine? What was the relationship between the two that would explain

Seybold's presence?

As far as Clay knew, Seybold and Blaine had not previously been associated in any way. If an association existed now, it would have to be a profitable one for Seybold, or he wouldn't be involved in it.

With a sudden chill, Clay thought of the *Venus Queen* and its cargo of jovium. Was that the answer?

Had Blaine pulled a double-cross?

Emerging into the control room, Clay saw a slender coveralled figure standing before the instrument board. Naomi Blaine.

She stared at him. "Scott!" she said. "So you were the one. . . ."

The unnaturalness and tension of the moment gave Clay an odd feeling at sight of her. He was struck by her vivid femininity, as though seeing her for the first time. They had practically grown up in Mars Base together, and he knew their frequent quarrels on any and all subjects were the result of taking each other for granted. He had always regarded her as a sister, feeling he had an incontestable right to criticize and scold. But now he suddenly realized she was no longer a child, but a grown woman—and an undeniably pretty one. Her dark eyes made a fascinating contrast to her creamy skin and golden-brown hair.

She tossed her head defiantly under his gaze. "What are you doing here?"

"I was going to ask you the same question," Clay said. He swung around as Seybold entered the room behind him. "Just what's this all about? Where's Asteroid? I found out that he landed several days ago; and it struck me damned queer that he didn't get in touch with me. So I came here—and ran into people with guns. That includes you, Seybold. How do you fit in? Exactly what's going on?"

SEYBOLD shot a glance at Naomi and shrugged athletic shoulders. "I'm not quite sure that it's any of your business, Clay."

"Not my business, eh?" Clay said grimly. He planted clenched hands on his hips. "Let me put you straight, Seybold. I mortgaged my business to finance Asteroid's trip to the Belt. My investment entitles me to an accounting with him. I have the right to see him and know where he is. And I'm sure I also have the right to know what your connection with him is, since I'm practically a partner of his."

"I don't know about that, Clay." Seybold swung his needler negligently. "Look here: just what was your business arrangement with Naomi's father? How legal was it, to be exact? Can you produce a contract to show what you're entitled to?"

A chill growing in him, Clay said slowly, "Asteroid and I didn't need contracts for any business arrangements we made together. He was my father's best and oldest friend, and I've known him all my life."

"I'm afraid that was your mistake, Clay." One corner of Seybold's lips twisted in a wryly sympathetic smile.

"What do you mean? What are you getting at?"

"What I'm getting at," Seybold returned gently, "is that legally you have no rights at all where Asteroid Blaine is concerned, and are entitled to nothing. On the other hand, I can produce a perfectly legal and ironclad agreement to show that I have been empowered to act as Blaine's agent, with full authority in all business matters concerning him. That specifically includes any discoveries he made on his trip to the Belt."

Stunned, Clay swung to Naomi. "Is this true?"

She nodded, her eyes avoiding his.

He grasped her shoulders. "What

did you have to do with this, Naomi? Did you put Asteroid up to it? Didn't either of you realize what a position it would put me in?"

"You don't understand, Scott," the girl said in swift protest. "What father found in the Belt has nothing to do with—"

SEYBOLD said quickly, "It isn't necessary for you to discuss the matter, Naomi. It's your father's affair, and legally he was free to do as he chose." He jerked up his needler as Clay whirled in sudden anger.

"You!" Clay gritted. "You must have tricked old Asteroid into this underhanded deal. I haven't forgotten that you once tried to do the same to me."

Seybold's face hardened. "Watch yourself, Clay. You're on dangerous ground when you question my business practices. Since this talk has become decidedly unpleasant, I think you'd better leave."

Clay turned back to Naomi. "Where's Asteroid, Naomi? I've got to talk to him."

Catching the girl's hesitant glance, Seybold said, "I'm sure you wouldn't want to subject your father to any of this unpleasantness. Clay seems quite an impulsive character and no doubt fully capable of physical harm."

"You know better than that, Naomi," Clay said. "Where's Asteroid?"

She shook her head. "Please, Scott. There's really no point in going into this any further."

"Come along, Clay," Seybold ordered, motioning with his needler. "It's time you started leaving."

"What about you, Naomi?" Clay demanded.

"I'm staying here. Max and I are making plans for a trip to the Belt."

Clay felt a twinge of something that he realized was jealousy. "Don't be a fool, Naomi. Seybold's a crook.

The deal he made behind my back with Asteroid proves that. Don't let him smooth-talk you into anything you'll be sorry for later."

Seybold said hotly, "I've had enough of your childish and spiteful accusations, Clay. Now, get out of this ship, or so help me you'll have to be carried out."

"All right," Clay said. "But I'm not finished with this yet, Seybold. I'm going to find old Asteroid Blaine if it's the last thing I do. I'm going to get to the bottom of this business."

"I wouldn't advise it, Clay," Seybold said. "You'd be very wise to leave well enough alone."

Abruptly, a clatter of sound became audible, and a moment later Hutch entered the control room. He threw a scowling glance at Clay as he turned toward Seybold.

"Boss, this guy tricked me. I—"

"Never mind that now," Seybold broke in. He produced the needler he had taken from Clay and returned it to Hutch. "Escort this man out of the ship. And don't be careless a second time."

Clay hesitated, looking at Naomi. She was motionless and silent, but her dark eyes seemed to hold a plea for understanding.

Then, followed by a grimly vigilant Hutch, Clay returned to the air-lock and climbed down to the ground. His mind was busy with what Naomi had said, that she and Seybold planned a trip to the Belt. Something important, obviously, was involved—and that could only be the *Venus Queen*. Asteroid Blaine evidently had located the vessel, which was why Seybold wished to keep Clay from seeing the old man.

BUT THERE was more to the situation than that, Clay felt certain. More than ever now, he wanted to

talk to Blaine and learn what lay back of his and Naomi's apparent betrayal.

Watched by Hutch, Clay entered his car and drove away from the *Griffin*.

Not until he was close to the spaceport gate did Clay discover that he wasn't alone in the car. A scrape and thump of movement from the direction of the rear seat made him whirl in surprise. He found himself staring into a familiar leathery brown face, framed in grizzled hair.

"Hello, boy. Guess you were looking for me, eh?"

The car swerved dangerously, and Clay busied himself for a moment with getting it back under control.

"Asteroid!" he said then. "You old space rat! How in the name of reason did you get here?"

The old man chuckled, but his humor somehow held a grim note. "Naomi and that Seybold fellow had me stashed away in the *Griffin*. Under cover, sort of. I heard you talking in the control room and heard enough to get the idea I was making a big mistake. So when Seybold's strongarm boy went up to the control room after you, I took the chance to sneak out of the ship. I hid out in back, here."

Clay shook his head in wonder. "I was plenty worried about you," he admitted. "It looked to me like you had gotten mixed up in a crooked deal of some kind."

"I owe you an explanation, all right, son," Blaine said. "Let's go some place where we can talk. And you'd better blast your jets. Seybold won't like it when he finds I've run out on him."

Clay slowed as he reached the gate, but the guardsmen on duty waved him on through. Evidently they were interested only in vehicles seeking to enter the spaceport.

Out on the streets of the city proper, Clay piled on speed, recalling

Blaine's warning. He didn't know what Seybold would do when he found the old man gone, but there was the possibility that Seybold might try to follow.

He kept a close watch as he drove, but there was no sign of pursuit. Reassured, he finally drew to a stop before the small building that housed his salvage firm. It was deserted in mute testimony of the financial difficulties he had encountered.

USHERING Blaine through the pressure chamber at the entrance to the building, Clay led the way to his frugally furnished office. He waved Blaine to a chair beside the desk and produced a bottle and glasses. As he poured, his elbow jolted a dictascriber on the desktop, and he righted the device barely in time to keep it from falling.

"Nerves," he muttered ruefully. "This whole business has me on edge." He raised his glass to Blaine's, nodded, and drank.

Blaine smacked his lips and sighed. "Just what I needed, boy. This mess hasn't been doing my nerves any good, either."

"What's it all about?" Clay asked. "I gather you located the *Venus Queen*, and Seybold used some sort of trick to cut himself in."

Blaine somberly shook his grizzled thatch. "You guessed wrong, boy. I didn't find the *Venus Queen*."

Clay stared. "You didn't— Then what in space is back of the whole thing?"

"Something none of us counted on back at the start." Blaine refilled his glass and continued slowly, "I searched the sector of the Belt where my figures showed the *Venus Queen* ought to be. I knew I was on the right track, but maneuvering around in the Belt is hard on fuel, and I

reached my cruising limit sooner than I expected. I had to start heading for home if I was going to have enough power left to get back on. But just as I was getting ready to turn back, I saw something."

Blaine shivered slightly and drained his glass. To Clay the old man's hushed, tense words seemed to fill the office with the atmosphere of space itself, its vastness, its mystery and its wonders. Very little actually was known about space, Clay realized, even though men had extended its boundaries as far as Jupiter. Anything could be in the Belt. Anything. . . .

"What I saw," Blaine went on, "was a ship. It wasn't the *Venus Queen*. It wasn't even a ship built by men. Scott, boy, it was something from Outside—a stranger from beyond our sun system!"

CLAY SAT frozen, awed. Scientists, he knew, had long speculated upon the possibility that the Solar System might contain evidence of alien visitors, a race far enough advanced to possess the secret of interstellar flight. And Blaine, unless his eyes had tricked him, was the first man to discover such evidence.

"Go on," Clay urged impatiently. "What did this ship look like?"

"It was big," Blaine said. "The biggest thing I've ever laid eyes on. About a quarter of a mile long and shaped like a cylinder, with both ends pointed. I can't guess what drove it once, but it was something a lot better and more powerful than rocket propulsion. There were a lot of projections along the hull, and at first I thought these might have something to do with the ship's drive principle. Now, though, I think I know just what those projections were and just what the ship was—an alien battle cruiser."

"Great howling jets!" Clay breathed. "A thing like that could turn the Solar System inside out!"

Blaine nodded soberly. "I know. It's all I've been thinking about. But the point is, boy, I didn't realize that right away. I was just too plain excited by what I'd stumbled across. And I was kept too busy making observations of its position and speed of drift to do any thinking about just what kind of a ship it was.

"That ship, boy, is due to pass clear out of the Solar System before much longer. How it got here in the first place, I don't exactly know. But since it looks like a battle cruiser, I figure it was in a fight somewhere near our system and was disabled. That was a long time ago, according to the drift rate, and in that time the crew would've all died off. So the ship is just ready and waiting for whoever can reach it first—if they reach it before it drifts clean out of the system."

"Didn't you try to take a look inside?" Clay asked.

Blaine shook his head. "I damned well wanted to, but I didn't have enough fuel left for that. The ship was a good distance away, you see, and I'd been looking at it through the search scope aboard the *Griffin*. The only thing left for me to do was to head back here.

"When I landed I found the spaceport under military quarantine. Seems that while I was gone the Independence Movement people had actually started a war, like they'd been threatening they would. I managed to get through a video-phone call to Naomi, and she said she knew somebody who'd cut the red tape and get me released without delay. A short time later she showed up with this Seybold fellow."

"So that's how Seybold entered the picture," Clay said musingly. "Through Naomi. She must have

known him for some time, then—and Seybold himself seems to know the right people." Clay's eyes sharpened on Blaine. "And you told Seybold about the ship you saw in the Belt?"

THE OLD man nodded, looking uncomfortable. "He seemed a friendly, understanding sort, and I didn't see anything wrong with that just then. And it wasn't until I got to talking to him that I realized what the ship was—a battle cruiser. I think he guessed that about the same time. But maybe the real reason I talked to him was that I hoped he'd stake me to another trip out to the Belt. I knew you couldn't do it, Scott. You'd gambled everything on me, and I couldn't face you empty-handed. The *Venus Queen* is some place around where that alien cruiser is located, and I was dead certain I'd find it on a second trip."

Blaine took a deep breath. "Anyhow, Seybold took the bait. He said he'd finance me to another trip. All I had to do was sign an agreement making him my agent to handle what I'd found. It seemed fair enough. I hadn't been inside the alien ship and didn't know if it held anything valuable. That would be for scientists and technical men to find out. You and I didn't have the kind of money to swing a deal like that. What we were interested in was the *Venus Queen*."

"Seybold may very well have control over that, too," Clay said grimly. "He told me he had full authority in all business matters concerning you. The alien ship seems to be just one of them."

Blaine suddenly looked unhappy. "I've been worrying about that, son. I never had much of a head for legal papers, and the agreement looked all right to me. I thought it was clearly understood the agreement applied to the ship I'd found and nothing else.

But after what I heard between you and Seybold aboard the *Griffin*, I got to wondering. . . . To tell the truth, the whole business was beginning to look plenty suspicious to me. Seybold was all fired up over my find, and it's put him up to something—something he's trying to be mighty cagey and careful about. I don't like Naomi being mixed up in it."

Clay jerked to his feet and paced the floor. "Seybold's a smooth, scheming devil!" he said angrily. "He's tied our hands neatly all around. And as for what he's up to, it can't be anything small. He has his fingers in too many important pies."

ABRUPTLY Clay whirled back to Blaine. "Asteroid, Naomi mentioned that she and Seybold were planning to take a trip out to the Belt. What do you know of it?"

"Seybold wants to examine the ship," Blaine said. "He's taking along a couple of scientists and engineers. I was supposed to go, too, but he has all the information he needs to find the ship without me. Everything's ready. The *Griffin* has been fueled and provisioned, and all the equipment's aboard."

"When are they leaving?"

"Tonight."

"Tonight!" Clay cried in dismay. He pounded a fist into his palm. "Damn! That doesn't leave us any time at all. We've got to do something, Asteroid. The first thing would be to bust this questionable deal of Seybold's wide open. It can be busted, don't you doubt that. Seybold didn't take me into consideration, and that's his weak point."

"But Scott, boy, we just don't have the money to buck him," Blaine pointed out.

"We will have—once we find the *Venus Queen*. This may be our last chance to look for it, and we—"

The sound of a buzzer cut his words short. He stiffened, realizing that someone was at the entrance to the building.

"Sit tight," he told Blaine. "I'll go see who it is."

Clay had locked the inner door of the pressure chamber after he and Blaine had passed through it. The outer door, however, had been unlocked, and it was the opening of this that had caused the buzzer to sound.

A small panel of one-way glass was set into the inner door. Peering through this, Clay frowned puzzledly. The pressure chamber was empty.

Clay decided his caller had been too impatient to wait and had just left. He wanted a glimpse of whoever it had been. Quickly he unlocked the inner door and stepped into the chamber. He was reaching for the handle of the outer door, when the sudden dizziness hit him. His legs went rubbery, and the narrow confines of the pressure chamber seemed to whirl around him.

Realization flashed in his mind. Gas! Gas—invisible and odorless. Someone had opened the outer door only long enough to empty the contents of a gas cartridge into the chamber.

A trap! And Clay knew, even as consciousness dimmed, that he had walked right into it.

Fighting desperately to keep control of his body, he staggered out of the chamber. His legs folded under him, and he fell. With a tremendous effort, he raised himself on one elbow and reached out to swing the inner door shut. But it was a weight too enormous to budge.

Blackness closed over him.

BLACKNESS—and then he was aware of light behind his closed eyes. Moments later he was staring about him, a memory of terrible ef-

fort and failure surging into his mind. And then, as he recalled what had happened, alarm shot through him and brought him erect. He stood swaying, still weak and numb.

There had been a reason for the gas attack, he knew—an unpleasant reason. But what was it? Evidently it had not been to harm him bodily, beyond the use of the gas itself.

A glance at his watch showed he had been unconscious for about an hour. In that time anything could have happened.

The building seemed strangely quiet. As he peered around him, he saw that the inner door of the pressure chamber was shut. That was wrong—he remembered having been unable to close it.

And then his eyes touched a gleaming object near his feet. A needler. Puzzled, he bent to pick it up. Where had the weapon come from? He hadn't had one in his possession before the attack.

In another instant he thought of Blaine. He understood why the building had seemed strangely quiet. Where was Blaine? What had the old man been doing while he lay unconscious?

Cold fingers seemed to grip at Clay's middle. At a staggering run, he returned to his office.

He saw then why Blaine had remained so mysteriously inactive. The old man was sprawled on the floor near the desk—dead. The countless tiny punctures of a needler showed in his coverall over the chest.

Clay stared at the weapon in his hand. A needler had killed Blaine—and Clay was certain it was the one he held.

The sound of the buzzer, striking abruptly into the heavy silence, made him whirl. His face twisted. A perfect moment for someone to arrive. Blaine murdered, and himself standing over the body, with the needler

in his hand. A perfect moment. It couldn't have been timed more beautifully.

And suddenly he realized that this visit very likely *had* been timed. That would explain why he had been gassed but otherwise left unharmed, while Blaine had been killed. That would explain why the needler had been placed beside him.

CLAY KNEW he had only bare seconds left. Along with everything else, of course, the inner door of the pressure chamber would have been left unlocked, to permit the easy entrance of witnesses.

He bent over the desk, and his fingers worked frantically for a moment. Then he was out in the hall and moving swiftly and silently toward the rear of the building. From the other end of the hall came the sounds of footsteps and voices. The voices were familiar. Seybold's voice—and Naomi's.

Clay reached the end of the hall just in time, concealing himself around a turn as Seybold and Naomi appeared and moved toward the office he had left.

At the end of the angle where Clay stood were a single door and a narrow stairway, leading upward. The handle of the door was turning as Clay touched it. He jerked back, startled, and heard a shoulder thump against the panel.

That would be Hutch, he thought. Clever. Seybold had tried to overlook no loopholes.

But there was still the stairway. Clay was mounting with stealthy haste, when Naomi's scream tore through the building. She had seen her father's body.

A trapdoor brought Clay out to the roof of the building. He leaped a gap to an adjoining roof and climbed a wall to still another. The lesser grav-

ity of Mars gave him an agility he would not have possessed on Earth.

Soon he reached a roof used as a jet-copter parking space, and from here an outside stairway permitted descent to the ground. He walked a short distance along the street until a taxi appeared. He waved it down and settled back to catch his breath.

For the moment he was safe. But the hunt, he knew, was on.

WHERE inconvenience and danger were not considerations, it was possible to gain entrance to the spaceport via a circuitous, difficult and prohibited route. Clay took this means to reach the *Griffin*. He knew authorities would by now have been alerted to watch for him. He would never have gotten past the guardsmen on duty at the spaceport gate, with their careful scrutiny of identifications.

It was evening which, on Mars, where the stars were visible even during the twilight that served as day, meant little. There was no transition from light to darkness. Here at the spaceport, as almost everywhere else, artificial illumination shone continuously.

It was a disadvantage. Clay would have preferred concealing shadows for the purpose he had in mind.

After considerable climbing and a long walk, Clay came to the square in which the *Griffin* stood. He made certain that no cars were approaching, then slipped into the masked entrance and peered cautiously around the edge of the inner lip.

A single car stood near the *Griffin*. Clay watched it for a long moment, until positive there was no one inside. Then he studied the towering metal shape of the vessel itself. All the visible viewpanes were lighted. Most, if not all, of the ship's passengers would be present, he decided, and everything would be in readiness for

departure.

A question sharpened in his mind. How alert were those aboard? Would they be expecting an invasion? As far as he could see, no guard had been placed outside the vessel—but no doubt there would be precautions of some sort. Seybold was clever enough to guess that Clay might try to get into the *Griffin*.

The outer door of the airlock was closed. His eyes followed the ladder that ran from it along the hull. The ground extension part of the ladder—some twelve feet of it—was drawn up. Getting inside the ship was going to be a serious problem.

Clay peered at the car again, then at the viewpanes of the *Griffin*. Now or never, he thought. Emerging boldly from concealment, he hurried across the stretch of cracked, glassy ground that separated him from the vessel. Stumbling and sliding, he reached the shelter of one of the massive tailfins.

He listened tensely, a heavy pounding in his chest. Now there ought to be shouts, the clatter of men descending, the crash of guns.

Silence.

His arrival appeared to be unnoticed—so far. The ladder extension was still drawn up, and the airlock was still closed.

The sound of an approaching car broke the stillness immediately around him. He drew back behind the tailfin. The car might just be going past this particular square, of course.

It wasn't. It turned through the masked entrance and rolled up to the *Griffin*. Subsequent sounds told of a single occupant.

FOOTSTEPS came up to the tailfin behind which Clay stood tensely pressed. Then something hard was pounded against the metal surface. Two quick raps, followed by one rap.

A pause; then again two quick raps, followed by one rap. Evidently a pre-arranged signal.

Clay saw the figure of a man move away from the tailfin, to stand directly under the airlock. He gazed upward, waiting.

Then a voice called downward: "All right, Matt! Coming aboard?"

The man on the ground nodded. "Let the ladder down, will you?"

"Ladder away! But listen, Matt, you'd better get your car out of here now. Otherwise you'll have to go through the trouble before takeoff."

Muttering in annoyance, the man turned back to his car. Clay heard the vehicle start up, and a moment later there was a thud as the ladder extension hit the ground.

The car left the square. An idea dancing excitedly in his mind, Clay slipped from his hiding place to peer guardedly up along the ship's hull. The outer door of the airlock stood open now—and empty. The other man had gone back inside.

Clay returned to his concealment and waited, pulses racing. He was poised tensely when the driver of the car came striding back and prepared to climb the ladder. A few leaping steps brought him up beside the other. The man stared in dismayed surprise, and his mouth opened for a shout. Then Clay's arm circled his neck, and he was borne down to the ground. A hard swing of Clay's clubbed needler stilled his struggles.

Clay glanced around swiftly, found that luck was still with him. Dragging his victim out of sight behind a far tailfin, he started up the ladder.

He reached the airlock and pressed the button to close the outer door. He pulled his coverall hood around his face, to conceal as much of it as possible. When the inner door opened, he peered warily along both ends of the companionway beyond. Nobody

was present at the moment. The man who had spoken to the driver of the car evidently had returned to some other part of the ship.

Clay's mouth curved in a tense grin. So far so good, he thought. Now, if he could reach the control room...

That was the heart of his plan. For the control room was literally that—the "control" room. Who held it was master of the ship. Once in possession there, Clay could order off everyone aboard by threatening to unshield the drive pile, or by threatening to bounce the ship—taking it up to a certain height, then allowing it to drop with its power suddenly cut.

The ship would be his. And ahead was the Belt—and the *Venus Queen*.

ONE OF the companionway's twin ladders was right beside the inner door of the lock. Clay mounted rapidly toward the bow of the vessel, his back muscles quivering. If the others aboard sighted him and realized he was an intruder, all hell would break loose.

He heard the voices of men as he passed open hatchways to the different deck levels. Once a man appeared in the companionway beneath him, descending to a lower part of the ship. He released a long sigh of relief.

Then the control room hatchway, open, was just above him. He listened for a moment. There was no sound. The room seemed to be deserted.

Raising himself up a step further, he poked his head through the opening. The room actually was empty. It seemed too good to be true. The heavy acceleration hammocks, in one of which a man on guard duty might comfortably have placed himself, were folded back into their wall niches.

Clay quickly climbed the rest of the way into the control room, elation surging through him. He swung the hatch shut and dogged it tight.

The *Griffin* was his!

He was striding toward the main instrument panel, when a sudden metallic clank and squeak sounded. One of the acceleration hammocks had fallen open out of its niche.

There was a man in it.

Hutch.

And Hutch held a needler with the tight-drawn readiness of a man who had been expecting visitors.

Clay stood frozen where the abrupt descent of the hammock had stopped him. He had slipped his own weapon into a pocket of his coverall after closing the hatch. Even as he started frantically to grab for the weapon, he saw it was too late. And Hutch's warning voice forestalled the wild, reckless impulse that rose in him.

"Cut your jets, Captain! Steady! Just as you are."

Hutch's tone was a little shrill. His features held a grotesque, straining intentness. He was a man prepared instantly to kill.

Clay saw this. Reluctantly, a cold emptiness growing in him, he remained unmoving. Hutch's abrupt materialization began to seem less incredible as he had time to digest it.

He said slowly, "Seybold must have guessed I'd show up here."

Hutch nodded. "He was pretty sure you would. So we sort of had a reception waiting for you. We rigged up scanning eyes around the tail of the ship, and inside along the companionway. I practically knew to a second when you'd reach the control room."

Clay felt a surge of self-disgust. He should have known it was too easy. The absence of guards should have warned him that other precautions had been taken.

He said, "I don't get it. If Seybold wanted to keep me out of the ship, why did he use a system like that?"

"Maybe he didn't want to keep you out of the ship, Captain. Maybe he figured to let you aboard and keep

you out of trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

HUTCH suddenly had the expression of a man who had spoken too much. "You got enough out of me, Captain. I'll let the boss do the talking—if he feels like it." Hutch jerked his needler in a gesture. "Now, get your hands up and turn around."

Clay obeyed hesitantly, his muscles taut. He heard Hutch approach behind him, then felt the muzzle of the needler against his back. Hutch's free hand explored his coverall pockets, removing his own needler.

"Guess this is the gun you killed old man Blaine with," Hutch said.

"I didn't kill Blaine," Clay returned.

"Well, I didn't expect you to admit it, Captain." Hutch's voice turned hard. "You blasted me in the jaw a while back. I been figuring to get even for that."

Clay felt the needler leave his pocket and sensed what was coming. The blow caught him before he could duck his head. Pain and nausea exploding in him, he slumped to his knees. Then another explosion, and for the second time blackness closed over him.

When awareness returned to him again, he found himself strapped into one of the acceleration hammocks. His hands and feet, he discovered on trying to move them, were securely bound. He heard voices nearby and twisted his head to get a better view of the control room.

He saw Naomi, Seybold, and a man he did not know. They were gathered around the chart table, discussing what seemed to be the *Griffin's* flight plan.

Seybold caught the movement of Clay's head and glanced up. "So you're awake at last, Clay."

His gaze on Naomi, Clay said nothing. The girl was looking at him now,

her dark eyes red-rimmed and her small face pale. Her mouth quivered.

"Murderer!" she said abruptly. "Whatever got into you, Scott? Why did you kill my father?"

Clay shook his head. "I didn't kill him, Naomi."

"If you didn't kill him, then who did?" she demanded. "Why did you run away?"

"I was gassed." He explained how it had happened. "When I came to, Asteroid was dead. With his body there, in my office, I knew how it would look."

"A likely story," Seybold said. "There's no doubt in my mind that you murdered Blaine, Clay. You felt the old man had double-crossed you. You got into an argument with him in your office, lost your head and needled him down."

Seybold shook his distinguished, gray-powdered mane. "I was afraid something like that might happen. I had marked you as an impulsive and hot-headed sort, Clay. When I found Blaine had left the ship, I realized he might be in danger. Naomi and I set out at once to look for him, but it wasn't until we had exhausted several other possibilities that we thought he might be at your office. We were too late."

"How did you manage to find him, Scott?" Naomi demanded.

"I didn't," Clay said. He related how Blaine had concealed himself in the car. He saw a startled expression spread over the girl's face, and swung his eyes to Seybold. "Since you were discussing a theory in regard to Blaine's death, Seybold, you might be interested in mine."

SEYBOLD'S smile was sardonic. "I'd never have imagined there could possibly be another theory."

Clay went on, "Blaine found something in the Belt that potentially was

of great military importance. There was the danger that he might let this information fall into the wrong hands, so an effort was made to bind him legally and keep him incommunicado aboard the *Griffin*. He didn't know just what the setup was, and there was the risk that he'd refuse to cooperate any further once he found out. So the moment he left the *Griffin* he signed his own death warrant.

"Blaine really wasn't needed any more and was tolerated only because of his relationship to Naomi. The location of his find in the Belt was known. And since the *Griffin* would pass into Naomi's hands on his death, that matter was taken care of. Only the method of his death remained to be arranged, and circumstances happened to be ideal. Blaine obviously had talked to me. Therefore, kill him and frame me for the crime. Two birds with one stone. Naturally, I wouldn't go running to the authorities. There was only one place I could run to—the *Griffin*. And a little reputation had been arranged for me."

Seybold's smile held derision. "You're insinuating that your theory fits me, Clay. It's completely fantastic, of course. There isn't a shred of evidence to connect me with Blaine's murder, while there is a good deal of it where you're concerned."

"Circumstantial evidence," Clay said. "You're setting yourself up as judge and jury, Seybold, and you couldn't possibly be impartial enough for that. You're too much involved in this yourself. Look. Why not take our stories to the authorities and let them decide which of us is right?"

Seybold's expression became guarded. "I'm afraid that's out of the question."

"Then you're condemning me without a trial, without a chance to defend myself," Clay shot back.

"Circumstances seem to require

that," Seybold returned, shrugging. "But the fact remains that Naomi and I are certain of your guilt."

"Just what do you intend doing with me—since you want to leave the authorities out of it?"

"You'll have to accompany us. There isn't time now for other arrangements. You're a salvage engineer, Clay. We'll be able to use you—regardless of legal and moral questions."

"That amounts to kidnapping," Clay said. He glanced at Naomi. "And you—are you making yourself a party to it?"

Her dark eyes dropped. "It...it can't be helped."

"Because I know too much, eh?" Clay demanded. "Because you and Seybold don't want authorities to know about the ship Asteroid found in the Belt."

SEYBOLD took a sudden step forward, his face dangerous. "What do you mean by that, Clay?"

"The ship Blaine found is a battle cruiser. In the hands of a group opposed to the territorial government of Mars, it would be of enormous value. Naturally such a group wouldn't want the government to know about the ship. And the only such group in existence is the one behind the Martian Independence Movement."

Clay plunged on, "Your interest in the ship, Seybold; and your efforts to keep it a secret, indicate your connection with the revolutionists. Naomi being mixed up with you is proof of that. I've known she was in sympathy with the revolutionists, and was beginning to suspect that she was actively involved with them."

"You do know too much, Clay," Seybold said grimly. "It was fortunate that I took certain precautions in your case."

"Then you admit it?" Clay glanced at the girl. "And you, Naomi?"

She said nothing. Seybold released a curt laugh.

"I not only admit it, Clay, but I'll add a fact you apparently haven't guessed yet. I'm the head of the Independence Movement. Those aboard ship are members of the Movement's secret inner group, people of whose loyalty there is no slightest doubt. Not one of them would betray me or the cause by helping you—just in case the idea might have entered your head. And that includes Naomi."

Seybold's eyes gleamed. "As you guessed, Clay, that alien ship in the Belt is our golden opportunity. The authorities think they smashed our revolution beyond any possibility of another uprising. They're wrong—and I'm going to prove they're wrong. We lost the first round because we didn't have weapons powerful enough to stand against what the government could bring to bear against us. But we aren't going to lose the second. The next time we're going to have the weapons we need—weapons of a kind no one in the System has ever seen before. That alien ship is bigger than anything we've been able to build yet, proof of greater scientific advancement. The weapons it contains must be terrific! Nothing could stand against us. Nothing! Not even the might of Earth itself!"

CLAY FELT chilled as Seybold's voice rose in gloating triumph. In that instant the man's suave veneer seemed stripped away to show the ambition and ruthlessness that lay beneath. Seybold would stop at nothing, Clay realized. If the alien ship fell into his hands, Earth itself would be threatened with disaster.

Clay's mouth tightened. That must not happen, he thought. Somehow, he had to prevent it.

Seybold grew grimly calm. "That's why we can't take any chances with

you, Clay. You'll have to stay with us—and I'm going to see to it that you earn your keep. I won't tolerate uselessness in a man—or treachery. Remember that. I may not be able to turn you over to the authorities, but one day soon there's going to be a completely new setup in Mars Base. You're going to stand trial for murdering Naomi's father—and I have absolutely no doubt of what the verdict will be."

Clay remained silent, wondering if this last had been intended for Naomi's benefit. He knew that an "accident" in the Belt could easily be arranged to spare Seybold the bother of holding him for trial—a trial that could never be anything more than a pretense.

Seybold abruptly glanced at the chronometer on the main instrument panel, turning to the third man present in the control room. "It's close to takeoff time, Bert. We'll have to hurry and get ready."

"Yes, sir!" The man called Bert saluted crisply and took a clip board from the chart table. He strode to an acceleration hammock opposite Clay's. Inserting the board into a support on the pilot's master control unit, he stretched out on the hammock and began buckling himself in. Bert, Clay realized, was the pilot.

Seybold went to the intercom and ordered the others aboard the *Griffin* to prepare for takeoff.

Clay said suddenly, "There's a man named Matt. Is he aboard?"

Seybold moved his head in a curt nod. "And not very happy about what you did to him, either. It wasn't quite necessary, Clay. My men had orders to give you an opportunity to get aboard."

"That could have been a mistake," Clay said.

"Your mistake," Seybold returned. "That's enough out of you, Clay. I've

had the interior of the ship altered to accommodate its present passengers, but we're still rather badly crowded. Using another ship might have alerted the authorities to what we were up to, you see. So you'll have to stay here for the present—much as I dislike the idea. But I'm warning you that I won't stand for any nonsense."

"Check," Clay said.

Seybold eyed him a moment. "Later you're going to have to get into the habit of addressing me as 'sir'."

"I can see it's going to be tough."

"You don't see the half of it, Clay." Seybold turned to Naomi. "I'll help you get buckled in, sweetheart."

Clay whistled softly, drawing a glare from the girl as she climbed lithely to the hammock above him. Seybold saw that her fastenings were secured, then turned to the hammock above Bert's.

A HUSH fell over the control room. Bert's master unit made small clicking and humming sounds as he tested control stations throughout the ship.

The minutes ticked away. Bert spoke briefly over the radio to the dispatcher at the spaceport administration building. Then a bell sounded its warning note through the ship. Colored lights flashed into life on the main instrument panel as Bert began manipulating the drive controls.

The *Griffin* began to roar and throb. The roaring grew in volume, and vibration shook the metal walls of the ship.

Clay felt a sudden pressure on his body. It grew, though it never reached the intensity of a takeoff in the heavier gravitational pull of Earth. He knew the *Griffin* was rising on the flaming column of its jets, climbing faster and faster into the star-gemmed immensity of space. The surface of Mars was being left behind. Ahead

was the Belt and an alien ship that offered a very real and terrible threat.

Time passed as the *Griffin* continued to accelerate. Events had left their imprint on Clay. He had felt the effects of nervous exhaustion, as well as those from the gassing he had received and the blows on the head from Hutch. He fell into a heavy sleep.

He didn't know how much later it was when he felt Seybold shaking him. "Come on, Clay! Snap out of it! You certainly aren't going to make yourself at home here. There's work to be done."

Hutch was present now, and a slight, slant-eyed man. Both held ready needlers.

Seybold indicated the other man. "This is Fong. He's a metallurgist, doubling in brass as the cook. You're going to start off by helping him get the galley in order, Clay. And no tricks. You're here on sufferance, remember, and there's a definite limit to that."

Clay was released from his bonds and guided out of the control room by Hutch and Fong. He darted a last glance at Naomi before he passed through the hatch. She was watching him, and he thought she looked unhappy. When she caught his eyes on her, however, she tilted her chin and coldly looked away. He felt considerably more unhappy himself.

"Sweetheart!" he muttered angrily.

"Cut your jets!" Hutch said. "And shake the lead out of your pants."

FOR THE next several hours Clay was kept busy. From a storeroom on a lower deck of the ship, he carried numerous boxes and cartons to the galley, where he opened them and distributed their contents to various cabinets or receptacles. Then he assisted Fong in the latter's meal-time prep-

arations. Fong proved an alert though apologetic overseer.

Finally, taken into custody once more by Hutch, Clay was herded back to the storeroom deck and chained to a stanchion. He was provided with padding to ease the hardness of the metal floor. Then he was alone, with only the small note of cheer provided by a dim glow-tube in the storeroom ceiling.

He stretched out on the padding and tried to make himself comfortable. He was almost directly over the engine section of the ship, a location not calculated to provide restfulness and quiet. The vibration and noise of the blast, however, were not as unpleasant as his thoughts.

At length he fell into a fitful doze, to dream that Seybold was shaking him again. Rousing, he discovered it wasn't a dream after all. He was being shaken. But not by Seybold.

He stared, blinked, and realized he was looking at Naomi. Her face was a pale oval in the dim light from the glow-tube.

"Naomi! What are you doing here?"

"I—I had to talk to you, Scott." She was kneeling beside him. Now she sat down and twisted her small hands. "Max doesn't know I'm here. I told him I wasn't feeling well. I wanted to be alone. I—"

She broke off, then went on: "I'm all mixed up over this situation, Scott. Everything happened so fast, I don't know what to think." Abruptly she caught at his arm. "Scott—look at me. Were you the one who killed father?"

Clay said slowly, "You *are* mixed up, Naomi. Or you wouldn't ask me that question no matter how it looked. Asteroid practically took up where my father left off. He meant almost as much to me as he did to you. He meant so much that I mortgaged my

business to finance his last trip to the Belt. Think over your question again. Is it really worth asking?"

Her face twisted. "But Scott, if you didn't kill father, then who did? Not . . . not—Max?"

"Max!" Clay growled. "And Max calls you 'sweetheart'. How definitely cozy."

She started to rise. "If you're going to be unpleasant—"

"What does Seybold mean to you, Naomi?"

"We . . . well, we have an understanding. We're going to be married when all this is over."

"Married? Seybold?" Clay scoffed. "Don't be a little fool, Naomi. Seybold's been around too much and too long for that. He has his eye on too many green pastures. You can't be any more than a pretty face to him, and some help in a pinch where his schemes are concerned. If he talks about marriage, you can bet that what he's leading up to—"

"Max is a gentleman!" she flared. "He has never so much as hinted at anything irregular. He's fine, Scott. Noble! Why, he has devoted his whole life to freedom for Mars!"

"Not to mention the power and profit involved," Clay returned grimly. "You're a starry-eyed idealist, Naomi—you and most of the others Seybold has doing his dirty work. You see the beautiful dream, and not the ugly reality. Seybold's too shrewd to be misled by dreams. He talks about freedom—but you can be dead certain there's a catch in it. There are political and economic realities that nobody—not even an idealist—can get away from."

She gestured wearily. "We've quarreled about this before, Scott. If you're going to start in again—"

HE GRASPED her wrists, shaking her a little. "Naomi, you've got

to listen to me now, if you ever do! I'm in a spot—for no other reason than that Seybold wants me out of the picture. This is a one-way trip for me, don't you realize that? And you're the only one I can turn to for help. We've got to stop Seybold. Somehow. We've got to keep him from getting his hands on that ship."

"But, Scott, I couldn't betray him! I couldn't betray the Movement!"

"Hell with the Movement!" Clay snapped. "Can't you get it into your head, Naomi, that Mars isn't ready for independence yet? A world has to be self-contained, self-supporting, for that, and Mars depends too much on trade with Earth for its vital necessities. Cut Earth out of the picture and what have you got? Economic ruin. Rationing. Controls. Does freedom exist in an atmosphere like that?"

"But there's the trade with the Jovian worlds," Naomi pointed out. "Earth needs that—and can't have it without using Mars as a jump-off point. Max is certain that will give us the leverage we need."

"Is he?" Clay snorted. "By throwing all his weight in that direction, he'll only succeed in choking off the Jovian trade altogether. He'll throw the whole System into a mess, destroy all the progress we've made so far."

Clay became grimly earnest. "Listen, Naomi. Your faith in the Movement is obviously based on your faith in Seybold's personal integrity. You consider him fine and good—a hero. Therefore, the Movement is fine and good. But suppose he isn't a hero after all? Suppose he's a calculating, cold-blooded murderer? Where does that leave your Movement?"

"But, Scott, I don't see how Max could have had anything to do with father's death."

"Don't you? Look. Were you with Seybold every minute before your discovery of Asteroid's death?"

The girl hesitated, her lower lip between her teeth. "No," she said at last. "When we found that father had left the ship, Max suggested that we separate, to search for him. Max was worried that father might start drinking and talk to someone about what he had found in the Belt. We kept in touch with each other. Then we thought of you, your office."

"There you are," Clay said.

"But that doesn't prove Max was the one who gassed you and killed father."

"Suppose I *can* prove it—definitely?"

She stared at him, her dark eyes wide. Her voice was hardly more than a whisper. "How?"

Clay glanced at the storeroom door. Naomi rose to open it and peer into the companionway. She returned, shaking her head.

OPENING the front of his jacket, Clay slid a hand through and removed an object he had fastened under his armpit with adhesive. It was a dictascriber recording spool. He gave it to Naomi.

"This is from the dictascriber in my office," he explained. "Before Asteroid started talking to me, I thought it would be a good idea to have the machine running. He didn't know I had it switched on. I hoped his story of his deal with Seybold would give me an advantage somewhere, and a recording would be handy to have.

"Now the important thing, Naomi, is that the dictascriber was still running when I was gassed. It was still running when the murderer entered my office and spoke to Asteroid before needling him down. You'll hear Asteroid mention the murderer's name, surprised to see him there. You'll hear the murderer accuse Asteroid of hav-

ing run out on him and tell him he wasn't needed any longer, anyway, and was going to be killed. You'll hear Asteroid ask for a fighting chance to live—and you'll hear the murderer laugh.

"The murderer, of course, is Seybold."

Her face pale and drawn, Naomi looked down at the spool in her hand. A shudder shook her slim body.

Clay went on, "Seybold seems to have guessed how Asteroid was able to leave the spaceport so quickly and easily as he did. In my car. So the way to find Asteroid was to look for him in the places connected with me—my office, for one. And according to your own admission, Naomi, Seybold had the time and the opportunity. He was able to time everything, in fact, so that I could recover from the gas and be caught standing beside Asteroid's body.

"I didn't intend to tell Seybold I had proof that he had killed your father—not while Seybold was in a position to silence me instantly. By keeping quiet I gained time. But I did hint he was the killer. For your benefit, Naomi. I needed to plant doubt in your mind. I had to get you over on my side. You were the only hope I had."

The girl nodded slowly. "There's a dictascriber in the ship," she said almost inaudibly, as though speaking to herself. "I can play this recording back..."

"But be careful," Clay warned. "Don't let Seybold catch you at it, or we're both finished. You've got to be free to move around, Naomi, if we're ever going to get out of this mess."

She rose, her eyes wide and fixed. "I'd better go now, Scott. I..." She shook her head a little and turned blindly toward the door.

Shock had numbed her, Clay realized. Her dream world had been shattered, and abruptly she had found herself confronted by harsh reality. She would need time to readjust.

ALONE ONCE more, he felt hope and excitement surge in him. There was a chance now! The odds he faced were great, but having Naomi on his side would give him the advantage of surprise in anything he attempted. If he played his hand right, he could put an end to Seybold's schemes.

During the next few ship-days, Clay caught only an occasional glimpse of Naomi. He had no opportunity to talk to the girl and learn if she had listened to the dictascriber recording. Seybold saw to it that Clay was kept busy, and either Hutch or Fong were constantly on guard.

Impatience and a nagging anxiety grew in Clay as each passing hour brought the *Griffin* closer to the Belt.

One ship-night, after Hutch had returned him to his storeroom prison, Naomi finally appeared. She seemed coldly composed.

"You were right, Scott," she said. "I had some trouble in finding a chance to be alone long enough to listen to the recording. But it was just as you told me."

Her small face twisted. "I was a fool—a silly, stupid little fool!" Suddenly her slim shoulders were shaking with the anger and grief she had been holding back.

Clay drew her down beside him and held her head against his shoulder until her sobs quieted. "Maybe I've been a fool, too," Clay said at last. "Growing up together as we did, that big brother act of mine seems to have become a habit. I quarreled with you when I should have shown more sympathy toward the things you were interested in. It took what happened to

make me realize how much you mean to me, Naomi."

She drew back, staring at him from tear-wet eyes. "Scott, what *are* you talking about?"

"I've awakened to the fact that you aren't a little girl any more, but grown up and nice enough to get married to."

She laughed softly. "I'd given up all hope of ever hearing you say that, Scott!"

"Would you consider the idea seriously?"

"Seriously enough to make you put it in writing for later reference."

He grinned and pulled her against him. Finally she said, "Scott, what are we going to do?"

"Does Seybold suspect anything?"

"I don't think so. But...well, he isn't as much of a gentleman as I thought he was. He's been trying to be a little too affectionate. I've told him I wasn't feeling well, but I don't know how long I can keep up the pretense."

Clay swore under his breath, then gestured suddenly with the chains that kept him confirmed to the stanchion. They were made of a tough alloy, light yet incredibly strong. "I've got to get loose from these things some way! Hutch has the key to the lock, but I don't suppose he ever lets it get far from him. A space torch is the only possibility. There should be one among the tools aboard ship. If you could get hold of it, Naomi—"

"I can try," she said. "But once you get loose, Scott, what then?"

"We can try to take over the ship. It's little more than a matter of getting into the control room. Seybold still thinks you're on his side of the fence, Naomi, and that gives us the advantage of surprise."

THEY ROUNDED out their plans, and then Naomi slipped from the

storeroom. Clay smiled grimly as he stretched out on his padding: Seybold's defeat was swiftly becoming a certainty.

It wasn't until two ship-days later that Naomi returned to the storeroom. Clay already knew something was wrong. On the preceding ship-day, with Fong in attendance as usual, he had passed the girl in the companionway and had seen her give a slight warning shake of her head.

In spite of whatever had happened, however, Naomi had managed to obtain the space torch, a long, slim tube with a cylindrical fuel unit at the base. Nor had she overlooked the dark goggles necessary for using the torch.

The girl was tense and evidently worried. "Scott—when I left after the last time I was here, I ran into Hutch in the companionway. I told him I had lost a compact and had gone down the companionway to look for it. He couldn't have guessed what part of the ship I actually came from, but he might have been suspicious enough to mention it to Seybold."

Clay frowned anxiously. "That could ruin everything. Has Seybold been acting as if he thought something was wrong?"

"Not that, Scott. But he's been acting as if little Naomi was beginning to prove a big disappointment to him. It seems he had certain ideas about this trip to the Belt."

"He's going to be disappointed in more ways than one, before I'm through," Clay said grimly. He drew the girl to him for a moment, then released her. "All right, get started at your end. I'll follow after you as soon as I get these chains off. That shouldn't take more than several minutes."

Naomi was to precede him to the control room. The ship was being held on course by the automatic pilot, but one of the crew was always posted

there in case of an emergency. It was Naomi's task to distract whoever was on duty, so that Clay could approach closely enough to go into action. Most men, as Naomi herself had pointed out, become utterly helpless when a pretty girl falls into a sudden faint.

With an excited grin, Naomi turned toward the storeroom door. She peered into the companionway—and gasped.

Clay stared at her, reluctant to believe that disaster had struck. Then he saw her being suddenly pushed back into the room.

A needler in his hand, Seybold followed. His long face was a mask of controlled fury.

FOR A long moment there was silence. Clay was frozen on his strip of padding, kept in a sitting position by the still intact chains. One hand at her throat, Naomi stood pressed against the wall where she had been flung.

Seybold glanced at them slowly, his eyes glittering. Then, just as slowly, he moved his free hand to slip an object from one of his pockets. He bounced it in his cupped palm, watching them.

The object was a dictascriber recording spool.

A cold wind blowing through him, Clay flashed a glance at Naomi. Her small face was pale, yet defiantly set.

Seybold's lethally brilliant eyes settled on her. He said softly, "You had been acting strangely, Naomi—very strangely. Not at all the way I expected you would act during the trip. So when Hutch told me of finding you in the companionway at a time when you were supposed to have been asleep in your cabin, I decided to investigate. I searched your belongings, to see if you actually had lost a compact. And I found this."

Seybold tossed the spool into the air, caught it deftly. His eyes went to

Clay: "You had something I didn't know about, Clay. I was in a hurry, you see, and it never occurred to me that the dictascriber on your desk might be in operation. You made good use of the evidence it put into your hands—at least where Naomi is concerned. Too bad I happened to be just too smart for you."

"Not smart," Clay said. "Lucky. But your luck can't last, Seybold. You're living on borrowed time."

"We'll see about that, Clay. In any event, I can assure you that your time is going to be a great deal shorter than mine." Seybold shifted his gaze to Naomi. "As for you, Naomi, do you realize that you've become a traitor to the cause? You know what's done to traitors."

"Traitor!" the girl jeered. "You murder my own father and expect me to remain loyal? And as for the cause, I've just had a demonstration of what a hypocritical sham it is!"

Seybold shook his head gravely. "You don't seem to understand, Naomi. The cause is more important than individuals. Those who join the cause renounce all previous loyalties—even the ties of blood. Your father, Naomi, had become a danger to the cause. Therefore, he had to be removed. It was as simple and impersonal as that."

The girl's smile was a mirthless grimace of contempt. "No, Max, I didn't understand. I'm glad you've made it so clear. I thought the cause was something fine and unselfish. I didn't realize how inhuman and totalitarian it actually was."

A SUDDEN spasm of rage broke Seybold's calm. "You insolent and insubordinate little witch! You've committed yourself to me more deeply than you suspect. You aren't finished with me yet by any means. I've honored you with my attentions, and you've led me a merry chase

long enough!"

Abruptly Seybold stepped forward to seize the girl's arm. She offered no resistance, still smiling.

"I'd just love anything that would give me a chance to kill you," she said with cutting deliberation.

Clay realized he had been momentarily forgotten. The space torch was at his side, almost completely hidden by his body. Naomi's gasp at Seybold's unexpected appearance in the storeroom doorway had given Clay sufficient warning. And while the girl's body had still blocked Seybold's view, Clay had managed in frantic haste to conceal the torch. Now he swept it up—and hurled it at Seybold's needler.

His aim was true. The furious words Seybold had begun hurling at Naomi abruptly ended as the weapon was knocked from his grasp.

Even as the torch left his fingers Clay was moving. He threw himself to the full length of his chains and caught Seybold's leg. With a death's-head grin of effort and determination, he jerked the other toward him.

Seybold managed to keep control of his wits. As he came sprawling toward Clay, he emptied his lungs in a resounding shout for help.

Kicking and twisting wildly, Seybold struggled to free himself from Clay's grasp. The man's metal-soled space shoe caught Clay a glancing blow on the temple, dazing him. His clutching fingers slipped. Instantly, Seybold sought to pull completely away and scramble to his feet.

Desperately, Clay lunged. He caught the other again, and the chains gave him an advantage he would not otherwise have had. They anchored him and aided in preventing Seybold from jerking loose.

Clay gasped at Naomi, "The door—close it, quick!"

With a snarl of fury, Seybold

whirled, smashing punches at Clay's face and head. Clay ducked, shifted one leg, and braced himself. Then, with a quick heave, he brought Seybold crashing to the floor. They rocked back and forth in a tangle of straining arms and kicking legs.

Naomi had darted to the door. Dismay twisted her small face as she swiftly examined it. The storeroom doors differed from the others in the ship in that they could be locked only from the outside.

Shouts drifted down the companionway, indicating that the others had heard Seybold's alarm and were now approaching.

AS CLAY and Seybold still struggled, Naomi sent a frantic glance around the room. Abruptly she hurried toward several large plastoid containers stacked against one wall. She seized one and slid it toward the doorway. Under the conditions existing aboard the ship, the containers had mass and inertia but little weight.

The girl rushed back for another container. Her plan evidently was to block the doorway and give Clay what extra time might be gained in this fashion.

The others were approaching too swiftly, however, for completion of the task. Naomi sagged in despair—and then her eyes fell on Seybold's fallen needler. She caught it up just as Hutch and Bert reached the storeroom and began throwing their shoulders against the door, pushing the few blocking containers back.

"Keep away!" Naomi cried. "I'll shoot!"

Hutch cursed and pulled Bert with him as he dodged to one side of the doorway.

"You haven't got a gun," Hutch said after a moment.

"I'll show you whether I have or

not!" Naomi returned. She pointed the needler at the partly open doorway and pressed the trigger.

Nothing happened. The impact of the torch Clay had thrown evidently had jammed the needler's mechanism.

Though hampered by the chains in his struggle with Seybold, Clay had already found they could be an advantage. Threshing, heaving, he deliberately maneuvered Seybold into a position where he could bring that advantage to bear. He whipped a loose length of chain around the other's neck and jerked it tight.

Seybold's efforts against Clay momentarily ceased. Amid choked gasps he clawed at the metal noose. Grimly, Clay drew it even tighter. Seybold's face darkened, and he went limp. Clay eased up on the chain.

In another instant Seybold seemed to explode in a paroxysm of panic and desperation, kicking and twisting with insensate violence. Again Clay tightened the chain, and again Seybold quieted.

When Clay eased up once more, Seybold remained still. He had learned what to expect. He watched Clay with a sick hatred in his eyes.

CLAY FELT a bleak satisfaction. He had Seybold under control. Now...

In the intensity of the struggle he had been unaware of other developments in the storeroom. They were brought suddenly and forcefully to his attention as Naomi screamed. Then he saw men leaping toward him. He recognized the foremost as Hutch—and ducked belatedly as a clubbed needler in the man's hand came sweeping down.

He managed to escape the full force of the blow. But it struck fire in his head, a fire that seemed to melt his muscles like wax. In another instant hands were gripping him roughly and

pulling him away from Seybold.

When the blur faded from Clay's eyes, he found that the confusion in the room had settled. Seybold stood a few feet away, massaging his throat and breathing hard. Near the door the man named Matt held Naomi helpless with her arms locked behind her back.

Seybold was watching Clay, his face malevolent. Abruptly his lips drew back over his teeth, and he leaped forward to drive his fist at Clay in a slashing blow. Clay tried to twist evasively, but Hutch and Bert gripped him at either side. The punch caught him on the cheek and snapped his head around. Again Seybold swung, and again.

Dimly, through a fog of pain, Clay heard Naomi's cry of protest. His face felt numb and huge. There was the taste of blood in his mouth.

Another voice came through the fog—Seybold's voice: "You're a dead man, Clay. It's only a matter of making that fact official. I'd kill you here and now, but conditions aren't ripe for that just yet. I'm going to give you some time to think over what's going to happen to you."

Seybold turned away, issuing curt commands. Clay was hurled back to the floor. Kicking and struggling, Naomi was pulled from the room by Matt and Hutch. Then the door closed, and Clay was alone.

He slumped on the padding, his head in his hands. Pain beat through him in nauseous surges, but mostly he felt utter, sick despair.

There seemed no way out now.

CLAY WAS kept confined to the storeroom. The only person he saw was Hutch, who brought him his meager meals. Always armed and wary, Hutch doubtlessly had been given orders by Seybold to take no risks of any sort.

The thought of escape was constantly in Clay's mind. He knew that each passing hour brought him and Naomi closer to their doom. Their only hope lay in freeing Clay from his chains, but without tools that was impossible. Seybold had been careful to remove the space torch, and the storeroom held nothing that could even remotely have served as a substitute.

Clay wondered with growing anxiety about Naomi. He tried to question Hutch about the girl, but Hutch refused to answer questions.

The *Griffin* was now decelerating. Realizing that the end of the trip lay close at hand, Clay's desperation mounted. If only there were some way to thwart Seybold, remove the man's threat to Naomi and himself, to the countless others who would be the victims of his schemes.

Clay kept part of his attention on the steady roar of the jets. When finally they went silent, he knew the ship had reached its destination.

He sat up tensely, his mouth suddenly dry. The end of the trip also meant the end for Naomi and himself. He waited for further developments.

After a moment the jets blasted again, briefly, then went off. In the next hour they were blasted several times. The *Griffin* evidently was being jockeyed into position beside its objective.

Then the silence held. Slow hours passed.

At last Clay heard sounds in the companionway, and the storeroom door opened to admit two figures in space armor. The thrown-back helmets revealed the faces of Hutch and Matt.

CLAY'S MUSCLES tightened with abrupt dread. Was Seybold planning to throw him out of the ship

without armor? He knew what happened to men who died in that fashion. In the absence of atmospheric pressure in the airless void, they bloated horribly and died as their body tissues and fluids expanded suddenly and without restraint, blood gushing from all available orifices.

Matt stood guard with a needler while Hutch approached. Clay rose slowly, his muscles taut.

"What are you going to do?" he demanded.

"You're coming with us, Captain," Hutch said.

"Why? What's Seybold up to now?"

"None of your business, Captain. Come along quiet, or you get needled down."

"Then I get needled down," Clay said. "It's a little cleaner that way. I'm not walking to any of Seybold's killing parties." He backed against the wall, crouching, his lips flat against his teeth.

Hutch said sullenly, "When the Boss gets around to finishing you off, you'll know about it. Right now he wants you to come along with us and take a look at the ship outside. You're a salvage expert, and there'll be work for you—as long as you behave yourself."

Clay relaxed and allowed the other to unfasten his chains. Then he was herded out of the storeroom and into the companionway. He saw Seybold and the others near the airlock's inner door, their space armor already donned.

"I have a little job for you, Clay," Seybold said crisply. "Cooperate and you'll be all right. Try any of your tricks and you die instantly."

"Just a little faster than otherwise, eh?" Clay snorted.

Seybold shook his head, but his eyes were veiled. "I'm talking cooperation right now, Clay."

"Where's Naomi?"

"Locked in her cabin. She's staying in the ship with Bert."

A FLUSH of anger touched Seybold's face, and Clay guessed that the subject of Naomi was not a happy one with the man. Clay felt a deep relief. Without further hesitation, he began climbing into the suit of space armor that had been waiting for him.

The others began lowering their helmets into place and sealing them tight. Seybold raised a hand as Clay prepared to fasten his own helmet.

"A final word of warning, Clay. I'm expecting you to cooperate. Remember that. Neither I nor any of my men have any reluctance about killing you. We're playing for the highest stakes imaginable, and you're a very unimportant pawn in the game. You're going to be watched every second. So be careful about what you do."

Seybold indicated Hutch and Matt. Both held space rifles which were capable of piercing space armor as easily as paper.

Clay nodded slowly. "What are you leading up to, Seybold?"

"This expedition requires teamwork, Clay. Men can't take chances in space—and we in particular can't take chances with what's out there." Seybold's eyes suddenly gleamed. "None of us has ever seen anything like that ship before. It's a monster! Why, it could hold a dozen like the *Griffin*! Wait until you set eyes on it, Clay!"

Despite everything, excitement kindled in Clay. Old Asteroid Blaine's story of the alien battle cruiser had fired his imagination. Now he was actually going to see the ship.

He sealed his helmet and assisted in the final inspection of armor and equipment. The helmet radios of the group were switched on and adjusted,

and at last all was in readiness for departure. Seybold gave the command to start passing through the airlock.

Clay waited his turn with Hutch and Matt. Eagerness burned in him now like a fever. There was the spectacle that awaited him out in space—but there was also the possibility of escape. Somehow, regardless of Seybold's warning, regardless of the space rifles of Hutch and Matt, he had to find a way.

In another moment Hutch's voice came over Clay's helmet radio. "All right, Captain, let's go."

FOLLOWED by his guards, Clay stepped into the airlock. The inner door closed. Presently a signal light flashed, and the outer door opened. Clay pushed himself out into the void, an empty, velvet-black ocean, at once unthinkably vast and awesomely magnificent, emblazoned and spangled with its countless star continents and islands, spreading out and away, depth beyond fathomless, sense-stunning depth.

Clay gasped—not at the panorama of space, but at what lay within some fifty meters of the *Griffin*.

The alien ship *was* huge. Clay had been expecting that, but the actuality dazed him. The *Griffin* was dwarfed. He himself felt suddenly ant-like—ant-like and chilled by the wonder of the unknown.

A race of giants had built that ship, he thought: giants at least mentally, if not physically. He seemed actually to feel the slumbering power that radiated from the enormous hull. Too much power for any one man. Too much power, especially, for a man like Seybold.

More than even now, Clay knew he couldn't let this alien titan fall into Seybold's hands. Somehow, at whatever the cost to himself, he had to prevent it.

As if in response to his thoughts, Seybold's voice sounded in his helmet radio.

"Well, Clay, what do you think of the ship?"

"It...it's terrific."

"Terrific is a mild word for it." Seybold's voice became exultant, gloating. "This ship, Clay, is something that can make any man of our race a virtual god! And it's mine—mine and those who follow me! With this ship in our control, nothing can stand in our way—not even the entire strength of Earth itself. We'll rule the entire System—isn't that right, boys?"

A sick emptiness grew in Clay as his helmet radio brought him the eagerly affirmative voices of the others. He realized that the possibility Seybold described had every chance of taking place.

AND SUDDENLY Clay felt his awful burden. The future of mankind literally rested on his shoulders—a future that held either slavery or freedom. Only he could stop Seybold while it was still within the power of one man to stop him. But unarmed, under guard, what could he do?

Seybold's radioed voice sounded again, abruptly grim and purposeful. "We'll cross over for a closer look, men. Everybody link up."

Clay saw now that two of the men were placed before a special T-shaped propulsion unit of the type used in heavy space repair work. Evidently, the purpose of this was to conserve the fuel of the shoulder propulsion units built into the space armor worn by the group. The smaller units, Clay realized, would be needed to explore the interior of the alien ship. The vastness of the hulk would require every bit of fuel available.

Maneuvering themselves by means

of their individual propulsion units, the members of the exploring party took up their positions along each arm of the T formed by the large special unit. This was chemical-fueled, as were the space-armor devices.

Clay fastened himself to the special unit by clipping the end of a cable attached to his armor onto an eye in the unit's frame. Hutch and Matt, on either side of him, did likewise.

Finally everything was in readiness. Seybold gave the order to start.

Pale flame jetted from the leg of the T as a control switch was pulled. The sudden acceleration jolted the group, and then they were sweeping smoothly toward the immense shape that floated ahead of them in the void.

Clay watched the leviathan swell to even greater size. Its nearness began to dominate his entire field of vision. He saw now that the enormous hull contained numerous great pits and cracks—fused, for the most part, as though having been caused by terrific heat. If the vessel actually were a battle cruiser, Clay thought, then it must have been in a battle indeed. A titan ship in a titan war! He shuddered to think of the tremendous energies necessary to cause the destruction he beheld.

The distance decreased rapidly, and soon Seybold gave an order to decelerate. The leg of the T was revolved to point in the opposite direction, and after a short blast interval the group was motionless relative to the hulk, now some twenty meters away.

FOR A LONG moment there was awed silence as the men absorbed the closeness of the huge ship. Then Clay's radio brought him the wondering voices of the others as they began commenting over certain peculiarities

of construction and design. The scientists among the group discussed what could have caused the extensive damage to the alien vessel's hull. Their opinion, Clay found, coincided with his own.

Presently Seybold's voice broke in: "Save the talk for later, men. There's work to be done, and we can't afford to waste any time. Clay, I want your attention."

"I'm listening," Clay grunted.

"All right. This is where you come in, Clay. You're to act as a sort of advance scout for the rest of us. Your job will be to examine the outer layers of the ship and give us an idea of what to expect. You can enter through one of the nearest holes in the hull. We'll wait here for...developments. You're to keep in constant radio contact with us, of course."

Anger leaped in Clay. "So I'm to be the guinea pig, is that it, Seybold? I'm to take the risks that you and the others are afraid to take. That's why you brought me along and preached about cooperation. If I don't get booby-trapped, then the rest of you will know it's safe to expose your precious skins to whatever's inside the ship."

"Don't be a fool, Clay. A man in your position doesn't have much choice about the way he dies. This way you're just taking a risk. Any other way you face an absolute certainty. But if you'll play along with me, you'll have an excellent chance of staying alive. I don't kill wantonly, just for spite. When I find a man useful, there's every reason for allowing him to live.

"Think that over, Clay. If you're going to be completely valueless to me, then I might as well have Hutch shoot you here and now. If you cooperate, I'll be willing to overlook the trouble you've caused me. I'm

going to need all the help I can get, judging from the size of this ship."

Clay's anger faded. He didn't allow himself to be deceived by the hope Seybold was holding out to him. He had detected the insincerity in the other's cajoling voice. Seybold, he knew, wanted him to volunteer willingly, since that was the only way he would be effective. Obviously, he could be forced only up to a certain point. Once beyond reach of the weapons held by Hutch and Matt, there was the danger that he would refuse to be of further assistance. Seybold clearly wanted to avoid that complication.

BUT CLAY realized it was wisest to do what was wanted of him. He didn't have any choice, after all. His armor's limited oxygen and fuel supply wouldn't permit any sulks on the one hand, nor would the rifles of Hutch and Matt on the other. He didn't expect to live once his usefulness had ended, but he would have to deal with that particular crisis when it appeared. There was as yet no reason to suppose that he would survive whatever numberless and frightful dangers the alien hulk contained.

"Well, Clay, what's your decision?" Seybold demanded impatiently.

"All right," Clay sighed. "I'll go over and look around."

"Good!" Seybold sounded relieved. "Report everything you see, Clay. Be alert for any indication that there's life aboard the ship. And try to determine whether any dangerous radiations or force fields are present. You'll need instruments for that, of course. . . . Just a moment."

Seybold spoke to a member of the group, and shortly an instrument case was passed along to Clay.

"Take that with you," Seybold said. "You'll receive instructions on how to

use what's inside as you need them. Take your time and get all the information you can. You'll receive further advice and suggestions as you proceed. . . . Now, get started."

"Check," Clay said. He fastened the instrument case to his armor and released the cable that held him to the propulsion unit. Floating free of the others, he carefully fired his armor's shoulder jets. The tiny flames lifted him up and then pushed him forward as he adjusted the angle of the nozzles. The group of silently watching men quickly dwindled in the void behind him. Ahead, the alien ship loomed like a miniature world, gleaming dully except where its metal surface was cracked and pitted.

The distance decreased. Soon only a few meters separated Clay from the ship. Hovering, he flashed his armor's searchlight into the nearest cavities. He repeated this, moving slowly along the hulk's length.

"See anything, Clay?" Seybold asked.

"No. Just a lot of melted and twisted metal. I want to find a clear place to enter. Think I'll look topside—relative to my position, of course."

"I suppose it's just as well if you look the ship over first," Seybold returned. "But don't waste too much time."

Manipulating the controls of his shoulder unit, Clay moved until Seybold and the others were far "below" him. He floated above what was in effect the top of the alien vessel.

AS CLAY peered about him, he saw a sudden flash of brilliance at one end of the ship, a point beyond the curve of the hull that was invisible to Seybold and his companions. Startled, he stared in the direction from which the flash had come—and

saw another. His forehead wrinkled puzzledly. What caused those sudden blazes of light? Swift-moving meteors, perhaps, striking sparks as they glanced off the hull? The flashes seemed too bright for that, though he knew that the ship, with its vast surface area, would be constantly showered by dust and debris of all sorts.

He continued to watch. He saw now that patches of pale radiance flickered and danced over the entire hull. The particles bombarding the metal could hardly produce such an effect, he realized. There was something about the metal itself. Something. . . *wrong*.

Puzzling over what that could possibly be, he played his armor's searchlight over the hull. This portion seemed to be exposed to more spacial drift than the others. Its surface was pocked and corroded to an incredible degree, as though eaten away by some powerful acid.

Then he thought of the fused pits and cavities he had already seen. He realized that they had been produced by the same cause. And very suddenly he understood what was wrong with the metal of the ship—with the entire ship itself.

The ship was death—swift, horrible death!

Dread sent an icy flash through him. Fumbling frantically with the controls of his armor's propulsion unit, he shot out and away from the hulk.

Seybold's voice stabbed from his helmet radio: "Clay! What's happened? What are you doing?"

Clay was too preoccupied to reply just then. He discovered that he had in his haste sent himself moving in a direction opposite to that of Seybold and the others. The immense bulk of the ship now hid him from them. He reached for the controls

again, intending to change the direction in which he was being propelled.

His muscles froze. There was something directly ahead of him in space, something he hadn't noticed before.

A ship.

He squinted at it incredulously. For an instant he had a feeling of disorientation. It seemed that he had gotten his positions mixed and was moving toward the *Griffin* instead of away from it. But that was impossible. The *Griffin* was behind him, as were Seybold and his men. This was a different ship entirely—a freighter, by its lines.

"Clay!" Seybold's radioed voice cried. "What's the matter with you? Why don't you answer?"

A wild excitement leaping in him, Clay ignored the demand. Another ship, motionless in space, and having been concealed from view by the latter's mass. Another ship—and Clay remembered something Asteroid Blaine had said. Could this possibly be the *Venus Queen*?

He sent himself moving toward the craft with greater speed.

"Clay!" Seybold shouted. "What's happened to you? Answer me!"

Clay was unheeding, his eyes fixed eagerly on the ship that was looming up before him. Then, as he made out the name on the bow, he released a cry of triumph.

THE SHIP was the *Venus Queen*. And as far as he could see, undamaged.

Asteroid Blaine had been right, then. The *Venus Queen* had been situated in this part of space after all.

Voices were erupting from Clay's helmet radio. He realized that his cry had been heard by Seybold and the others.

"...up to some kind of mischief," one of the men was saying.

"I think he's found something," another put in.

"Clay!" Seybold shrieked. "What kind of a trick are you trying to pull?"

"He's using his suit jets, Boss!" Hutch said abruptly. "Didn't you hear them going? He's heading out into space, away from us!"

Seybold swore. Then he was shouting frantically: "Bert! Bert! Are you listening?"

"I'm right here, sir!" the pilot aboard the *Griffin* responded instantly.

"Blast ship at once!" Seybold commanded. "Get after Clay! Burn him down with the jets! He's somewhere on the other side of this monster here, moving directly out into space. Get after him, Bert! Don't let him get away!"

Clay felt a sickening wrench of anxiety. He knew what a terrible weapon the blast of a space ship could be. If the jets of the *Griffin* were turned on him—

He had to reach the *Venus Queen* before Bert reached him. And he knew Bert would reach him very soon.

A considerable distance still separated Clay from the freighter, and he was already moving as fast as the relatively feeble jets of his space armor would propel him. He knew he would lose further time in decelerating, since he had no wish to smash headlong into the *Venus Queen*.

The gap between him and the vessel narrowed with nightmare slowness. He was certain that the *Griffin* was even now moving toward him with gathering speed. Only a few more minutes remained to him at the most.

He delayed decelerating until the last possible instant, carefully judging the distance remaining between him and the freighter. Then he acted to check his flight, swinging his legs to-

ward the vessel's hull to break his final momentum. The impact jarred him cruelly, and he was struck by the sudden fear that he might have damaged his armor. In the void of space that meant swift and violent death.

But there was no time even for fear. He had to keep moving.

DARTING a glance back toward the leviathan shape of the alien hulk, Clay saw a moving flicker of radiance. The *Griffin*, he realized, had skirted the hulk. Now it was bearing down on him.

He had been careful to direct his approach so as to arrive as close to the *Venus Queen's* airlock as possible. He found its open orifice now, and hastily he maneuvered himself into it, pulling the outer door closed after him. He had been none too soon. The *Griffin* was dangerously close.

An idea struck him with electrifying force. The *Griffin* was here—on this side of the alien hulk. And Seybold and his group were on the other side—unprotected. If the drive engines of the *Venus Queen* were in functioning order, Clay thought, he could swing the vessel around to where Seybold and the others were situated, give Seybold a taste of his own medicine.

Clay heard Seybold questioning Bert in regard to developments, but he paid no heed. Whirling, he punched the button that would open the inner door of the airlock. He waited impatiently until the door opened, then hurried toward the control room.

There was no sign of life aboard the freighter. If any of its original crew had been present, Clay knew his arrival would have alerted them.

He was certain he knew what had happened. Blasting toward Mars with their cargo of jovium from the satellite system of Jupiter, the men

aboard the *Venus Queen* had sighted the huge alien ship. They had stopped to investigate—and had perished before they realized the deadliness of the giant hulk. No doubt only some of the men had gone out at first. When they failed to return, the others had followed—to meet the same fate.

The control room was deserted. Without stopping to remove his armor, Clay placed himself before the pilot's master unit. His pulses leaped exultantly as lights flashed on the main instrument panel. The *Venus Queen's* drive engines were undamaged—ready to go!

Clay sent the freighter blasting in an enormous half-circle that brought him around to the opposite side of the alien hulk. He handled the controls with a reckless disregard for safety, gritting his teeth against the savage acceleration that slammed and jolted him. He knew he had to act fast. Seybold must be given no time to grasp his plan.

CLAY WATCHED the observation screen above the master unit as he hurriedly jockeyed the freighter into position for what he intended to do next. The task seemed to take forever, and he cursed silently.

Then, the tiny figures of Seybold and the others appeared in the observation screen. Directly beyond them was the monstrous outline of the alien ship.

Clay could see no sign of the *Griffin*. His helmet radio told him that Bert had been utterly dumbfounded at sight of the *Venus Queen*. And Clay's whirlwind flight in the vessel evidently had left Bert at a complete loss about what to do next.

With the freighter finally poised on a direct line with the group of men ahead of him in space, Clay sent the vessel hurtling forward. His mouth

was grimly set. He knew his judgment had to be good. If he made a mistake now, the result would be swift and complete destruction.

The chaotic rush of events had confused Seybold. Clay's helmet radio informed him that the other was making a belated discovery.

"That isn't the *Griffin!*" Seybold gasped. "It's the other ship Bert told us about. And it's coming straight at us!"

The voices of the other men became audible in sudden, panicky alarm.

"It's going to burn us down!"

"We've got to get away—got to hide!"

"The big ship!" Seybold shouted abruptly. "We've got to get into it quick! It's our only chance. Once we're inside, this one won't be able to reach us!"

The group was swiftly growing larger in the observation screen. The armored figures were still attached to the T-shaped propulsion device. In their panic, none seemed to think of freeing themselves and scattering in space. Instead, they sent the propulsion device moving directly toward the alien hulk, evidently intending to seek shelter among the huge gaps in its surface.

IT WAS what Clay had been expecting them to do. And knowing what was going to happen, he felt a twinge of regret—a pang of conscience. But it was the only way, he realized, the only way to insure safety from these vultures.

Clay was tense. The propulsion device was close to the alien ship now, and he had to be fast—fast and accurate. He had to have the mass of the alien behind him before Seybold and the others touched its deadly hull.

At the crucial instant, Clay sent the *Venus Queen* veering off at an angle. Then he threw power full on

into the jets and felt acceleration crush him as the freighter blasted in another enormous half-circle.

He was barely in time. Mere instants later his helmet radio brought him strange, brief sounds—sounds of men dying. With the vast bulk of the alien ship safely behind him, he didn't see the stupendous explosion that consumed Seybold and the others. But he had known what would happen and was able to picture it. He had seen the brilliant flashes that resulted as spacial dust and debris hit the alien hull....

After a moment, Clay found the *Griffin* in the observation screen. He was relieved that Naomi, like himself, had been sheltered on the opposite side of the alien ship, thus escaping the deadly radiations that had followed the explosion.

"Bert!" Clay called into the radio. "Are you listening?"

"Here!" Bert answered instantly. "Is that you, Clay? What's happened? I heard something damned queer, and since then there hasn't been a sound from Seybold or the other men."

"They're dead," Clay returned. He explained quickly. "Where do you stand now, Bert?"

"I've been wondering about that for the past ten minutes. I'm a pilot, Clay, not a wild-eyed revolutionist. I didn't like Seybold's order to burn you down with the jets, and I was plenty glad you got away. I gave you a break, in fact. So as far as I'm concerned, this whole crazy business is over."

"Fine!" Clay said in relief. "We'll get together, then, and I'll come aboard."

RELASED from the cabin in which she had been locked, Naomi ran into Clay's arms.

"Scott—you're free!" she cried in

incredulous delight. "Whatever has been going on? Where are Seybold and all the others?"

Clay told her. He described the guinea-pig role Seybold had planned for him, then related the events which subsequently had led to his discovery of the *Venus Queen*—present all the time, but hidden by the vast bulk of the alien craft, so that not even Asteroid Blaine had guessed it was there.

"I got the idea of using the *Venus Queen* to scare Seybold into thinking I was going to blast him with the jets," Clay went on. "I knew he and the others would try to protect themselves by hiding inside the giant hulk. There was no other place for them to go, since the *Griffin* was on the opposite side of the hulk. Well, Seybold was scared all right. And the instant he and the others touched the hulk they were blown to atoms—less than atoms."

Naomi looked puzzled. "I don't understand, Scott. How could just touching the hulk do that?"

"While quite close to it," Clay said, "I noticed that one side was exposed to a shower of spacial drift. This side, incidently, was not visible to Seybold and the others, which is why they didn't make the same discovery I did. Now, when the drift hit the hulk, it literally burned up. And the metal of the ship burned too. The part of the hull I examined was deeply pitted, eaten away. The big holes I saw in the ship, melted and fused, obviously were caused by larger fragments of drift exploding on contact. There's only one explanation for such a powerful effect—atomic reaction:

"That giant ship, Naomi, came from a part of the Universe where inverted matter existed—matter turned inside out, having an atomic composition directly opposite to our own. And the

fact that it's opposite can cause hell—sheer, unadulterated hell. Because when inverted matter comes in contact with normal matter, there is complete atomic destruction. The unlike charges of each cancel out, producing energy even greater than that of nuclear fission.

"The hulk out there, of course, is constructed of metal with inverted atoms. It's literally a gigantic booby-trap to a race with normal atoms, like ours. Our people can never touch it, because the slightest touch means instant death. Something Seybold found out too late. But he could have found out if he'd had the courage to do what he forced me into doing."

Naomi shuddered a little. "It was a terrible way to die, Scott, but it was justice—an ironic kind of justice. Seybold was killed by the very thing

he had killed to get for himself." She drew back into his arms. "I'm glad you're safe, Scott, glad we're going home...."

Clay grinned. "We're just as good as on our way right now. Bert's going to pilot the *Venus Queen*, while I handle the *Griffin*. The cargo of jovium in the *Venus Queen* means a new start for me, Naomi. And for you, too. If you're through with revolutions and noble causes."

She shook her head. "There's only one cause I'm going to follow from now on, Scott."

"What is it?" he asked in sudden alarm.

"Yours," she said.

Clay sighed in relief. "Well, I'm certainly going to make it interesting!"

THE END

HERE'S MOTE IN YOUR EYE!

By Peter Dakin



THE IDEA that the scintillation of the stars is due to the way hot and cold air currents of the earth's atmosphere affect light, has been upset recently by British researchers. The findings of Dr. H. Hartridge Weale, of the London Institute of Ophthalmology, indicate that the eye performs infinitely tiny movements when it observes a star, thus giving the star the effect of "twinkling", so that actually it is not the stars that twinkle—the twinkle is in your own eye!

The image on the eye's retina from a point of light is a bright dot which is

surrounded by many bright and dark rings. A large number of the little rods and cones are stimulated, and the source looks large and constant, when the pattern is bright. When it is less bright, only a few of the cones are stimulated. Then the eye is rolled around until the light falls on the rods which record brightness, and on the cones which indicate color changes. Since pale light fails to affect the receptors in the retina sufficiently to bring about changes in what is seen as the eye rolls about, faint stars do not normally twinkle.

Meet Mr. Hotu

By Jon Barry

ARCHAEOLOGISTS, continually pushing back the clock and uncovering Man's early ancestors, have recently found the caves and hills of Iran, old Persia, to be a fertile ground. The University of Pennsylvania's Iranian Expedition has just

unearthed what are believed to be the remains of the oldest modern men on Earth. Buried deep in strata within caves, these remains are surrounded by a variety of artifacts used exclusively by primitive peoples.

The skeletons of the *Hotu* man, so-called because of the name of the cave, by means of a new process of time-typing by radioactivity, have been found to be between thirty and seventy thousand years old. The *Hotu* man, unlike the Neanderthal, is a true modern man; that is, the jaw of the *Hotu* man is sharp, not receding, and, while the head is large, its structure is not ape-like. The *Hotu* man is modern man, projected back a few millennia. *Hotu* man is *Homo sapiens*, erect-walking, massively brain-cased and vigorous-appearing, far, far removed from the ape-like ancestry of the Neanderthal.

Interesting aspects of the primitive men were also uncovered. For some reason almost all teeth in the heads of the skulls

of the skeletons were abscessed, indicating that the *Hotu* man must have had the very devil of a time with toothache; the reason for this deteriorated dentition has not been uncovered.

Also, it is interesting to note that, contrary to quite recently held opinions, and more in keeping with Darwinian concepts, the belief is now that the evolution of Man did not proceed at the same rate everywhere on Earth. Apparently in those dim days of antiquity when Man was beginning to assume his modern form, he proceeded at a variable rate, and so it is very possible that at the same time that the *Hotu* man was walking the Earth, somewhere, the Neanderthal or the Java men were also alive.

← THE ARROW OF TIME →

By Frederic Booth

THERE IS no surer way of stopping the pragmatic experimentalist, the guy who believes everything can be solved or discovered in the laboratory or the observatory, than just by asking him the simple question, "What is time?"

That is the stopper of them all.

Science measures time with the most precise of instruments; we employ the idea constantly; it is intuitively in the back of everyone's mind; yet nobody has the faintest idea of what this mysterious measure of space-time is. Philosophers and physical scientists have been beating their brains out about the matter for many centuries and we are no closer to a solution today, than they were two thousand years ago.

An effort has been made recently to divide space and time into minute discrete units, discontinuous and definite. The space unit called the "hodon" was a tiny distance of about ten to the minus twenty-fourth centimeters and a "chronon" the particle of time about ten to the minus twelfth seconds! But these arbitrary divisions are of no help in finding out what time is.

Time apparently is an ordering of events. That is, when two events happen, we say one happened "before" the other, or the other happened "after" the first. The problem that bothered philosophers for a long time was that of discerning which one was the first event. In other words, when we see two ordered events, what determines which is the before and which is the after? Is it not possible to reverse the labels, or is there some absolute way in which we can put an arrow

Oddly enough, there is such a label, such an absolute standard by which the directional course of time can be labeled

with an arrow, an arrow that requires no intuitive appeal, nor any mystic interpretation. In the philosophical study of time, this label is about the greatest single advance that has been made in the whole study of that esoteric subject.

The "arrow of time" is the Second Law of Thermodynamics!

This means that the Second Law, which states that the entropy of the universe is constantly increasing, and never, never decreases, points in the forward direction of advancing time. Now entropy is simply a mathematical measure of the randomness of disorganization of energy. For example, a hot object has less entropy than a cool one. As an object cools its entropy increases: thus we know that objects cool with time. Entropy puts the label, the arrow of direction, on the course of time. If two events occur and it is necessary to determine which preceded the other, the entropy states of both are measured and the one with the greater entropy, the least organization, is the following or succeeding event.

This neat, packaged way of discerning an absolute measure of time's progress has tremendously stimulated philosophy and physics and gives great hope that, some day, some thinker may be able to nail down the meaning and significance of time. All the mysteries of physical science are as open books compared with the elusive idea of time. Nothing is more vague, disconnected and unexplained than time, duration, endurance. We know we're going somewhere, through something, but what it is, is anybody's guess. Relativity and space-time are just words which do not get at the core—all we know is "time's arrow..."



Even the Zim's giant strides were not going to get me there in time to save Horowitz

FIFTY THOUSAND NUGGETS

Between them and the wealth of Mars were the Zim — fabled creatures of horror. But their real problem was a beautiful woman

By Don Wilcox



WHEN A KID in his teens goes hitchhiking around the planets he can expect anything. But I never figured on such a jolt as they gave me when I transferred out of Skystation Twenty-Seven. The agent of the A.E.G. (Associated Earth Governments) pulled me off an Earthbound ship and hurried me around the balcony toward a small 25-ton silver and white sky truck called the *Hound's Tooth*.

"We're shooting this boat out on a special assignment," the agent told me. "We want her to come back loaded to capacity—twenty-five tons of nuggets."

"Nuggets?" I gulped. "My job has been making up bunks and polishing rails and—"

"That will be the least of your troubles on this jaunt."

"I was hankering to get back toward Earth."

"Sorry, this is an emergency mission to Mars."

For a minute I had a notion to say no. I hadn't been back to Earth since I quit school over a year ago. But the agent wasn't listening to any of that kind of talk.

"Bob Bantz," he said telling it to me straight, "for a sixteen-year-old you've got a darn good record." He handed back my employment card as we neared the entrance of the *Hound's Tooth*. "There's education in space travel that no school in the world can match. Take my word for it, Bob, if you come through this deal alive—" "Alive?"

"Successfully, I should say. Don't be alarmed, it was just a slip. I meant successful."

"Well?"

"You come through strong on this assignment and you'll be in line for something good. You want to be a pilot, don't you?"

"Yes sir. I've already—"

"Now get this: You're going to be on the staff of James Wallace, a young scientist. He's your captain. Fact is, we've drafted him and the others just like we're drafting you. He was a tourist on his way home when this emergency came up. He hasn't much of a staff, so you give him all the help you can."

"Sure, I'll do my best."

"There'll be good money—better than you've ever seen before. Wallace will explain all about that."

"Thank you, sir."

We shook hands and he said, "Good luck, Bob Bantz," and gave me a quick spat on the behind to send me running up the steps into the airlocks.

JAMES WALLACE? That's the name he'd said, and the sound of it made my heart do a fancy hurdle. That was the name of a teacher I'd had—a football coach and a great guy who knew how to cram science down our throats and make us like it. Could it be the same James Wallace? I had been his water boy for the football squad and I'd have given anything to have made his team. But the urge to go space traveling had got me. As soon as the school year ended I had grabbed my grade card and scampered down to the AEG agency to take the first sky-thumbing job they could give me.

These memories rushed through my head as I went aboard the *Hound's Tooth*, hoping I was about to meet up with this same James Wallace. And sure enough!

Five minutes later, as we accelerated out into space, big handsome "Wally" Wallace was pigging me on the back, laughing, and saying it was like old times to see me again.

There were seven of us on board, and Wally introduced us around. The last person to join the group, coming out of her stateroom dolled up like for a party, was this good-looking redhead.

"This is my wife," Wally said, grinning. "Darling, this is our staff. Can you give 'em a big smile?"

She laughed, and I liked her, the easy way she met everyone. It seems she and Wally were on their way back to Earth from a honeymoon in space when they hit this Skystation Twenty-Seven and the AEG agent persuaded Wally it was his patriotic duty to go on this Mars nugget chase.

As far as you could tell, everyone liked Melva Wallace except the big hard-boiled bony-faced fellow named Brasket. When she spoke to him, he spit and looked the other way. Later I heard him say he hated all women

and wouldn't be caught on a ship with one if he could help it—and what business did *she* have on an emergency run like this?

Brasket later said, "The captain shoulda left her at the Sky Station. He coulda hung her on a nail. She'd a kept."

Horowitz, the chunky fellow with the heavy black eyebrows and the foghorn voice, said, "Maybe he likes to keep her around where he can cuddle her."

"Cuddle her! I'd cuddle with a butcher knife," Brasket said with swaggering air. Then he gave me a look as if he just dared me to repeat what I'd heard.

BUT SHE and Wally were real friends to me right from the takeoff, even though something was said that might have given me a bump if I had been sensitive. The minute she heard I had gone to Wally's school she said, "Oh, I visited there once, at a football game. Of course I don't remember anyone. The only one I remember was Wally's water boy, he was such an imp of a kid. You know, trying to be so conspicuous—"

"Melva!" Wally said. He was blushing.

"I mean, this kid was trying to be the hero of the game, and he was only the water boy."

I gulped and said, "I guess that must have been me."

"Oops!" Her eyes whirled and she kind of gulped.

"It's all right. I was putting on the airs pretty thick, I expect. It's just like me, trying to be the whole show—"

"Oh, I didn't really mean it." She tried hard to apologize. And Wally patted me on the back and said I'd been swell and he couldn't have won all those games if it hadn't been for

me. So I couldn't possibly take offense. All the same, what Melva Wallace had said meant something—something for me to put in my pillow and sleep on. It isn't every day you get such a chance to see yourself as others see you.

So I slept uneasily, resolving that whether this Mars errand turned out to be a pushover or a toughy, I would go through my part of it quiet and unexcited. Little did I know!

I dreamed off, calling the roll of the seven of us, wondering if Wally could make us work together like a team. There was Johnson, a sleepy two-hundred-and-fifty pounder, who smoked his pipe solemnly and said little. If there was a joke, his eyes could twinkle; otherwise he was expressionless. There was the little dark-haired man at the controls, who acted extremely conscientious. His fingers were white and delicate, and his eyes seemed too large and dark for his chalky sensitive face. His name was Sleet. Wally evidently considered him a dependable pilot.

These and the other five I have already named made up our party: Brasket, the woman hater; Horowitz, the thickset, frog-voiced fellow; Wally and Melva and myself.

WALLY CALLED us all together less than an hour before we were to land.

"They took your guns away before you came aboard," Wally said. "That was orders. I notice that Brasket carries a whip. We'll let that pass. However—"

I saw Brasket's lips twist with a surly expression of personal satisfaction, as if he just dared anyone to take his whip away.

"However," Wally went on, "the point is, we're under strict orders from the AEG to do no killing. I'll explain why later. Nevertheless, since

we may meet certain dangers, I'm going to issue to each of you a special weapon."

He opened a box and brought out a number of small pocket-size green-handled pistols. He handed them around to us.

"These are freeze guns. They shoot a paralysis ray—very effective at close range. You can paralyze a Mars creature without even injuring him. Any part of his body you hit will freeze tight and stay frozen for a good five minutes. Don't get reckless and count on his staying frozen all day. Five minutes—seven at the most—will give you time to protect yourself from any Martian life we'll meet up with."

"You mean we're going to run into some Zims on the warpath?" someone asked.

"Probably not Zims. Possibly Zimburros. But more likely the deadliest of the three—the Zimpires."

Wally gave me a glance as if wondering whether I remembered my science. This continent of Mars, I recalled, was inhabited by three major types of so-called men. The Zims were highest, with language and a culture, and they were the race our Earthmen called Martians. Then there were the uncivilized men-like *moles* who burrowed in the earth and were called the Zimburros. Finally there were the tallest and fiercest of men-like animals, the Zimpires. These, when driven out of the civilized areas of the true Zims, often took to the prairies and deserts and lived in the holes which the Zimburros had made. The Zimpires often stood thirty and forty feet tall on toothpick legs. They ran like the wind, and they were cruel killers of Zims, Zimburros or Earthmen.

"Now, here's the deal in a nutshell," Wally began.

"Wait," Brasket said. "About these

guns—you mean a shot wouldn't even harm a person?"

"Right. It would put him out of commission temporarily, that's all. It wouldn't leave him injured."

BRASKET regarded his gun with interest. "Why don't we treat ourselves to a demonstration?"

"If we had a dog or a monkey or a parrot," Wally said, "we could demonstrate. But take my word for it—"

"I couldn't endure the sight of a pet being paralyzed, I'm sorry," Sleet said, touching his forehead as if he was horrified by the slightest thought of pain or violence. "Besides, I must get back to the controls. If you'll excuse me..."

Wally asked us all to follow Sleet into the control cabin so we could all hear what Wally had to say. The party ambled fore—all except Brasket and me. He blocked my way, and I saw a bad look in his eye.

It happened in a flash. He shot me with the freeze gun and knocked the legs out from under me. I was moving forward and suddenly, *spat!*—my legs were stone. I seized the rails. *Spat!* The ray smacked me across the face and neck. For an instant I clung to the rails too outraged to believe my own feelings. The white streams, as thin as a wire, had shot out with the ease of a flashlight beam, and none of the party ahead had heard a thing.

I couldn't cry out. My throat was frozen. Just numb and feelingless as if I hadn't any throat—or mouth or chin.

But my head was clear! And my arms were ready for action. And there stood Brasket, putting his gun away calmly, grinning at me as happy as if he had just chopped my head off.

With quick arm action, I jerked myself along the rails and caught

him. I caught him around the neck and threw my whole weight on him, stone legs and all. He stumbled backward and fell, gasping and cursing. I slugged him in the face, and his jaw fairly cracked.

He rolled us sidewise, so the others, looking back, wouldn't see what had happened. I pasted him again, but I was no match for him. I was carrying too much dead weight. In a minute he threw me off and was up on his feet. Here I had no rails. I groped for something to hold onto. By that time he had jerked the whip out of his belt.

He lashed me ten or twelve times as fast as he could swing the whip. You could see from his expression that he felt good over this turn of events. I held my hands over my face for protection. With no feeling in my neck and jaw I couldn't tell how much damage he was doing.

They called back from the control cabin: "Where's Brasket and the kid?"

"We're coming," Brasket said, and folded his whip. He grabbed me up and dragged me in on my dead feet, acting very chummy, and sat me down on a bench.

"The kid's playing games," he mumbled. But no one noticed. He had given me a bad beating for no reason—except that he wanted to try the gun out on someone, and I was the easiest victim. Yes, he had given me a bad beating and got away with it, and there we sat, him with his arm around me, giving me a sarcastic grin, just daring me ever to say a word. Gradually the feeling came back to my legs, and my lips and throat began to work again, but I didn't speak.

"**H**ERE IS the deal in a nutshell," Wally said, looking around at the group of us. "We'll reach this

northern area of Mars as dark comes on. This season at this latitude we'll have a night of about twenty-four hours. We'll spend the whole night gathering nuggets of *gravo*."

"Gravo? Where does so much gravo come from?"

"I'll explain that in a minute. The point is, we're under pressure of time, and we'll have to work like fury to get our load before our time runs out."

"Why only one night? Who's in such a hurry?"

"The Zims are about to move into this land," Wally said. "They're going to race in and settle. The land is theirs, and once they've settled, the Earth governments don't want to disturb them in any way. That's the AEG policy, you know."

"But the gravo?"

"The gravo belongs to the AEG. You see, the Associated Earth Governments sowed these nuggets on this desert stretch several years ago, when Mars explorations were new. They had put an outpost at this point, and were trying a means of simulating Earth gravitation for people, motor vehicles and flying craft. As you know, the demand for gravo for use in space ships and sky stations has skyrocketed, it's so useful in simulating real gravity."

Sleet's eyes were wide. I guess all of us were pretty excited over this earful Wally had for us. Sleet said, "You mean we'll be able to pick up, in nugget form, all of twenty-five tons of gravo on this certain stretch of Mars desert?"

"That's the lowdown," Wally said.

"If we had only known!" Brasket gave Sleet a look. Sleet's eye turned to catch Horowitz' and something told me that these three chance pickups were in league together. Sleet's soft face turned away, and his sensitive hands played at the controls as Wally

talked on. Things were going on in his sly brain, and he didn't trust himself to look back at either Brasket or Horowitz.

"It was an oversight on the part of Earth that this valuable material wasn't gathered up a long time ago."

"They did a damn good job keeping it secret," Horowitz said in his fog-horn voice, not looking at anyone in particular.

"It belongs to our governments," Melva Wallace said. "Wally and I feel that we owe it to the AEG to help."

THE SARCASTIC "H-m-m-m!" from Brasket seemed to say, "Such innocence!"

Johnson, sleepily puffing on his pipe, said, "Then our job is plain. We're to load this sky truck up with twenty-five tons of gravo."

"That's the deal," Wally said.

"What if we get more than twenty-five tons?"

"The ship holds twenty-five, but we may be able to crowd in a few extra pounds. That's up to us, according to my contract."

"Who gets the extra, seeing it's worth hundreds of dollars a pound?" Brasket asked.

"That's what I was coming to. We're to be paid—and paid high—on a percentage basis for our twenty-five tons that we deliver to the AEG. Gravo is worth right now a thousand dollars a pound. Our fifty-thousand pounds will have a market value of fifty million dollars. We're to have one per cent of that to divide between us. This trip, if successful, is going to pay us off at the rate of about seventy thousand dollars apiece. That's because we're taking a risk, and we're stepping in to handle an emergency for the AEG."

Wally's words fairly took my breath away. For a minute no one said any-

thing. Johnson was counting something on his fingers, and Horowitz had gone to work with a scratch pad.

"The big risk we take is the Zimpire," I said. But no one seemed to hear me. Everyone was lost in figures full of dollar signs.

Sleet turned, his bright eyes full of ideas. "You say we might throw on a little more than the twenty-five tons?"

"A very little."

"At a thousand dollars a pound, even a few pounds would count up. Who gets the extra?"

"Well, boys," Wally smiled, "they allowed me to name my own terms on any extra poundage, and we put it in the contract that there would be an even division of it for ourselves."

"For a thousand dollars a pound," Johnson said, "we'd better leave our shoes and take on nuggets."

"In the time we'll have, it may hurry us to gather a few tons," Wally warned. But everyone was so busy counting his new riches, no one listened to warnings. Brasket was muttering that for a thousand dollars a pound they should throw off their clothes and take on nuggets—and why the hell had Wally had to bring a woman along?

"Let me ask a hypothetical question," Horowitz said, lowering his eye toward me and then glancing at Johnson. "Suppose—just suppose—a Zimpire charges in on us while we're working. Suppose someone gets killed? Suppose someone falls over a cliff or dies from a heart attack? Is there anything in the contract that says we have to bring a dead body back? Or do we bury our dead on Mars and use the extra weight for nuggets?"

THERE WAS cold silence for a moment. Johnson, who weighed all of two hundred and fifty pounds, growled, "I don't like the sound of that question."

Wally, I could see, wasn't ready for such a question. His eyes snapped the way I've seen him when his team was caught on the field by a trick play. He shook his head.

"That question is out of order. Plumb out of order."

"But I'm saying *if*," Horowitz persisted. "After all, it damn well could happen. And a body that weighs one hundred and fifty pounds could leave room for an additional hundred and fifty thousand dollars in gravo. And that's all ours."

"Forget it," Wally said. "I've made you a damn good deal, and I expect you to come through with no accidents. We're all going through this and we're going back safe, so don't get any ideas."

His sharpness was the first indication I had seen that he might try to handle these troublesome birds. Whether they were hounding him just to be monkeyshining, or whether they were thinking in terms of cold turkey, I couldn't tell. Then Brasket came up with a needler.

"Did you mention five hundred thousand dollars?"

"That's our one per cent."

"And we divide it equally between us?"

"Right."

"And that makes around seventy thousand apiece?"

"Right."

"Hell, you must be dividing by seven," Brasket snarled.

"There are seven of us."

"There are six of us, by God! You don't aim to count *her*!"

"I sure as hell do," Wally barked back. "She's one of us and she'll do her full share—you just see if she won't!"

Brasket growled to himself. He looked around as if he expected the other men to join his protest. He let his eyes linger on me, but whatever

he was thinking, he didn't say it. For the moment he was letting Wally have his own way.

We landed on a sand-covered plateau with the last of the day's sun rays glinting gold over the crest. The ruins of an old earth outpost stood silhouetted in purple on the horizon. This had been one of the earth's first landing fields on Mars, deserted years ago. But, as Wally had explained, the lines of gravo nuggets that had been sprayed in long lines from the early landing were still here.

WE PREPARED to go out and go to work. We had brought a small pick-up truck tuned for Mars conditions. Otherwise we would work by hand, using ordinary hand rakes.

"If you're used to high jumping on Mars from the light gravity," Wally said, "you'll find this terrain tricky. At least from what I read—"

"You've been here before, maybe?" Horowitz said suspiciously. And Brasket said under his breath, "Bet he's already lined his own pockets."

"I doubt if anyone has been here in our lifetime," Wally said. "We'll have to keep a sharp lookout for zimpires."

I remembered something else from my science. "The zimpires won't attack us in the dark, will they?"

"We're counting on that, Bob. That's why we've timed this job for the night hours."

"Smart kid," Brasket gave Horowitz a wink and a nudge. I thought of how Melva had remembered me as a water boy, and clamped my lips shut.

Wearing oxygen helmets with spotlights on top, we moved out of the air locks, down onto the sandy floor of Martian earth, and went to work.

Right away we located a line of nuggets. We'd scrape along the ground lightly with the rakes, and *bling!* a

nugget would clink against the metal tines. The magnetic-like action helped. You didn't have to see the nuggets to find them; they'd often be covered over with an inch or more of sand, but they'd fairly pop up for you.

Now and then a larger one would crop up. Most of them weighed about a pound, Earth weight. At first the work went fast, and lifting them into sacks or buckets, or scraping them together into heaps for the pickup seemed no trick at all.

Melva manned the pickup truck, and no one could say she wasn't a worker.

Wally tried to watch everything and work along with the rest of us at the same time.

Sleet was left in charge of the ship (though Wally had the keys, I took particular notice of that). Besides keeping guard, Sleet's job was to run the little bucket-belt elevator that carried the dumped cargo right up into the belly of the ship. It was a bright sight, that gleaming machinery at work in a circle of spotlights from the underside of the silver-white *Hound's Tooth*.

EVERYTHING was going fine. I began to drop my worries, seeing how well Brasket and Horowitz were working. And seeing how friendly and trusting Wally was to everybody. I wasn't sure whether I'd have trusted Sleet with the ship. In fact, when you stopped to figure that every one-pound lump of this shiny silvery-black metal was worth a thousand dollars, you were skeptical about trusting anybody, even yourself. I began to have silly thoughts, like what if a few pieces of this would drop into my pocket or stick in my boots?

Right away you were beginning to perspire inside your space-suit and you slackened your pace a little. This

work was to go on for hours, with an hour of rest only after every five hours of work, according to Wally's plan. We weren't to play ourselves out with fast work. It was the even steady gait that we wanted. Gradually, we fell into fairly smooth operation.

"Keep shy of them holes," I heard Brasket say.

"Don't tell me," Horowitz said. "I'm not lookin' for zimpire company, not if I'm in my right mind."

Some of the holes were wide enough for a man to crawl into. You couldn't see any signs of the man-moles, that is, the zimburros, and all of the holes looked old and weather-worn, so we knew the zimburros had been driven out of this region. But here and there we saw the big wide thirty-inch footmarks of the zimpires, and that would give us a chill.

We worked through our first five-hour shift, rested an hour, and went back to work again. The second five hours was the worst. After the second rest, I began to get my second wind. I fell into an easy pace that I knew I could hold for hours and hours.

Then something came along to knock all the wind out of me. I got my first face-to-face look at a zimpire.

I WAS ALONE when it happened.

We had begun to drift apart, each following the most promising line of nuggets that ran parallel to the ridge.

My rake ran into a tuft of grass. I gave an awkward jerk. It shouldn't have happened, but I had taken my helmet beam off the ground for a moment to cast about and catch my bearings in the dark. Then I bent my head quickly, so the light shone down on my tangled-up rake.

"Matted grass," I said to myself, and gave the rake a jerk. Now, you know that grass roots don't move,

and something about the way my rake came up made me jerk back. I had brought some grass up with it. Only it wasn't grass.

Looking closer under the light at the stuff caught in my rake, I was puzzled. It was a yellow-orange hair.

I shot the light back. The patch of "grass" was rising up from the ground. I began to back away.

It was the head of a zimpire, and the mat of "grass" was the yellowish-gold fur that sticks out from their necks like a five-foot fur collar.

The zimpire started to climb out of his hole. He had one arm out, and he struck at the ground, missing me by five or six feet. I guessed he couldn't see much against the light. He rose up in the semi-darkness. I was too plain scared to turn my light away and run. He had a weird savage red face, and he blinked dizzily out of his two big saucer-sized eyes. The slits in those wide green orbs narrowed like a cat's against the light.

His arm was like a jointed gas pipe, as devoid of visible muscles as the legs of an insect. He beat the ground with the tentacle-like branches that formed the end of his arm. One tentacle touched the rake I had dropped and started to wrap around it. I seized the rake and jerked with all my might, and the next instant I was running, pell-mell.

Fifty yards away I turned back to look. The zimpire's eyes glowed softly. He was lowering himself into the hole. The wide fur collar was pulled up over his face as his head went down. It became a tuft of grass on the surface of the land. The "ass" trembled a little and then came to rest. The zimpire had gone back to sleep.

I MIGHT had gone around shouting to everyone, but right about then

a shout from someone else sounded into my helmet.

"Hey, we've lost a man!"

It was the foghorn voice. I remembered that Johnson and Horowitz had been working over that way, not far apart. A few minutes ago the pickup truck had sputtered by, picking up their loads. I went dashing over the slope of the hill. The light on Horowitz' helmet bobbed about nervously. Brasket was coming from another direction.

"We've lost a man!" Horowitz repeated. "He's stone dead."

"What happened?" I yelled.

"The pickup truck ran square over him."

"Damned girl!" Brasket muttered.

"Dead, is he?"

They shone their lights down on the form of Johnson, who lay sagging and dead across a rock. I bent down and tried to feel his pulse.

"He's entitled to a burial," Brasket said. "This looks like a good trench—this bit of gully here. Lucky I've got a spade."

"We better call Wally," I said.

Brasket gave me a savage kick in the seat of the pants. "Get busy there, kid. Pull those rocks out. Don't you know we're in a rush? This burial is gonna put us behind schedule."

I backed away. There was something phony here. Johnson's body didn't show any marks of a truck wheel. The truck was roaring back, and thank goodness Wally and Melva were both on it. In the blaze of their lights they could see Johnson lying there, and the other two men digging like fury. Melva and Wally jumped down from the truck.

"Keep the girl away from here," Brasket shouted. "She shouldn't have to see what she did!"

Horowitz looked up at her and said, "Don't take it hard, kid. No one's

gonna blame you. If he hadn't let his light go out—"

"What are you saying?" Wally demanded. "What's happened here?"

"Didn't she tell you?" said Brasket. "She ran over Johnson."

"I don't think she even knew," Horowitz said.

"Rushed like we are, we oughtn't to waste time on a burial, but it's just a matter of human decency." Brasket rolled the body of Johnson over into the shallow grave and started to shovel earth onto him.

"Stop it!" Wally shouted.

And Melva cried, "I never ran over anyone! I couldn't have!"

WALLY pushed Brasket back and bent down to try to examine the body of Johnson. While holding his pulse, he looked up at me. "Did you see this happen, Bob?"

"I just came up, and they tried to make me help dig."

"If he's gone," Melva said, half crying, "the least we can do is have a service for him."

Brasket stepped up and lifted a hand over the form. "I consign him to the Almighty. Tough luck, buddy. We'll see you in eternity."

Then he grabbed the spade and would have covered the man if Wally hadn't stopped him. It was the first time I ever heard Wally let go with a down-to-earth curse. He shot the words at Brasket so fast that the air was blue with name-calling.

"Look!" Melva cried. "He's moving."

Our lights poured down on the dead man, and it was a pleasant sight, watching him come to life. He shook the dirt off his chest. He sat up and blinked up at us through his helmet. With his easy, sleepy manner he reached for his pipe, tapped the ashes out of it, and lifted it toward his

mouth—then discovered he was wearing his oxygen helmet.

"I must have fell asleep," Johnson mumbled.

Wally helped him up. "Feeling all right? No broken bones? No aches or pains?"

"Feeling fine," Johnson said. "Didn't mean to play off on you, Captain. Seems like something knocked me out for a minute or two."

"The truck ran square over you," Horowitz said.

"Huh?" Johnson stared. "Don't kid me."

"What he means is, someone shot you with a freeze gun," Wally said icily. Horowitz and Brasket moved back as Johnson looked around innocently. They were all looking at Wally now, wondering what he would say or do. His lips were tight, and there was a weird light in his eyes, and somehow I had an awful premonition that he was going to shoot down two men then and there.

His voice was steady when he spoke: "Men, we have a job to do. We're going right back to work, all of us, as if nothing had happened. But remember, there aren't just seven of us now. There are eight. Murder walks with us."

THE NIGHT went on.

Wally watched everything as sharply as was humanly possible. He had taken the weapons away from Brasket and Horowitz, even Brasket's whip. The men were sore about that, and they were angry at each other. But the thousands of dollars worth of nuggets we were gathering, and the prospect of riches from this lush deal, kept them moving. They talked, but they kept working at the same time.

I found a row I could work, close enough to catch part of their conversation. Brasket gave Horowitz all the

blame for bungling the attempted murder of Johnson.

"Two hundred and fifty pounds. That's a quarter of a million dollars for the split—and you had to mess up the deal. You damned lout, I told you you were supposed to stone him the minute he went down."

"Yeah?" Horowitz might not have been listening.

"I got the ray on him. I came through with my end. No one saw me. All you had to do was heave the biggest rock you could find and the god-dam deal would have went over like a top."

"Your schemes are all like that. You stand off safe and leave me the dirty work."

"You damn well know he wouldn't stay froze more than five minutes if we didn't kayo him. I thought you *had!* What a sap you made me, trying to bury him before the freeze wore off."

"It was a helluva scheme in the first place. I told you it didn't make sense. Look—"

"Yeah, you look once. Divide a quarter of a million by seven and figure what we missed by your damn blundering."

"Look, Brasket, we'd have had Wally down on us and the whole deal would have busted wide open in a minute. I'm smart enough to see that. You're stupid blind. You know what Sleet said to us before we started out with these rakes—"

"Careful, the kid might be listening."

THE VOICES broke off into silence for a while. I kept right on working along the crest as if I hadn't heard a word. Johnson, farther on and well out of hearing range, kept right on scraping.

Melva and Wally came along on

the truck, picking up what the rest of us had accumulated, and stopping to locate some new veins. Melva stayed, working the earth with a rake only a short distance from me. Wally took the truck back and dumped it at the foot of the little shining elevator. And so the working hours passed.

"Watch Sleet too," I whispered to Wally the first time I got a private word with him. "Those birds talk like he's their ringleader."

"Thanks, Bob," Wally said. "We're trying to watch everything." Then he was off again, and I bent to my rake with blistered hands, making the nuggets come wherever they would.

Again I listened in to the low-spoken words a little way down the ridge.

"He's got it timed about right," Horowitz' low frog-voice carried easily through the crisp Mars night air. "Here's five of us picking up. We average about seven nuggets a minute as long as we're in good picking."

"I know what you're figuring to tell me," Brasket said.

"Seven a minute—that's thirty-five a minute altogether from the five of us."

"I know. You're figuring what we'd have gained if we'd put Johnson out of the works early in the game."

"Twenty-one hundred nuggets an hour. Say two thousand for round numbers."

"There's plenty of hours. It's freight space we're short on, not hours."

"Now be reasonable, Brasket. Be honest about it. Is there plenty of hours? After daylight, we may get all sorts of grief from the zimpirees. That's the thing we can't gamble on. Wally was right, figuring we had only so many good hours of dark. Five hours' work. An hour of rest. Five more hours of work. In twenty-nine hours we get in twenty-five hours of

work apiece if we don't drop dead."

"Does that make it?"

"It just makes it. Fifty thousand nuggets. That's our load. At approximately a pound a nugget—twenty-five tons."

"And if we'd kayoed Johnson—"

"We'd have lost a fifth of our tonnage."

"But we'd all have worked that much longer. And with Johnson properly buried, we'd have added a quarter million dollars—our gravy—yes, gravy, even when you split it."

"There's still time," Horowitz said, very low.

"M-m-m." Brasket mumbled uneasily. "The picking's getting thin along this line."

They drifted farther apart. Every one of us was branching out farther from the ship, trying to locate better "streams" that we hadn't already worked. Wally made the rounds and repeated his warnings to us to keep away from the holes and keep a sharp lookout for the zimpire. He mentioned to me that he had half a notion to give the freeze guns back to the two men, trusting there wouldn't be any more "accidents". They might need them to fight off the zimpire. Daylight was coming.

A MOVEMENT a few yards ahead of me caused me to change my course. It was another "tuft of grass" that moved—undoubtedly another zimpire, moving his head about, wondering if it was about morning.

I turned off the light on my helmet. The early morning twilight made the sandy plateau a field of reddish blue mists and shadows. Down in the valley it was still night. Here and there the crests of sand took on the brightness of copper and gold. The silver and white *Hound's Tooth* loomed

against a background of deep shadows.

"We'll soon be on our way," I kept saying over to myself. "Within an hour or two."

Then, in spite of aching back and blistered hands, I would zip into the work with a fresh burst of energy. For time was short now. Somewhere over the horizon to the west the great Zims themselves would stir out of camp with dawn's early light. They would come eastward, advancing like an army, driving all wild things before them. Before another darkness all this land would be theirs.

I tried to visualize what that advance would look like. Undoubtedly a host of tall gangling zimpire would race ahead before the mechanized advance. Would the zimpire know what was happening to their happy hunting ground? Hardly. They were little more than beasts—long-legged human-looking forms that had never gained a language.

I saw Melva beckon to me and point to the north.

"Zimpire!" she called. "Keep an eye on it."

The creature was nearly half a mile away. You could see he was still half asleep, crawling part way out of his hole, resting on an elbow, and ruffling his wide furry collar with his tentacled hand.

MELVA moved down over the edge of the hill. The others, too, had moved down into more shadowed areas. I had better follow—but I paused to look back at the zimpire, now up out of his hole, standing and stretching his long toothpick arms. He was fully five times as tall as a man. He towered upward like a two-legged bean pole. His eyes, even from that distance, seemed to shine with a greenish-yellow light. His body was

divided into sections like an insect's, wasp-waisted at the joints. His legs, lacking any muscle padding, were two long greenish-blue pipes with knee joints.

I caught my breath. He was moving off in another direction. He must have found another den, for in a moment he let himself down into the earth and was gone. I stood, holding tight to the freeze gun.

"If he had come up on me, I never would have heard him," I said to myself, thinking of the tracks I had seen of the big thirty-inch padded feet. "No wonder those fellows are fast."

I was thinking of stories I had heard of zimpire's tossing men over cliffs or breaking them in their hands.

At that moment a streak of sunlight spread my own shadow before me—and another shadow—tall and long-legged—right beside me.

I hadn't heard a sound. I whirled. Thirty-five feet of pipe-legged Martian zimpire was coming toward me. Breath was puffing through the yellow fur collar, and the big red owl-eyed face was grinning at me. The right arm with its long tenacle fingers was whipping the air.

My gun flashed.

The pencil line of white light cut the beastly thing across the knees and it froze in its tracks. None too soon. Another step and those big feet could have booted me like a football.

Wild with terror, I whirled to see if anyone was near. Everyone, it seemed, was down over the ridge out of sight. I was running—I *thought* I was running!

The zimpire bent forward and snatched me off my feet. Its legs never moved; it was frozen to a standstill, but the towering body had such height that the forward swing put me within reach of the swaying arms. Up I came.

I BLAZED away with the freeze gun. Fast as I could maneuver it, I sprayed the white line of paralysis over the creature's face, shoulders and arms. The tall body stiffened.

I was a captive in stiffened arms. The creature had meant to throw me over the side of the hill. The action had stopped with me high in the air, caught in frozen tenacles about ten feet above the zimpire's head—perhaps forty feet above the ground. Our purple shadows spread across the sand.

Five minutes to think it over! Yes, I tried to keep my head, knowing the freeze would last for all of five minutes. But who could think under those circumstances? I was writhing, trying to free myself. Then suddenly I stopped struggling. From my lofty altitude I could now see down over the edge of the hill, and what I saw fairly petrified me.

"Melva!" I cried. "Melva!!!"

I was too far away for my voice to carry. I was powerless to stop. What was about to happen would happen. Brasket, slipping up on Melva, shot her with the freeze gun. Her arms went stiff. She fell.

Horowitz, right back of Brasket, now leaped to his job. He had cords ready for the purpose. He bound her hands behind her. He bound her feet. Then he lifted her bodily and lowered her into a nearby zimpire hole. He started filling the top of the hole with rocks. He looked up, as if asking Brasket why the devil he didn't help with the job.

Brasket got him as he turned—shot him up and down the spine with the freeze gun. Paralyzed from head to foot, Horowitz fell and lay like a stone. Then—nothing in the world could have kept it from happening—Brasket pounded him with stones. With the biggest stone Brasket could find he made a smash-up job of it.

He looked about for another hole for his second victim.

As he looked around, his eyes came up to see the zimpire and me above the ledge.

I HAD BEEN squirming hard all this time and was about to pull myself free. Scared to death, I had only one thought, and that was to get out of this beastly grasp and run to Wally. Whether I was shouting all the time I don't know. Things happened so fast, and I was so deathly scared. What had just happened to Melva made me wild with terror.

Suddenly the zimpire's knees began to loosen. Its arms and shoulders were still locked tight, but the parts I had shot first began to unlimber.

Then I made a discovery. To my amazement, the zimpire was also watching the show down over the edge of the hill the same as I was. Apparently I had been forgotten. Now, still frozen more or less above the waist, the zimpire discovered it could run.

With me hanging on for dear life, the zimpire charged down over the hill's edge toward Brasket. By this time I had kicked free of the tenacles and had slipped down over the creature's head. I clung to its back, riding like the wind.

Brasket saw us coming. He made a scramble to recover his paralysis gun. In his flurry to smash Horowitz with stones he had forgot to pocket the pistol. It was a break, and how!

"Go after him! Go after him!" I shouted to the zimpire, as if it could understand! But it was going hard in the right direction, its yellow fur flying back in my face. I slipped farther down, almost lost my grip, and then sank the fingers of my left hand into the body, held on like death, and rode like wildfire. In that moment I didn't

care what happened to me. All I asked was that this savage creature I was riding might run down the bloody murderer and trample him to death.

"No! No! Go back, you devil!" Brasket screamed as we came down onto him.

With an uncanny instinct, Brasket ran toward craggy rocks where he thought the footing might be too treacherous for the zimpire to follow. But he never made it to those rocks. With one free hand I pulled my pistol and shot.

Zip! Zip! The paralysis ray cut a white path through the dust and found Brasket's hips. He fell forward, and the ray cut a line up his spine and across his jaw. He rolled down the slope like a stone statue off its pedestal.

BY THIS time the zimpire's arms and shoulders were as free as rubber whips. Slashing the air, he went after his second victim. Maybe he was angry out of some half-developed sense of justice. Maybe he had been stirred by the sight of one Earthman killing another Earthman. Or maybe it was all ferocious, savage play to the zimpire—who knows?

He gave chase like a starved beast after a bird. Brasket fairly flew down the slope, but not fast enough. And I—

When or how I got to the ground I never could remember. I found later that there were zimpire hairs clinging to my fingers and a strong zimpire odor over my hands. Some time during that mad chase I swung down the length of the creature's body and leaped like a monkey to the ground.

Then, as I plainly remembered, I chased back toward the scene of violence. Thank heaven, Wally was coming. The truck was throwing back a hurricane of dust, coming on wide

open. The horn was sounding full blast.

Johnson came running from somewhere out of deeper shadows, not knowing what had happened, but damned well sure that whatever it was, Brasket and Horowitz would be at the bottom of it.

He stopped cold at the sight of Horowitz lying there, a mass of bloody clothing and equipment—helmet and skull crushed almost beyond recognition.

By the time Wally pulled the truck to a stop, I was digging like mad at the mound of rocks.

"She's in here," I shouted. "He put the ray on her and dumped her here."

"Who did it?"

"What did they do? Did they kill her?"

"They tied her—help me with this rock! Don't let them fall in. Look—it's a big nugget. If it falls in on her it'll crush her."

"Careful! Careful!"

The gravo was such tricky stuff you couldn't trust your own strength or sense of balance when you were near a lot of it. This one huge chunk of gravo, by far the biggest we had encountered, gave us a battle to handle it just right without letting it slip down.

IN A MINUTE we could hear the low muffled cries of the girl somewhere down in the hole, and Wally mumbled, "Thank God! She's alive."

We cast about for just an instant to make sure the zimpire hadn't decided to turn back on us. At present it was well occupied with Brasket. It had caught him up and was swinging him overhead—which made no difference at all to us, as long as it stayed a good half mile away from our territory. We had a job to do and it had to be done fast.

I crawled down into the blackness. They held the end of a rope tied to my feet so they could draw me back. The sand dust and zimpire smells were thick in my nostrils. But there was Melva's voice, sobbing and calling, just a few feet farther down.

I squirmed until my hands found her shoulders. The rope let me move further, until I slipped my hands under her body and cut the cord that bound her hands. Then she drew her arms up, and as I signalled for them to draw the rope back, she clung to my hands. Slowly, using our knees and feet and elbows, we fought our way up into daylight.

"Melva, are you hurt?"

"I'm all right. I'm scared. Oh, Wally, get us out of here!"

"We'll lose no time getting away," Wally said. "Look what's coming over that hill!"

WE LOOKED across to the western horizon and saw what Wally meant. Hardly a mile away a whole multitude of zimpires had appeared along the top of a hill. The early-morning sun caught them, and it was a weird sight, the way their colors flashed. They were like a host of capering children, chasing a few yards, then stopping to look back across at something beyond our view.

Johnson beckoned to me and together we loaded the last nugget—the biggest chunk of all—into the truck.

Wally carried Melva and helped her into the seat. We climbed aboard, and Wally skimmed back over the sandy trail toward the waiting ship.

"What happened to Horowitz?" Johnson shouted to me above the truck's roar. He was still baffled over the recent happenings.

"Brasket happened to him," I said. "Did you see it happen?"

"I had a box seat," I said. I wanted to say more, but something restrained me.

"I guess you didn't have a chance to prevent it?"

"From where I was I couldn't do a thing but holler."

"That's what I heard, then," Johnson said. "You know I looked up toward the hill and thought I was seeing things. That zimpire had something in its hands that looked like a human being, kicking. It was silhouetted against the light, and I couldn't be sure. Was it you?"

"What would I be doing up in the arms of a zimpire?" I shouted back against the noise of the truck.

"Kicking," Johnson said. "It was you, wasn't it?"

I grinned my answer and looked at my hands. That's when I discovered there were still zimpire hairs sticking to my fingers.

"I can't figure Brasket's turning on Horowitz," Johnson said. "They were in cahoots, anyone could tell that."

"Brasket would have murdered his own mother."

"I guess he meant to get all of us—then he and Sleet would have it all their own way—"

"And they'd never have gone back to Earth with the stuff. Turn it over to the AEG? Not them!"

We rolled up to the ship, and now we could see back to the west where the wall of advancing zimpires had been before. They weren't there now. They were on a nearer hill. Off to the south more were coming, thousands more. On the far western horizon we could see little white puffs of smoke and dust.

"That's the Zims themselves!" Wally shouted. "They're moving in on wheels. They're bringing civilization and gun-powder, and they're chasing

the whole wild race of zimpires ahead of them."

"They're coming fast!" Melva cried. "Oh, Wally!"

"They'll never overtake us," Wally said. "In a couple of minutes we'll be loaded up and on our way."

"We'll never go back for the body of Horowitz?"

"Can't do it. Can't possibly!"

"And what about Brasket?"

"The zimpires will take care of him. At least I hope so," Wally said. "All I hope is that the Zims never find any trace of him. They've been promised a clear path. We've taken off what belongs to Earth, the rest is theirs, and no Earthman is supposed to interfere."

"From what I last saw of Brasket, I don't think he'll do any interfering," I said.

WE HURRIEDLY scooped the last of the load into the gliding buckets. The big nugget went up with a heavy clunk. Sleet, handling his end like a veteran, gave Wally the exact weight, and we knew we had all we could handle.

"Too much?"

"I don't think so," Wally called back.

"We can't take any chances not getting off the ground."

"With Horowitz and Brasket gone, we'll have a slight margin."

"Where are they?" Sleet said sullenly, standing in the entrance of the airlocks. The rest of us looked at him, suddenly aware of a note of defiance in his voice. Melva had already gone aboard; but Johnson, Wally and I had stood by to the finish. The truck had been rolled into one of the old outpost buildings to be left. All that we were taking with us, including the little portable elevator that swung down from the belly of the ship, had

been moved back into place for flight. We were ready to go aboard.

And yet there stood Sleet, blocking our way. He held a pistol, and his voice had a murderous edge.

"We'll explain what happened later," Wally said. "Those two rats, Brasket and Horowitz, you'll never see again. They marked up their scores with murders. They've brought themselves to a bad end. Now, step aside. We're coming aboard."

"Tell me more," Sleet said with a wave of the pistol. "Tell me exactly what happened to my buddies."

I glanced back to the hills and saw very definitely there was no time to tell anybody anything.

"Sleet, damn it, let us in," Johnson snarled. "Look, we'll never get away. They're only a quarter of a mile—"

"You said it," Sleet said. "You'll never get away. I have the swag all packed, nice and neat. The girl is on board," his lips twisted in a sly smile, "and I couldn't stand to see her left to your fate, gentlemen. Fortunately, I do not share Brasket's hatred of women. I shall guarantee for Mrs. Wallace a very pleasant passage. In fact, I may make so bold as to tell you that she and I planned it this way right from the start."

"It's a damned lie!" Wally snapped. He started for the steps.

"I'll drop you in your tracks!"

"That's only a paralysis gun," Johnson said. "You can't kill us with a freeze gun."

"Five minutes will give me ample time to get away," Sleet smiled. "And now, Wally—*Captain* Wallace—would you give me the keys to this ship, like a gentleman, or shall I first put the freeze gun to the three of you?"

"That bluff I anticipated," Wally said, "right from the start. You see, Sleet, what you're holding isn't even a freeze gun. There was one dummy

in the lot, and I took care to give that to you. You couldn't paralyze a fly."

SLEET'S smooth smile faded and he gave a suspicious glance at the weapon he was holding. At that moment, the white line of a freeze ray caught him from the rear. Melva, walking unsteadily, moved up on him, drilling him up and down with the paralysis ray. He toppled down the steps to the sand.

"Thank you, dear," Wally said, with a smile. "I was afraid he would try that trigger before you could stop him—and then—well, you'd have had a pretty big job on your hands."

It was over and above the call of duty, but we loaded the paralyzed Sleet onto the ship, bound him securely, and when he came out of the freeze, gagged him any time he grew too talkative. Wally guessed it might be well to have him on hand when we reported to the interplanetary criminal court.

Just before we took off, we caught sight of one zimpire, running fast ahead of the hosts that were approaching over the last hilltop. It was *my* zimpire—I think I would have recognized it even if it hadn't been carrying its trophy.

Dangling from its long rangy arm was the body of Brasket. The brutal zimpire was using that body as a club, holding the feet, beating at rocks or shrubbery or other zimpires with what had been the head—now an unrecognizable mass of human flesh and bones. It was an ugly sight, and I was glad that Melva didn't see it. I, for one, would never tell her.

We had cushioned ourselves for the take-off. A few seconds later we had charged off into the open skies. Looking back, we couldn't see anything of the puffs of white smoke or the dust

of an advancing horde of Zims. In a flash, that world had been left behind.

Wally turned the controls over to Johnson, who lit his pipe, presently, and his eyes twinkled to show that once again his world was all right.

Melva was breathing quietly, and she gave Wally a smile that was beautiful and relieved and happy. "Wally, we've had some close calls."

"Don't I know it!" He slipped his arm around her. "Like some of my football games. I never knew what was coming next—but I always had my water boy to help me with my

worrying."

"Water boy!" Melva cried. I came toward her, and she gave me a hug, and Wally patted me on the shoulder just like he used to do. "Wally, if it hadn't been for our water boy, do you know where I'd be right this minute?"

"Down in a zimpire hole, suffocated."

"Oh, Wally, don't ever let this water boy get away from us. Come on, Bob, smile a little. You don't have to be so modest!"

THE END

LANGUAGE IN A VACUUM

A CURIOUS and interesting bit of evidence that the world is indeed shrinking, is the organization of a group, The International Civil Aeronautic Organization, to decide on an international glossary of aviation terms to be used by radio and radar operators at airports everywhere, from Topeka, Kansas to Baluchistan.

In a way this organization's work has already been cut out for it—English seems to have become the major international medium, and so many planes are American, British or Canadian that foreign flyers have been required almost automatically to pick up English. The new arrangement is to choose aviation terms in English, but with primarily Latin roots, so that most educated technicians anywhere in the world will be able to understand.

A similar problem will confront the world a decade or two or three hence, when men begin to pop off into space. Communication is the heart of any transportation system, from ox-carts to rockets, and space travel will accentuate the need for lucid, understandable terms which, when used over the radio, will be intelligible to any rocket pilot.

This "lingua franca" of aviation and rocketry is likely for the most part to be English in content, since it is the English-speaking nations which have been most active in the field. There is always the danger, however, of some other nation's beating us to the punch—though we doubt very much if Russian will be the chosen

speech!

Technical terms are generally coined in the land of the inventor. In aviation this is overwhelmingly true. English technical terms, ranging from "take-off" to "dive", have international currency even though the user may not speak a word of conventional English. When a pilot is circling a field awaiting instructions to land he manages to understand the orders of the tower no matter what language they're delivered in—English most of the time, or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

Rocketry offers an excellent example of how foreign terms sometimes incorporate themselves into English. Since the pioneer work on large rockets was primarily German, frequently at American rocket fields like White Sands, New Mexico, such a remark as "Brennschluss" can be heard coming from the mouth of a technician who knows no German. "Brennschluss" means literally "burning-ending", which refers to the point at which the rocket has consumed or cut off completely its fuel ejection.

Among technical people languages usually cause no difficulty because no narrow nationalism contains them; they usually are glad to use whatever word pops up, be it Hindustani or English, so long as it fits the situation. And because of the prominence of English-speaking persons in rocketry, you can bet your bottom dollar that the "language of space" will certainly be English!

—Ralph Cox



Light itself may hold the secret of the Universe. You'll get the answer in this, the third, chapter of our future history!

CHAPTER V

THE CHALLENGE OF THE UNIVERSE

BY THE YEAR 2100, none of man's eternal dreams relative to space travel had actually materialized. There had only been the explosion of three projectiles against Luna. The first of these (1981) was hailed mightily, but with undertones of frustration. It was realized that even an imprisoned monkey can throw a banana skin through the bars of his cage and hit the far wall. The scientific world knew full well that important discoveries and

inventions had to be made before man could dare the void.

Immanuel Zelkov made the first twenty-second-century contribution to the cause in 2106; not with a travel mechanism, but with his delayed counter-refraction telescope, which allowed the use of both infrared and ultraviolet penetration at distances of more than one million light years away. (1)

But Man was still Earthbound,

(1) Relative to Zelkov's reflector, John Hayden of the Mount Shasta Observatory commented: "A man can walk the Moon's surface with this glass. He can count the the ribs of Mars. It gives one a sense of freedom never before experienced."

awaiting the work of Loring, Schwartz, Hartman and, ultimately, the great Packard.

Arturo Loring, whose *Birth and Death of Worlds* was the basis of all authoritative research of the times into astrophysics, and Marchman Schwartz, were coincidental workers in space-aimed research, although they were not acquainted and never met so far as is known. But their findings interlocked in that Loring needed Schwartz' findings in the realm of light rays in order to locate the single ingredient which made his vacuum tank a scientific miracle. (2)

In 1914, Marchman Schwartz made a great stir by his revolutionary provings relative to light, and with his proofs which came from salvaging images from spent light rays. Schwartz' findings came as the result of experiments which, aimed in one direction, slanted off in another.

Schwartz' unsupported original theory was that light is a basic power. He set out to reconstruct exact images of stars and planets from the light rays they sent across space. He worked prodigiously and probably destroyed records of inestimable value. (3)

Marchman Schwartz—a haunted, bedeviled genius who cut his own time shorter with a pinch of poison at the age of sixty. He died believing himself to have been an utter failure. Evidently, the devil inside him would not let his mind dwell on his dozens of contributions to human welfare.

But a young physicist named Bal Hartman seized upon Schwartz' work as proof of some of his own theories about light rays. Hartman, eight months after Schwartz' death, published a daring paper in which—giving Schwartz full credit—he stated that light is beyond all doubt a basic

(2) In a lecture before the Pennsylvania Associates, Cleveland, April 17, 1911, Loring stated: "I believe it entirely possible to duplicate in miniature the concerted actions of all the cosmos. There is, however, a single element missing. Strangely enough, this may be a very common element. We know that a single element acts in different manners under different conditions. Free-void is a condition in itself unlike any so far known to us. But a condition which can be duplicated. I have come close to success many times; close enough to know that always some one element serves a different purpose in free-void than under any other condition."

(3) Roger Kenning, Schwartz' life-long friend and biographer, painted a graphic picture of his idol in *Genius at Work* (Temple Photo Press) published in 1921, a year after Schwartz' tragic death. Kenning says: "A no more unhappy man than Schwartz ever lived. It seemed to me at times that he was in the clutches of some inner demon that drove him on and on and on, while at the same time deriding and ridiculing him for his failures. There were those who thought the man mad, and I can only agree; but it was a madness unlike that of any other mortal. An unquenchable fire burning and thundering within him, never letting him rest.

"Schwartz' standard of measurement was always failure, never success. I remember the night he received the First Medal of the Pennsylvania Associates, an honor shared only by four men. Schwartz was so honored for his aid to the medical profession in giving them his five controlled antiseptic rays, thus ending germ, fungus, and malignant-growth diseases for all time.

"I attended the presentation banquet with him and accompanied him to his quarters after the presentation. He was standing in a corner of the room, his face turned from me, his huge hands locked behind his back. I remarked, 'Tonight, Marchman, you should be the happiest of men.'

"He turned slowly to show me his great, broad face, ugly to the point of beauty. And I could see the tears streaming from his eyes. 'Proud?' he asked. 'Proud of what?'

"Before I could answer, he went on: 'For a medal they gave me in return for a few crumbs from under my laboratory table? It means nothing—nothing at all—because I haven't proven anything! Don't you understand? I've wasted a lifetime chasing phantoms! And there is so little time left!'"

power-source.

This paper, unintelligible to the layman, said in essence that light rays, once come into this particular disciplinary form, never die, but remain in that form vulnerable only to a fixed quantum-combination of destruction found in rare submolecular combinations.

In short, Hartman said there is no such thing as "putting out a light" in the accepted sense; that darkness is but superimposed combinations of the basic power.

Hartman began immediately upon a series of experiments that resulted in the system of illumination now in universal use. The old system entailed various wasteful methods of transforming various other forms of energy—mainly electricity—into illuminative forms. It was Hartman who laid down the principles whereby it became possible to illuminate vast areas by stripping away superimposed "heavy" light rays by straining a pre-weighted total through a Lastron tube. A comparatively simple process that somehow evaded the unhappy Schwartz.

Immediately, Loring seized upon Hartman's discovery as the guide to his unknown cosmic factor. Starlight. In less than a year, this brilliant physicist perfected his Loring Vacuum Tank. (4)

Various scientists and physicists pursued exhaustive studies of free-void conditions as simulated in the Loring Tank, and thus were well acquainted with free-void and its characteristics even before a practical means of space-travel had been perfected.

These studies detected the presence of the dread heat pockets which were later to plague the free-void rover. Hartman, however, had mathematically proven the existence of these terrible space rovers even before they were discovered in his tank.

CHAPTER VI

THE CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

MAN WAS not yet ready, however, to span free-void. The cart had come before the horse; man knew far more about the highway than about the means of conveyance.

Prior to 2140, no practicable means of powering a space craft had been devised. The means of ample power translation had been at hand for years, but the weight-power ratio had never been successfully worked out.

Several individual components still awaited discovery. It would have seemed that Hartman, so close to the

(4) *Science For the Lay Mind* (Pennsylvania Associates, 2130): "Loring's tank, constructed of heavy, transparent plastoid, marked a milestone in cosmic-molecular research. The term 'Vacuum Tank' was a misnomer, as a vacuum existed within the container only before Loring began injecting the proper combination of elements. These consisted of certain molecular latents and actives, together with a sub-atomic gas known and controlled but not understood. All important was a fixed reflection of starlight set at the consistency of free-void norm. This last key catalyst was made possible by certain discoveries of Bal Hartman, based upon the life-work of Marchman Schwartz. The only adjustment necessary was a specially constructed Lastron tube to correctly monitor the preweight derivative.

The tank was set in the center of a ring of cellular-electronic microscopic magnifiers, and through these instruments one could watch in miniature the building and the tearing down of the eternal cosmos; the living and the dying of solar families and galaxies; here, for Man to watch and study, was the awe-inspiring work of creation going upon its majestic way; here were age-old questions answered with mathematical clarity and precision.

basic secret, could have been depended upon to produce the most important of these components. This was not the case, however. The honor of perfecting a practical power-translation unit fell to a physio-chemist named Arnold Hitchcock who, following the path laid down by Schwartz, Hartman and Loring, invented, in 2153, the first unit capable of translating the light ray power basic into a combustible fuel for jet-drive. The motor was unique in that it had no moving parts and worked on the principle of magnetism increasing in a high ratio to expanding heat translation.

But all the preliminary problems were not yet overcome. The one which had stumped the Sacramento Engineers so many years before still remained to be solved. The problem of weight. A craft capable of spanning space would still be far too heavy to lift from Earth. (5)

Ten years elapsed before the solution was found in the work of Robert Porter, who was then not even at the peak of his miracle performances with metals. But in the year 2162, Porter furnished the specifications for

a Porter steel shell, the metal weighing no more than standard aluminum, yet a two-inch thickness of it having the same tensile strength found in a hand, and the adventurer-genius LeRoy Packard came to the fore. Packard, backed by the Pennsylvania Associates, was the moving force behind the building of the first guided space-craft. It was completed in the year 2167, was of tear-drop design, and was powered by four ray-motor jets. Packard believed the craft capable of penetrating free-void, circling and returning therefrom.

He himself designed and devised a system of controls transcending the ordinary radio control, which he felt would not only hold the craft in subservience, but also, via the Schwartz-Hartman light-image research, provide an adequate photo transmission while the trip was in progress.

The craft, named *Experiment Pennsylvania*, was hurled skyward on the morning of June 9, 2167, a first test of all the components contributed piecemeal by some of the world's greatest brains. (6)

Packard was highly elated that he

(5) From an anonymous paper in the files of the Sacramento Engineer's Club, dated August 8, 2110: "We can leave Earth, travel to the Moon, and return. We have the power source and translation; we could build the conveyance. There is at the moment but one barrier, and this a presently insurmountable one. In order to contain the necessary equipment and also hold up under the stresses and strains of the voyage, the space craft would of necessity weigh somewhat over four thousand tons. The problem of lifting such a mass beyond Earth's gravity cannot, at present, be solved."

The anonymous author was, of course, in error. The engineers of the time were overindulging in optimism. They did not have either the power source or the translation; neither would their four-thousand-ton craft have triumphed over free-void even if they had had the means of lifting it above gravity.

(6) For further study into the various principles, men, and inventions behind the first space craft, the following tapes and volumes are recommended:

Roger Kenning: *Genius at Work* (Temple Photo Press, 2121).

Schwartz—*Unhappy Superman* (Temple Photo Press, 2130).

From *Fermi to Packard* (Pennsylvania Associates, 2152).

Frieda Katzman, *The Iron Kite* (on the Toronto College tapes).

Prof. Leahy Williman, *The Sub-Quantum Theories—1 to 17* (University of Chicago Press, 2149).

Leona Ketterling, Porter—*Man of Metal* (Bobbs-Merrill, Hays & Crawford, 2160).

could follow his space baby in flight, and follow it he did—right into a heat pocket where he saw the beginning of its translation into a thin streak of molten metal. Whereupon the Pennsylvania Associates charged off seven million dollars and looked to their credit balance. They decided further backing was in order.

But obviously some new safeguard was needed. This was perfected by Lenster, a communications expert with the General Transmission Trustees, a radic combine of the time. Lenster perfected a dependable device for translating rays from the heat pocket walls into radic signal beams, effective at a distance sufficient to escape the magnetic draw of the pockets.

So Packard tried a second time. *Mercury I* pushed its bright nose beyond Earth's field early in 2170. Again Packard was dogged by misfortune. He lost control of his tear-drop, and no doubt some far planet eventually pulled the doughty space rover down.

The Pennsylvania Associates, still long on determination, were now short on funds, so the General Transmission Trustees and the Calais University Expansion Fund came to their rescue. Packard offered to step down in favor of someone who had at least more luck, if not more brains. His offer was refused, and he was set to supervising the building of the *Mercury II*.

Packard built the ship to accommodate a human passenger, then announced his intention of riding it into space. Attempted dissuasion was of no avail.

It so happened, however, that Packard had borrowed personal funds from the First Physicists' Society, and the president of that august or-

ganization read to Packard some of the small print in the contract he'd signed. The copy demanded that Packard keep his feet on Earth soil until his bill was paid. Packard sought loans with which to pay the Physicists but, strangely enough, he couldn't borrow a single dollar. This, of course, was merely a subterfuge so far as the Physicists were concerned. They felt Packard was too valuable a man to be crisped out in a heat pocket. The subterfuge worked, however, and Packard was forced to watch the *Mercury II* clear the field without him.

Fate now treated Packard with more consideration. The tear-drop roamed free-void for over three months, after which time Packard brought her back to the ways in Detroit as bright and clean as the day she'd cleared.

But she brought with her proof of a new problem, one not previously seen from work in Loring's Tank. In truth, she brought back proof that rocket-type craft are useless for space travel at high speeds. In fact, no high speed had been developed. *Mercury II* had not at any time traveled above five thousand miles per hour.

Far more grave, however, were the signs of the terrific stress and strain the ship had undergone. Knowing full well that the obvious vibrational damage had not been the result of any structural defects, the scientists went to work on the problem in two groups. The Pennsylvania Associates concentrated on the *Mercury II*, while the First Physicists occupied themselves with the projected problems, using a Loring Tank as a basis of inquiry.

A year passed, and it was the Physicists who found the answer: that the only practical space ship

would, of necessity, be globular in shape. (7)

The principle was of course accepted because the proof of the Physicists was conclusive. But, even then, the General Transmission Trustees from whom now came all the financial backing, wanted what they considered more practical proof that such a revolutionary divergence was necessary.

They were willing to pay for the proof, so Packard constructed another tear-drop; one with arrangements made for a speed of seven thousand miles per hour—far too slow for space travel—and staged a demonstration for General Transmission. He cleared the field with the craft and tore off its tail half way to Luna, entirely for the edification of the General scions.

And now, General balked at carrying the entire financial load, inquiring as to where they would get their money back even if the project were successful. Why the question was brought up at that late date is not clear, but as a result of General's reluctance, the First Physicists tapped their bulging tills and came forth with half the backing. General agreed to handle the other half.

The blueprints for the first globular space craft were obtained in relatively open competition. Individual scientists were invited to submit personal qualifications. After studying these, the backers, under advice from selected Physicists, subsidized twenty-five likely applicants and promised rich rewards for success.

Eleven months later, Evon Trude submitted plans and blueprints for the Trude Flying Platform, and the die was cast. Trude, working closely with Packard, built the craft in eighteen months. It consisted of a circular platform hinged on an axis at two points on the inside of a Porter Steel globe. Under the platform, in the lower hemisphere of the globe, was the gyro equipment to hold both the platform and the globe stationary against the revolutions of a second globe enveloping the inner one, the outer globe revolving free. The outer globe was swung also on the axis.

Outside the outer globe, on both poles of the axis, were superimposed Porter steel blisters which housed basic power translators and were pierced by five strategically placed jets. Controls from the blisters projected through a huge axis tube which bisected the platform and served as a complete control board. The blisters served also as the "eyes" of the ship, through a system of reflectors through the axis. Also, strategically placed, smaller jets were attached to the outer surface of the inner globe, in order to speed up or brake the speed of the free-spinning outer globe. (8)

The craft had much to recommend it. Under complete control from the inner platform at all times, it could be lifted gently from its berth on two jets, through any magnetic field. Could be set squarely and accurately into any orbit. With the combined force of the jets and the revolving shell, speed was limited only by the stress

(7) From a lecture by Professor Henri Tardo before a class at Calais University, May 19, 2182, on the Calais tapes: "It was a problem solved by a child—a child with simple faith in the Infinite. But we were of course too full of knowledge and intelligence to listen. It was solved the day my small daughter said, "Daddy, all God's space ships are round. Why are ours long and narrow?"

(8) *Trude's Flying Platform* (Pennsylvania Associates, 2195).

twenty-six inch thickness of R2 steel.

So all the materials were now at and strain quotient. Because of Porter's magic, this quotient was practically nil.

Also, no equipment or allowance had to be made for human frailty due to sudden precipitation into high speeds. There was ample power in the blisters to lift the globe straight upward from berth at a speed rate as low as forty feet per minute by actual test.

So Evon Trude was now a wealthy man, and the scientists were ready to brave free-void. (9)

Now, Man looked with brave eyes

toward the unmeasured distances beyond Earth's atmosphere. Sure of their technical knowledge, sure of their space craft, sure of themselves, they prepared to depart from the Earth's atmosphere for the first time in all history.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *In the next installment of the history, our unknown historian recounts the story of man's arrival on Luna, and on Mars, and gives a true account of conditions on the planets of our Solar Family.*

(9) After the establishment of the Social Codes in 2045, antedating by a decade the complete public acceptance of the mutual benefits pioneered and proved in the "cultural island", the new basis of individual initiative became accepted as standard.

Under the Codes, a basic living standard for every world citizen was worked out. The facilities for maintaining this standard were granted each citizen as his just and rightful heritage. However, these basic grants in the way of food, clothing, living space, etc., formed an accepted minimum, which was estimated at the living level of a couple with two children earning seventy-five hundred dollars per annum in the year 1942.

If an individual wished to rise above this minimum level of existence, the way was open for individual effort. If the reader wishes to go further into this phase of economic and social history, a volume titled *The Man, The World and the Norm*, by Lewis DeKoven (Temple Photo Press, 2090) is recommended.

NO GREATER DISCOVERY!

By William Karney

POPULAR articles never tire of discussing the greatest and most influential of Man's inventions. At various times, fire, the wheel, printing, the symbol zero, and a host of other things have been acclaimed as the world's "greatest" inventions. Discussions of that sort are generally of the "straw man" variety, wherein you set up a mock situation and proceed to knock it down by a logical process. Nevertheless, such discussions are valuable because they lead to a consideration of the really fundamental ideas which have moved human beings to mastery of their domain.

If you're going to advance the thesis of the world's greatest invention, the ideal consideration is not gadgets or things, but rather ideas and principles. On this score, then, ethics and morality, as well as mathematics and mechanics have a place in the argument. Apart from ethics and morality, though, it must be realized above all else that Man, even in these esoteric fields, is

a symbol-using animal and that, more than any other single fact, distinguishes him from the animal world.

Alfred North Whitehead, the great mathematician and philosopher, probably caught this principle more clearly than anyone else. He made the simple but profound statement, "...the first man who noticed the similarity between *seven* fishes, say, and *seven* days, made one of the most notable advances in human thought..."

That abstraction, the abstraction of number, is unquestionably one of the greatest thought-provoking strides in the whole of human experience. Mathematics and number, the most abstract of human thoughts and at the same time the most important for concrete advances, enabled man to symbolize his ideas, perhaps not with physical symbols, but certainly with words and mental images. What an interesting thing it would be to be able to go back and investigate the mind of the first man to whom this relationship ever occurred!



THE CLUB HOUSE

By Rog Phillips

I WAS SITTING at my typewriter contemplating my novel. That was yesterday. Today my novel is finished, and I feel a sense of loss. That's one of the drawbacks to being a writer. You create a world and people it, and live with it. And then you write the magical words, THE END. You sit back with a feeling of having accomplished something. But the next day you feel you've lost something. Eventually you have to try to recapture what you've lost by starting another story. You recapture it, only to lose it again when you've finished that story.

Some people have captured the feeling by taking years to write a novel, with no real thought of selling it. *Gone With The Wind* was written that way. The manuscript was two feet thick, I heard. And Shasta Publishers are bringing out a book, *Beyond These Walls*, that was written by a woman who regarded it as a hobby. She had never read science fiction. Didn't even know there was such a branch of literature. She dreamed up a world of the far future where there were cities, self-contained and surrounded by force screens to keep out the jungles and savages. In one of these cities lived a biochemist. That's all he knew, biochemistry. He got into some kind of trouble, probably political, and was expelled from the city. They suspended the force screen long enough for him to reach the edge of the jungle. A weakling, he develops in the story into a capable man and leader, and eventually returns to the city. At first he could manipulate a molecule with

utmost perfection, but fumble ineptly with a shovel.

One day the author picked up a book in a book store and took it home and read it. It was about a similar dream world of the future. She realized for the first time there might be a sale for her story. There was.

The urge to create something is quite universal among human beings. It provides a satisfaction that nothing else can. With most people it never becomes more than an occasional impulse. With one in a thousand it becomes more or less of a driving compulsion. They become writers, artists, sculptors, architects. And who knows how much of a conscious realization of creating history animates the figures of history? And scientists?

In an "expose" of Walter Winchell that is running in various newspapers the accusation is made that he has remarked, "A hundred years from now Walter Winchell will be the only reporter of these times who will be remembered". I have a sneaking hunch that that hope, if not belief, animates all the other best-known news analysts and commentators.

From the moment a President is inaugurated into office he must be aware that he has entered history. As long as there is a United States he will be listed in history books as one of the Presidents. He most likely feels a hope that he will be more than just listed. When he has a momentous decision to make, a historic meeting to attend, he must occasionally pause and consider what potential historic importance, what possible influence, his

words and decisions will have.

Stalin, sitting behind the walls of the Kremlin, is certainly aware at all times that he is making history. Hitler, even at his last moment before killing himself, must have held in consciousness the satisfying feeling that he had at least been one of those who made history. Not the history he had set out to make, but history. He had tried to create. For a time it probably seemed to him he was creating. In the end all he had created was history. Perhaps in those last hours he was attempting to create a religion, with himself as the godhead, so that the new religion would complete his dreams of creation.

The world's heavyweight boxing champion must feel a thrill that he is a historical figure, over and above any feeling he has of being able to lick anyone on earth.

Every criminal who feels within himself a certain skill at his chosen profession must at some time or other feel the urge to become recognized as the greatest that ever lived in his line. The greatest international jewel thief, the slickest pickpocket in the history of the New York Police Department. The creator of the greatest murder mystery ever to confront the nation: the Black Dahlia murder.

The urge to create sometimes gets mixed up with the urge to be recognized as a creator. Spurious fame can sometimes come to be desired by those who feel they can't gain true fame. In crime, the police have to contend with this. Many people "confess" to the Black Dahlia Murder, in the hope that they will gain fame, even at the cost of their lives.

A successful murderer undoubtedly has to fight the urge within him to become recognized. The corollary of a successful murder is that the murderer remain unknown. And that's

contrary to human instinct. Like the old one about the woman who said, "They do say that murder will out, but no one ever did discover that I murdered my first husband and buried him under the manure pile behind the barn."

And for every murder where some crackpot came forward and "confessed", and was convicted (and there have been some like that), the true murder must have felt a sense of outrage, a desire to come forward and expose the upstart, and must have had to fight it and hold it down.

In the history of science there have been known instances of men gaining credit for some new discovery by conscious fraud. In modern journalism there are men who earn a living by ghost writing for the journalists whose names are family bywords. In any writer's journal you can see ads like, "Do you want to see your name in print? Let me ghost write your novel!" Those ads must pay for themselves or they wouldn't be there. The urge to become recognized as a creator remains after the attempts to be a creator have failed. In some people.

In some people the urge to be recognized may be stronger than the urge to create. Both are tied to the urge to have a purpose in life, to be important in the eyes of the public or some section of the public. At first, though, I think it starts as a pure desire to create. If that desire finds fruition only in imperfection or failure, it turns to spurious outlets for satisfaction.

In myself, and in a lot of people, I have found a lack of enthusiasm about the things other people have discovered, and great attraction for the things they failed to discover, or failed to accomplish. I gained a good command of plane geometry by trying to trisect the angle. I gained a good

command of algebra and the theory of numbers by trying to solve Fermat's last theorem. The trisection of the angle has been proved impossible. Fermat's last theorem has never been proved impossible. Millions of people have seized upon it as a quick road to fame, a tailor-made outline of creation of something new. It is, stated in words, "A to the nth power plus B to the nth power, n being greater than two, and n, A, and B being integers, can never equal an nth power of an integer". Fermat claimed to have proved it, but didn't bother to write the proof. The problem is so famous that if anyone ever did solve it he (or she) would be famous forever, no matter whether he had a collitch degree or not. It's one of those things: a challenge, a monument of mystery that challenges the human mind.

The urge to create is, I think, instinctive in the normal mind. The ideal society is one where that instinctive urge to create is permitted to find expression.

Next to creating, or perhaps I should say allied with it, is the pleasure of experiencing a masterful creation, whether it is a painting or a story or something else. They say fiction is a form of escapism, meaning that the reader is surrounded by woes and chooses fiction to escape into another world where his troubles or frustrations don't exist.

In a very basic sense I don't believe that is true. Very few people turn to reading to escape their troubles. A lot of people read to escape boredom, though. In that kind of escape they are seeking satisfaction of a kind they can't get in their surroundings, whether it is a glamorous love affair with a beautiful damsel who needs them, or bold adventure in the asteroid belt with Black Bart, the pirate of the spaceways. The alterna-

tive is boredom. Sitting in solitude and contemplating one's navel, so to speak. Which brings us to the very core of this instinctive urge to create. Solitude is no good unless it is creative solitude. The human mind isn't constructed to idle. It must be engaged in making a piece of furniture in the basement workshop, doing the laundry, cooking, writing a letter, reading a book, listening to the radio, or something.

Put a totally nonintellectual man in solitary confinement for a month and he will go insane, just to be doing something. Even the mystics who make a profession of contemplating their navel do so to make the sensory intake so boring that the mind frees itself to wander on purely intellectual planes.

A person alone in a room, and reading, is, in a sense, passively creating. The part of the mind that finds emotional satisfaction in the new, the created, can find perhaps as much satisfaction without the knowledge of having created unassisted.

And certainly the story that the reader remembers the next day, the novel he takes delight in contemplating again and again, is one that he would have been proud to write himself. One that offers something more than—escape!

* * *

In the letter department there's one from Max Keasler, who says "When I got home for the Xmas holidays there was a foot-high stack of letters asking for a sample copy of Fv. Most of them were fans who had never read or seen a fanzine before". He sends his new fanzine, *Opus*, which will appear in the reviews this time.

A letter from James Taurasi says

he is interested in getting pictures of Mari and me for use in his newszine, *Fantasy-Times*. By the time you read this he should have them. He also asks me to announce the coming *Fan-Vet* Convention, Sunday, April 20th, 1952, at one p.m., Werdermann's Hall, Third Ave. and East 16th St., New York City. Features of the day will be a fantasy film, introduction of guests, editors, authors, artists, etc., among whom will be Paul Fairman, Sam Mines, Jerry Bixby, and others. Another feature will be the auction of collector's items. Reason for the event is to get favorable publicity for the *Fan-Vets*; and at the same time raise money, by means of the auction, to send mags and books to fans in the U.S. armed forces overseas where they can't get them for themselves. Their sole source of revenue for this project is the income from the yearly auction and from private donations. The *Fan-Vet* news sheet, and *Fantasy-Times* are separate projects. *Fan-Vet* is sent free of charge to any fan member of the armed forces who asks for it. The letter is from both Jimmy and Ray Van Houten. Jimmy also wants to stress the fact that F-T is put out "by four guys, all active in the mag, and is not a one-man product". That's true of many of the fanzines. In my reviews I sometimes mention that, but more often merely give the name of the editor and his address so that the reader will know where to send for the zine. After he gets a copy he can get the rest. In fact, almost no top-ranking fanzine is masterminded by just one person.

* * *

The Tenth Anniversary World Science-Fiction Convention is crystallizing into form now. Their Bulletin No. 1, January 1952, was in this month's

mail. Plans are for it to be held in the Hotel Morrison in Chicago, the world's tallest hotel. Rates are quite reasonable, for a good hotel: from five dollars for a single to eight for a double. And it's in the heart of the Loop, so if you want something cheaper you can find it within walking distance of the Morrison.

The convention is to be held August 30-31, September 1. You can find out more by writing to SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION, Box 1422, Chicago 90, Illinois.

For the benefit of you newcomers, every year over the Labor Day holidays there's the big annual World Science-Fiction Convention. Last year it was in New Orleans (the Nolacon). In 1950 it was in Portland, Oregon (the Norwescon). In 1949 it was Cincinnati (the Cinventon). The very first one was in Chicago, ten years ago (the Chicon). So far the bulletin lists 228 names of those intending to be there. There will of course be many more than that. Probably closer to five hundred fans and professionals will be there for the three-day convention, including Mari and me. And undoubtedly Howard Browne and Lila Shaffer.

One thing, you will have to place your reservations early if you want to stay at the hotel. Over Labor Day every hotel in Chicago is filled to the gills. Makes a normal American situation. Everyone from out of town comes in and stays at a hotel. All the hotels are full. Everyone who lives in town goes to the country. All the houses are empty. . . Place your reservation directly through the Committee, rather than directly with the hotel.

And now we come to the fanzine reviews. First is one that sort of snuck up on me. You'll see why in a minute. To quote its editor, "This zine is, and we believe you will agree,

absolutely at rock bottom". We agree. You can't get any lower in putting out a fanzine. It's positively the lousiest excuse for a fanzine I've ever seen. And in a way that is its appeal. It has the lowest circulation of any fanzine—only ten so far. At least it boasts of having ten readers! That's rock bottom. Its price is nothing. That's a rock-bottom price. But its editor has to work hard at putting it out, because, you see, he writes each copy by hand. For that I take my hat off to him and give him first place this time. And don't be afraid to subscribe, because when he gets enough readers he's going to get a mimeo or something and become respectable. So here it is...

* * *

BEGINNING THE FUTURE: Vol. 1, Nos. 1, 2, 3; free upon request; Inter-galactic Publishing Company, Box 1329, Grand Central Station, New York 17, N.Y. Published weekly. Handwritten. Editor, Mr. U. And all I can say is that there never was, and never will be another U. He's original!

Until he gets some subscribers so he can expand (and some contributors too), he will publish only news and book reviews and such. One thing I must ask you to do, if you send for this zine. Please, please enclose a three-cent stamp. And a lot of you should send for it. Mr. U deserves encouragement if anyone ever did!

* * *

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION: 25c: Charles Freudenthal, 1331 W. Newport Ave., Chicago 13, Ill. This is one of the nicest first issues that's come my way in some time. Photo-offset printing on slick paper, good picture reproduction, thirty-two pages. Ray Bradbury occupies two articles, one by him, "Where Do I Get My Ideas", and the other by Edward Wood, "The Case Against Bradbury".

Mr. Wood says, "There is hope for Bradbury, if he can achieve a firmer writing discipline before his present dazzling success overwhelms him. He may even attain some measure of lasting fame.... Some day he may even write some science fiction".

Ray Bradbury says about himself, "If you ask me where I get my ideas then I will have to say I was raised on Poe and

Hawthorne and Waukegan (the town in Illinois where he was born) and Hemingway and *Amazing Stories* and *Oz*... I wanted to write a book that would use Buck Rogers perhaps as a springboard... taking the people from my home town, I parceled them out into rockets, to live, to build homes, to be lonely. And I knew that the essence of my book must be loneliness".

For myself, I hope that Ray remains Ray Bradbury, and I'm sure he will. Too many writers successfully develop a style, then try to follow their critics' advice—and write better stories that are forgotten immediately.

This is only a beginning on a review of this zine, but I can't give it more space. Send for it if you want more—and it's worth it.

* * *

FANTASY-TIMES: 10c; twice a month; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 Thirty Second Ave., Flushing 54, New York. The newszine that publishes the news when it happens, and sometimes before. Eleventh year of publication.

It used to be mimeographed. Its subscription list became so big that it had to go photo-offset, and it was a big improvement, because now reproduction of illos doesn't have to be done by tracing on stencil.

Not only do you get reporting on personalities behind your stf magazines and books, you also get complete coverage of all new magazines and books, and films and tv shows, etc., that are going to appear, so that you can be looking for them. If you are interested in fantasy and science fiction at all you should be a regular subscriber.

* * *

JOURNAL OF SPACE FLIGHT: sample copy on request; official organ of the Chicago Rocket Society; 10630 S. St. Louis Ave., Chicago 43, Illinois. Editor Robert Friberg.

Mr. Friberg forgot to include the address somewhere in the zine. Every fanzine should have the address displayed somewhere, because I generally get them from the office sans envelopes. I had to look it up in a back issue of the CLUB HOUSE.

Maybe subconsciously he knew he had forgotten that, because he put it on the last page, "Thanks of the month goes to Rog Phillips of the famed 'Club House' who has consistently given the CRS and its publications an intelligent and helpful helping hand, in a quiet and appreciated way". Flattery will get you nowhere! Put your address in the zine!

There's a reason why I have consistently boosted this zine. It consistently publishes material that I feel most serious science

and science-fiction enthusiasts want and need. Articles written by members of the Society who are engaged in research into the problems that will have to be faced when we break away from the gravitational chains of our planet. In each issue there's at least one lengthy article of this type. In the January issue it's "A Punch Card System For Space Flight Research". An eight-page article, adequately covering the subject.

In addition, in every issue, is the department "Rocket Abstracts," which contains thumbnail notations of articles and facts of interest to science-fiction fans, taken from dozens of current periodicals.

In subscribing to this zine you are putting a lot of guys to work, just for you, reading and studying, and making their reports every month.

And if you want to make their acquaintance personally they have regular monthly meetings of the Society on the first Friday of the month at 8:00 P.M., in Room 518 of Roosevelt College, in Chicago.

* * *

OOPSLA: 10c; Gregg Calkins, 930 Briarcliff Ave., Salt Lake City 16, Utah. A first issue regular type of fanzine. Mimeographed on several colors of paper. The cover is a drawing of a author delivering a manuscript in person to the editor of a fanzine, discovering that the address is Schultz's Market.

Gregg begins his editorial with, "This is the first issue of a fanzine I hope someday to make one of the top ones in fandom". See what I mean about creative drives? And maybe he will. He's off to a good start. Plenty of good fan cartoons, good mimeography, interesting stuff. Even something by Rog Phillips. A reprint of the very first CLUB HOUSE editorial from *Amazing Stories*.

The titles of the contents will show you this is going to be a fan publication with lots of fun. The editorial is titled *Eruptions*. *Scoop!* Hoffman Fanfile is a word sketch of fandom's most spectacular fem-fance: 5' 8", brown eyes, auburn hair, not much Southern accent, definitely not skinny, to quote from it, and will be twenty around August. Born in a hospital, too. Which predisposed her to be editor of the fanzine, *Quandry*, and prolific contributor to other fanzines.

There's more. Much more. And I predict that *Oopsla* will become one of your favorites.

* * *

NEWS LETTER: 15c; every second month; Bob Tucker, P.O. Box 702, Bloomington, Illinois. "The leading newspaper of the science fiction world." And in its way it definitely is. Bob approaches news from a different angle, and puts plenty

of thought into his zine and into gathering the news.

More interesting item in this issue is the 1951 checklist of stf magazines. Twenty-nine titles, four now suspended. Most interesting feature, as always, is "Letters to the Editor".

On the cover of the January issue is a picture of Bea Mahaffey and Judy May, who are somewhat masterminding the convention this year....

OPUS 1: Max Keasler's successor to FAN VARIETY; 15c; W. Max Keasler, Box 24, Washington U., St. Louis 5, Mo. Originator of the famous torpedo boys, the characters who have very expressive eyes and nothing much else, Max keeps his zines filled with little cartoon characters that make you happy even if you can't read. "Ever Lovin' Yers", the letter department, is particularly interesting because of a hoax article that was run in F-V No. 13. But there's more going on there than a furor over a hoax. Take for example the following:

An editor of another fanzine wrote a letter to Max saying some bad things about another fan. It was published. Meanwhile the unsuspecting victim had sent in a subscription to the fanzine of the editor who had attacked him. So that editor writes a hurry-up letter to Max saying, "Please don't print that letter about Blank being love sick. Please don't. He just became one of my subscribers..."

"Worms Eye View of Some Editors" is Marion Bradley's personal views on some well known pro editors, and is highly entertaining. I should list everything in the issue. You'll enjoy it all. The cover itself is terrific, and points up the big question of the day, though it doesn't mention it explicitly: IS POGO GOING TO REPLACE SCIENCE FICTION? That has a lot of us more worried than we are about the inroads of television.

* * *

THE NATIONAL FANTASY FAN: official organ of the National Fantasy Federation (NFFF). Membership dues \$1.00 per year. Editor, Ray C. Higgs, 813 Eastern Ave., Connersville, Indiana. Treasurer, Bill Berger, 912 E. 140th St., Cleveland, Ohio. I don't know how many members NFFF has now, but it's quite a few hundred. Membership activities run the gamut of stf interests from writing to fan publishing to collecting, with all sorts of benefits like discounts in buying books, to the manuscript bureau where the fan author can send his work and the fan editor can send for material he needs for his fanzine. You can't get more for your money anywhere, and you can't get into the thick of fandom quicker anywhere, or have more fun doing it.

* * *

THE LITTLE CORPUSCLE: free to members; 15c, to non-members; published for the Napoleon Fantasy Club and the Little Monsters of America. Editor, Lynn A. Hickman, 408 W. Bell St., Statesville, N.C. TLMA is one of the fastest growing general fan clubs. And they go to make this fanzine worth reading. Membership in the Little Monsters is also a dollar. Subscriptions to LITTLE CORPUSCLE and its big sister zine, TLMA, are included, which gives you more than your money's worth. On top of that you make the acquaintance of many interesting people.

TLMA has ambitions to become a chain group of local fan clubs, and has already succeeded in starting local chapters in a lot of places. For details write the above address.

* * *

RENAISSANCE: formerly COSMIC; 10c; Joseph Semenovich, 40-14 Tenth St., Long Island City 1, New York, who says, "We know we have a great fanzine, send us a letter and tell us why we have a great fanzine." Okay, let's see if you have, Joe....

Already we find something that makes this issue worth a dime. It's Bob Silverberg's article on "Science-Fiction Magazine Rarities". You might have one of them in your own collection, something worth real money, like twenty-five bucks for a book whose original price was two or three dollars. The first issue of *Amazing Stories* is worth something like fifty dollars if it's in top condition!

"Does Science-Fiction Deny God?" by L.L. Shepherd is worth a dime by itself. It's well and intelligently written. It's the kind of article you can get more out of on the second or third reading than the first, and get enough out of on the first to want to read it again.

So you've proved your point, Joe. And any reader who sends for a copy and doesn't think so—I'll return double his dime to him for a letter telling me why he thinks he was rooked.

And there're twenty more pages you don't even have to read—but you will. They're good reading.

* * *

SCIENCE-FICTION ADVERTISER (formerly *Fantasy-Advertiser*): 20c; Roy A. Squires, 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, California. In the January issue a prize contest is running. Fifteen dollars, plus the regular page rate, is offered for the best article on the subject of any contemporary writer (stf type); and evaluation of his writing in terms of the main stream of science fiction; how he has been

influenced by other writers; discussion of ideas he has introduced to science fiction; analysis of his growth as a writer, etc....

Stf Advertiser, is, as its name implies, primarily an advertising medium. As such, it has a terrific circulation not only in fan circles but out of fan circles, in the book field and in book stores where it is sold over the counter. Published every other month, it contains for the most part ads and book reviews. But in addition there are well-written articles that are paid for with money. So any of you fans who are looking for a paying market should investigate this one too.

Photo-offset throughout, this issue has a terrific planetary cover by Morris Scott Dollens.

* * *

FANTASIAS: 10c; David English, 203 Robin St. Dunkirk, N.Y. Cover by Max Keasler depicts some kind of high priestess at her altar. Bill Venable is the author of an article, "The Hardest Job in Fandom". He starts it off with the intriguing statement, "It has been said that the hardest job in the world would be Wheeling West Virginia". He goes on to say that the hardest job in fandom is to organize a going stf fan club. I agree with him. Also perhaps the most pleasurable, if you like that kind of work.

A generous sprinkling of fan art, and some good fan fiction, are what make this zine. And there's some darn good fantasy poetry which seems to be growing rather scarce in fanzines lately. Why? Twenty-two pages make this a well rounded issue. Your subscriptions will help him keep it up....

* * *

BSFF: *Bulletin of the Baltimore Stf Forum*; next meeting March 19, 1952. Editor, Ray J. Sienkiewicz, 802 W. 35th St., Baltimore 11, Md. With twelve pages, the contents lists sixteen things. So most of them are brief.

There's a wonderful lilting rhythm to Charlotte Gilman's poem, "Similar Cases". Only three of the ten stanzas appear, but you can get the rest by requesting them.

This seems to be a very good local club. If you live near Baltimore, why don't you contact Ray and attend a meeting?

* * *

Last, but far from least, is a monumental fan work. One of those works of love that aren't fanzines and can't

be compared with one. It's the RAY BRADBURY REVIEW, copyright 1952, William F. Nolan, editor and publisher, 4458-56th St., San Diego, California. Price 50c.

It's a beautiful professional job of photo-offset, sixty-four pages, and covers the subject of Bradbury and

his writings from start to finish, collecting into one volume articles about him and his various stories from many different sources, all tabulated. It's the type of thing you would gladly pay three bucks for in hard cover. And it's only fifty cents. If you like Bradbury, get it. **ROG PHILLIPS**



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SCIENCE FICTION

BOOKCASE

TRAVELERS OF SPACE, edited by Martin Greenberg, Gnome Press, New York (\$3.95).

Like breakfast food shot from the wide mouths of 240-millimeter howitzers, the current explosion of science-fiction anthologies continues to inundate the land, in a fashion reminiscent of the annual spring floods of the Ohio River Valley—save that the seasons seem to impose no restrictions on the torrent. Two are reviewed in the current Bookcase, and we have received word by everything from heliograph to carrier pigeon of at least a dozen more in various stages of preparation.

Now, we have no objection to stf anthologies *per se*. However, the current spilldam overflow of same is already beginning to cause the field to show definite signs of erosion. In most cases, at any rate. Since the bulk of anthologies run heavily to the short story spliced occasionally with the short novelet, and since the actual topsoil of short stories of real literary excellence in the realm of science-fiction is extremely limited, the anthologist is faced with either running material already over-used, or publishing second and third-rate stuff.

Bradbury, Brown, Asimov, Leinster, Kuttner-Badgett, MacDonald, van Vogt, Tenn, Sturgeon—these are the names that compose the spine of anthology after anthology. All too

often, since the science-fiction output of this group of talented authors is in general severely limited, we keep running head-on into the same stories.

There are ways around the impasse, of course. It is our hunch that most of the best modern science-fantasy writing has been done in lengths ranging from 10,000 words up—with the 15,000-30,000 zone remaining virtually untouched by anthologists and other hard-cover publishers.

The usual publisher's objection to compiling a volume of such story lengths is that the casual reader wants to see a lot of stories listed on the contents page. Otherwise he feels he's getting gypped and won't buy. This we consider balderdash, humbug and tripe. If the volume is properly presented, so the prospective reader will know what he's getting in the way of quantity, and if the stories are good, it will sell.

The other path lies in deeper research on the part of the anthologist. Instead of combing back issues through the past dozen years of a small group of pulp magazines, let him leave the beaten trail and look for the occasional gem that turns up in the less-highly-regarded stf publications, or the rarer works of fantasy that have been published in a steady trickle for decades in the so-called "general" magazines.

In his latest anthology, *Travelers*

of *Space*, Martin Greenberg has elected to use the long-story method of escape from triteness and used it on the whole, we think, with considerable wit and sagacity. Seven of the fourteen stories that make up the bulk of the volume run between 10,000 and 20,000 words. The other seven run from 8,500 in the Harry Walton and H.B. Fyfe entries, down to a brief 1,500 for Robert Heinlein's (for some reason he uses the pseudonym of Lyle Monroe) hitherto unanthologized *Columbus Was a Dope*.

In general, and especially considering that this is almost strictly a collation of space opera uninhibited and flying free, the quality of the stories is high. Certainly it is almost evenly entertaining. Our especial favorites were Keith Bennett's heroic *The Rocketeers Have Shaggy Ears*, recounting a Venerian saga following a rocket-shipwreck far from base, *Attitude* by Hal Clement, involving the capture of a space-ship by an alien ditto, and Fyfe's *Bureau of Slick Tricks*, in which interstellar skulduggerly leads the reader a merry chase.

For good measure the volume includes a foreword by the editor, an introduction by Willy Ley, a science-fiction dictionary complete with preface by Samuel Antony Peebles, its chief compiler, a visit to an interstellar zoo narrated by David Kyle, and sixteen three-color illustrations for the last by Edd Cartier. This zoo item, pictures included, is the one weak item in an otherwise very strong entry in the anthology sweepstakes.

* * *

SCIENCE FICTION OMNIBUS, edited by Everett F. Bleiler & T.E. Dikty, Doubleday & Co., New York (\$2.95).

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13

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Gerald Vance

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science-fiction stories of the past couple of years, this is your dish. Doubleday & Co. have taken over the Bleiler and Dikty *Best Science-Fiction Stories of 1949* and its follow-up in 1950 from Frederic Fell, and bound the two volumes together in one gigantic double dish.

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Should you have missed any great number of these minor masterpieces when they first appeared, either in magazine or anthology form, get them. Do likewise if you are new to sf or failed to get the original separate volumes. In any case you'll be acquiring a bargain.

* * *

SPACE ON MY HANDS by Fredric Brown, Shasta Publishers, Chicago (\$2.50).

If we are biased in favor of Fredric Brown, we're damned proud of it. In a very minor way some eleven or twelve years ago, we had a small editorial hand in ensuring purchase of some of his earliest professional stories. We were at least partially responsible for the publication of five of the nine stories in this book and, just to heap coals of meteor-dust on our head, the author dedicated this volume to us. With this dedication, and some four or five thousand dollars we do not currently possess, we should be able to buy our wife a blond mink coat.

Actually, each of these stories is in its way a gem, hand-polished with all of the loving Brown craftsmanship and unerringly precise economy of words. In mood and content the tales range from slapstick humor to horror that will curl your hair without a Toni. In length they run from a spare 2,500 words to a fat 12,000. But no matter what their length or mood, taken altogether this bunch of beauties can be safely guaranteed to give their reader a thoroughly-artistic emotional dry-cleaning. Mr. Brown is an artist who doesn't miss a bet.

* * *

TOMORROW SOMETIMES COMES by F.G. Rayer, Home & van Thal, London (9s. 6d.).

A quite well-written if at times annoyingly trite tale, this volume tells us of a Major Jack Mantley Rawson, a key man in the British atomic counterattack setup of the near-future, who gives his assistant a green light when an explosion occurs just as he is going under anesthesia for a major operation.

He comes to some centuries later to discover the world full of post-atomic mutants warring upon one another, at length finds haven in a city run by Mens Magna, a cybernetic machine to end all dittoes. Worse, he finds his name accursed as the man who was responsible for the atomic holocaust that all but destroyed the world. It seems the explosion that caused him to give his assistant the go-ahead was a mere accident, rather than enemy-caused.

If this sounds familiar to you, it did to us as well. Yet the volume is well-written and gallops rapidly if not happily through its preordained paces to an ending that is not exactly unexpected. A long way from the best, but not the worst around.

A MAN NAMED CLARKE

By Lee Owen

THE NAME of Willy Ley is familiar to anyone who has ever evinced the slightest interest in science fiction, especially if he's been seriously concerned with the engineering, or factual, aspects of it. Ley, whose associations with rocketry from the pioneering days of the German Rocket Society to his present outpourings of detailed blueprints of astronomical flight, is a semi-technician, who looks upon interplanetary flight as the birthright of Man. His preeminence as a popularizer, always highly regarded, is being threatened by a new arrival on the scene, an Englishman, Arthur C. Clarke.

Clarke's series of popular technical books on rocket flight, space stations, and all the rest, are extremely accurate scientific engineering presentations, technically several cuts above the more historical approach of Ley. This is not to disparage either man, since both have their place, but whereas Ley captivates his audience by the drama and history of rocketry, Clarke does the same thing by his analytical analyses of technique. A trip with Clarke is literally an interplanetary flight.

Clarke's strongest point is his insistence upon no fantasy at all—but sheer cold reality. He knows space flight is coming. It is simply and clearly an engineering problem requiring money and tools. By the most detailed sort of analysis, he probes into every conceivable phase of the problem and comes up with unambiguous answers, as free from speculation and extrapolation as human thinking can be.

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THE READER'S FORUM



Dear Ed:

I've decided it's time to raise a plaintive cry in regard to the state of illustrations in your mags.

I'll be chronological about it. I'll start about a year ago with the May 1951 issue. The cover was by Jones, as had been all your covers for too long a time, but this one was unusually bad. R. G. Jones is a good artist, but as has been the case with too many good artists, his work has appeared month upon month upon month, and the repeated sight of that artist's work has sickened the observer into prejudice. Such has been the case with Jones' covers. Such has been the case with Vestal's interiors for another mag.

A year ago your interior illustrations were a bit disgusting. W. H. Hinton was a talented fellow with pen and ink but, alas, another deplorable hack. What work you had by Finlay was hurriedly done, and poorly reproduced.

Going on to the July issue, the cover by Tillotson was even worse than the interiors he still perpetrates, if possible. The stories were chopped, bruised, beaten, and finally *hacked* to death. In short, the mag wasn't worth the price on the cover. However, I still bought AMAZING in the feeble hope that the mag might some day improve.

And now (buck up, boy, here comes the good part), with the March 1952 issue, you're starting to improve. The cover is quite good, but the figure in the foreground is rather poorly executed. The first illustration, by Valigursky, is pure excellence. It is not one of Valigursky's best. The illo by him for THE SPACE WITCH in the November 1951 ish is easily his best work. The illo for C'MON-A-MY-PLANET in the January 1952 runs a second to the aforementioned masterpieces. These two illos are also easily better than anything by Cartier. I realize I'm sticking my neck out when I say that, but it's my honest opinion. If you were to publish one of my stories (which I doubt), I would want Valigursky to illustrate it. The single-column illo of Flannigan is superb. Valigursky has a knowledge of figure design surpassed by none, and equalled only by Finlay. Oh, yes, the single-column illo of Princess Mnir-sr is—yummy.

The Finlay illo for THE GRAY LEGIONS is only exquisite. This, I think, is one of Finlay's very finest works.

Then you foul the gears with a chunk of crud by that damned nitwit Emsler. May I say, without fear of contradiction, that that page was better left blank.

My chagrin was lessened, however, when I saw the superb Lawrence. He is the very epitome of painstaking craftsmanship.

But, then comes one by that asinine chicken-scratching *oaf*, Woromay. What I have to say about this illo is better left unsaid, because you wouldn't print it.

The headings for the departments and those Vignettes (bless their hackneyed little pages) are 150% better at least. I particularly like the one for THE CLUB HOUSE. It's cute.

The Reckoning: In the last six months, AMAZING STORIES has improved 100% in artwork and story content. It is now worth the two bits asked for it, and I'm glad I stuck with it while the mag was AAAAAAAAAAGGHHH. Get rid of the illos like the ones by Emsler and Woromay, replace them with more Finlay, some Cartier, and more Lawrence, and don't wear Valigursky's welcome out, and if you hold the present level of stories, at least, your mag will be back up there in my books.

Bill Tuning
Santa Barbara, California

Read any good books lately? —Ed.

NOT ALL SCOTCH IS IN BOTTLES!

Dear Sirs:

Since you have printed letters from fans on most parts of planet Earth, why not one from Scotland—so here goes!

British reprints of AMAZING STORIES and FANTASTIC ADVENTURES (with trimmed edges) have been appearing on the stands here from time to time since February 1950, but owing to the paper shortage there hasn't been an issue of either since No. 8, which contained "All Heroes Are Hated" and "Justice of Tor". I don't know when I shall see another issue of your wonderful mag, but I'll still tramp from store to store with my heart full of hope.

There are two very fine British *s-f* magazines which appear monthly and quarterly—they are NEW WORLDS and SCIENCE FANTASY and are what you Americans would call "slick".

A. C. Clarke, whom you all know, has

written a factual and prophetic book on "The Exploration of Space". It runs a very close second to Ley and Bonestell's "Conquest of Space". The paintings by the artist in the latter were truly magnificent.

It may interest you and your readers to know that the British movie of H. G. Wells' "Things to Come" has been bought by American television. If you are lucky enough to view it I'm sure you'll agree it is good science fantasy.

I keep a careful check on all good stories through the medium of "The Reader's Page" and have discovered that I've been very unfortunate to miss such classics as:

AMAZING STORIES:

"Warrior of the Dawn"

"The Return of Tharn"

"The Green Man Returns"

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES:

"So Shall Ye Reap"

"The Man from Yesterday"

"The Involuntary Immortals"

"Zero A. D."

May I encroach on the generosity of your readers by a plea for magazines for which they have no further use. I shan't be able to pay for them in cash—I wish I could—but I will send what copies I have of NEW WORLDS and SCIENCE FANTASY and I promise to answer all letters, by way of exchange. So help me, Ed, by printing this letter—it's my only hope.

Cheerio, fans, and to you, H. Browne, and the staff of AMAZING STORIES, my congratulations on turning out such a consistently top-grade s-f mag—for quantity and quality it's really tops! Keep up the good work.

Yours in anticipation,

John Highet

52 Burnhead Street

Greenock, Renfrewshire, Scotland, U.K.

For personal reasons, if nothing else, we'd like nothing better than to send you at least three of the stories you list. Unfortunately we do not have them in stock, but it seems safe to assume our readers will send all six on to you. —Ed.

LOVE IS A WONDERFUL THING!

Dear Mr. Browne:

I want to cast my vote for serials. GALAXY, ASF and OW seem to be doing O. K. with their serials. Why not you?

THE GOLDEN GODS was a much better story than LAND BEYOND THE LENS. Barye Phillips' covers were very good for both of them. Let's see less of Jones and more of Phillips. I must congratulate Bloodstone on his deviation from the usual "hero marries beautiful and alluring heroine" ending. How do you marry a character that is (1) sexless, (2) identical in form and feature with yourself?

THE MAN WHO BOUGHT TOMORROW was a fairly good story.



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who
grew
up
in a
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full
of
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women**

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THE DOG WITH THE WEIRD TALE I rank second in the mag. Seems I enjoy a story more if there's a good pun in the title. The rest were too average to rank.

As regards MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE, keep the numerous and wordy footnotes, as they lend an air of authenticity to your "history". I'm not gonna knock it or believe it, yet. I'll wait until I read a couple more installments.

Are any of you readers comic-book collectors? I would like to obtain any copies of Pogo Possum comic books published from 1943 to 1946. I guess if some guy can ask for "Automobile Lillian" I can ask for Pogo Possum comics.

Gary Pickersgill
Box 270
Sheldon, Iowa

We recently received the third novel in the "Lens" series and will feature it as soon as possible. Bloodstone's reputation as a top writer was earned by the first two stories he ever wrote! —Ed.

THE LITERARY DETECTIVE

Dear Editor:

For quite some months now I have been letting AMAZING STORIES go, rarely ever read the magazine, because I don't like the type of material you print. For certain reasons I read some issues—July, '51 because WE THE MACHINE looked good (it was, too); August '51 because it contained a short novel by Raymond F. Jones, whom I like; October '51 because it had a short novel by Milton Lesser, whom I like; January '52 because (a) it was a real novel, and (b) that novel was by Walter M. Miller.

Finally, the March 1952 issue hit the stands with LAND BEYOND THE LENS. I paid it no attention. A day before the April issue came in I received a letter from one of my stfriends telling me how great LAND BEYOND THE LENS was. I promptly wrote him a letter about how I never read AMAZING any more, etc. The next day AMAZING STORIES came in, with GOLDEN GODS. Well, GOLDEN GODS looked mighty good, and I had heard LENS was good, so I got out the last issue and read LAND BEYOND THE LENS, then read GOLDEN GODS. I'm glad I never mailed that letter to my friend. LAND BEYOND THE LENS was the best story you've printed since WE, THE MACHINE, and that story was a semi-classic. GOLDEN GODS was pretty good, but not as good as the first.

Maybe I was in the mood for Burroughs-type reading, or maybe LAND BEYOND THE LENS was really that good. In any case, I enjoyed it immensely. Thanks for printing the two.

A letter of mine wouldn't be complete without some guess as to a pen name, so here goes. I think John Bloodstone is in reality Howard Browne. Why? Because "Bloodstone" sounds sort of phony, and

Browne is known for his Burroughs-type stuff. Maybe I'm wrong and John Bloodstone is really a new author. If so, he's a very promising author. He doesn't write like a beginner, though.

By the way, Bloodstone left himself open at the end of GOLDEN GODS for another story in the series. Personally, I'd like to have it end right there, and have Bloodstone go searching for other characters, Flannigan and Mnr'ra were all right as characters, but I get tired of the same characters after awhile. Even Burroughs, in his later Martian books, used different characters than just John Carter and his mate.

Add notes: FANTASTIC looks like a good mag. I suppose you will insert a lot of the stories you bought for the slick AS into this mag. Like the Bradbury in the first issue. I don't like the name of the mag, tho—unless you intend to print nothing but fantasy. I don't like to have stf called FANTASTIC. Good stf isn't.

Glad to see "Men Behind AS" back. This issue's installment isn't so hot, but at least it shows that the department is back.

Terry Carr
134 Cambridge Street
San Francisco 12, California

The editor of Amazing Stories did not write the Bloodstone series—although he would have been proud indeed to have done so! ... We have a third story about Flannigan; written at our request after the enthusiastic response to the first two. ... Oddy enough, not a single story in the new magazine FANTASTIC came from the selection of stories originally purchased for the "slick" AS. —Ed.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?....

Dear Editor:

The lead story in your March issue has as yet not been read, but I have read the rest of the issue and thought that I would tell you what I think of it.

First of all I may as well explain why I haven't read LAND BEYOND THE LENS. Well, the truth is, I can't pronounce half the names in the story. I can guess, but that's no fun. I like to know whom I'm reading about. I realize that names of this sort are necessary in some stories, but when you do publish stories of this type, how about giving us readers a guide as to the way they are pronounced?

Of the rest of the stories in this issue I think that "The Gray Legions" rates tops. Let's have more by this Storm fellow.

A very close second is "Strange Blood". Fairman has a style that is really great. In my mind he's one of the best.

Next come "Queen of the Floating Island" and, last but not least, "Throwback".

But now to the meat of this here letter. Will you please cut down on the large number of fact articles that are clutter-

ing up your wonderful magazine. Cut them down to, say, about four or five per issue. Then maybe you could make the "Observatory" and the "Reader's Forum" longer.

How about a long novel by you, H. B.? I read "Twelve Times Zero" by you and thought that it was wonderful. I can remember when someone made this same request a while ago and you said that as editor you couldn't find time. Then out comes IF with a long novel by you. What goes?

I would like to correspond with other Fen. And will answer each letter that I receive.

David Jewett
E-305 East 54th Avenue
Vancouver, Washington

Every time a reader suggests cutting down on the fillers, we get a flock of letters threatening to tear us limb from trunk if we try it!... Few readers actually pronounce the name of a character unless reading aloud; recognition is made by sight of the letters spelling out the name. Glad you liked "Twelve Times Zero"—it was written at the cost of valuable time, corny as that sounds, that should have been devoted to working on a novel already contracted for. But Paul Fairman is a close personal friend who asked a favor of us. —Ed.

AN AUSSIE ASKS...

Dear Sir:

While reading through a copy of AMAZING STORIES I noticed the various appeals for back copies of your magazine in the Reader's Forum. I should like, sir, if you will, to add my plea along with them. I am an old reader, and used to get my AMAZING STORIES in England before the war. We all know what a frightful mess-up that was, and now we find our thoughts turning to Space and the shape of things to come.

Therefore, Mr. Editor, if any of your readers would send me copies published since 1940—doesn't matter what condition, as long as the reading's all there—I undertake to send back Australian "Westerns", English "Detectives" or good-quality Australian stamps.

May I add how much I liked "Ask Me No Questions" by Mack Reynolds in the January issue.

My very best wishes to the staff of AMAZING STORIES.

From a "Pommie Down Under",
K. Philip Manning
81, Hampton Square West
Morley Park, W. A.

I LOVE YOU!

Dear Mr. Browne:

I have just finished reading the April issue of AS, so I think I will get in on the act and write you a letter.

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First of all, I want to say that I am a little peeved at the people who continually write complaining letters to you and other sf magazines. This I don't understand.

I read sf for entertainment and entertainment only. If I was not entertained by the stories, I certainly would take up some other form of literature. I like sf for three reasons: (1) it offers a challenge to my imagination; (2) it compliments my intelligence by giving me something to think about and speculate upon, instead of telling me precisely what, where, when, who, and why, and (3) it offers a delightful experience when I read such stories as "Toffee", or, in your current ish, "The Dog with the Weird Tale".

I like *all* kinds of stories, from very short to 85,000 words or more. I like semi-technical to pure fantasy all the way to the Thorne Smith type of ridiculous reading—in short, I like anything different, and as long as there are sf magazines published I will read them—no complaints!

I would like to say that I have particularly enjoyed the stories of Gurud Ritroon and hope to see more of them.

On the subject of covers, I have no definite "yes" or "no" as to sex. I say, as long as they don't overstep the bounds of decency, LONG LIVE PRETTY GIRLS! I do like the covers that Bok does, as they are definitely different.

This is the first, and probably last, letter I shall ever write to a sf magazine, but I did think you should know you had—

One satisfied and completely happy fan,
Mrs. Roberta Scruggs
Route 1, Box 1547
Santa Clara, California

THAT'S NO WAY TO TALK!

Dear Ed:

Recently finished reading the March issue of AMAZING STORIES, and want to compliment you on the lead story, LAND BEYOND THE LENS. When I finished reading it I thought, "Gosh, wish that story would have a sequel!" And, lo and behold, there the sequel was in the April issue of AS. Thanks for reading my mind. "Queen of the Floating Island"—Ugh!! Couldn't even get interested in it. "Strange Blood"—Good! The rest of the March issue, so-so.

And now here is the worst!! In the April issue, where in the world did you ever get that story (if you want to call it that) "Battle of the Howling Hatchet?" If that is a sample of Don Wilcox's writing, throw him out the nearest window the next time he has a story. While I have been writing this letter I noticed the author's name. He wrote that other smeller, "Queen of the Floating Island".

"The Dog with the Weird Tale" was good. When I finished reading it I looked at my dog and said—"umm."

"Master of the Universe" sounds like

it's going to be good. I still have to admit that I like AS and FA the best. Never indulge in any other magazines. Except for the *Galaxy* science-fiction novels. Though that last one, "Odd John", sure got me.

Am really looking forward to the first issue of FANTASTIC. Sure hope I like it.

R. C. Johnson
1223 West Main Street
Fort Wayne 7, Indiana

Don has a long job coming up soon—a splendid sequel to his classic "Giants of Mogo". Try it for size! —Ed.

TOLL BRIDGE

Dear Sir:

For many years my family has been a reader of AMAZING STORIES, and still is. About ten or twelve years ago, perhaps a little more or less, you published in one issue a wonderful story called, I believe, "The Bridge of Light". We kept the magazine containing that particular story for years and, much to our regret, it somehow disappeared.

Would you know where we could obtain a copy of that story? I know it is asking a great deal to try and trace one story in a magazine that long ago—but if you could give the information, my family and myself would greatly appreciate it.

Mrs. Carrie Herbold
c/o W. Rennet
Ridgely, Maryland

A THIRTEENTH ISSUE?

Mr. Browne:

A letter is usually difficult to write. But after I read your prozines I felt I had to write you this fan letter. I liked the story in your March issue called THE LAND BEYOND THE LENS and the one in your January issue called THE IRON MEN OF VENUS. THE LAND BEYOND THE LENS was sprinkled with a goodly serving of space opera, but that's the way I like it.

Personally, I think that AS is the best prozine I have ever read. I especially like Sam Merwin's "Science Fiction Bookcase" because it gives the latest dope on science-fiction books and gives their respective prices. Though I don't have a bookstore in our town I am trying to find some old H. G. Wells novels.

If I may be so bold, I would like to make a suggestion. Why don't you publish an annual edition of your zine?

I'll sign off now, since my letter probably won't be published anyway. Keep up the good work.

Tom Shelton
316 Austin Street
Jacksonville, Texas

From time to time the idea of publishing an Annual is discussed, but so far nothing has been done about it.

—Ed.

WANTED!

Dear Mr. Browne:

I hope that you publish this letter in your letter column, for it is an earnest plea for an issue of your mag, *February 1952*. I missed this ish while subscribing to your magazine AMAZING, and would like to obtain a copy from some fan who wants to sell his. I will be willing to pay what he paid for it new. Just write me and tell me if you have this issue, please.

Oh, yes, your lead novel in the March issue of AMAZING, "Land Beyond the Lens", was good. Wilcox's novelette was great.

James Lewis
R. R. No. 4
Trenton, Tennessee

NOTICE OF THANKS

Dear Sir:

Last year you were kind enough to publish a letter of mine in AMAZING STORIES.

As a result of that letter, I received magazines from many kind readers. I have been writing to the people concerned to thank them for their generosity, but due to having worked overtime all the year, there may still be a few people I have not acknowledged. I hope they will be patient; they can rest assured that eventually I will contact them. In addition, I received a number of parcels of magazines which bore no address of sender. Will those anonymous donors please accept my thanks via this letter in AMAZING?

There are a few British stf magazines and pocket books now being published, which are not sold on American newsstands. I will be glad to trade these for American stf magazines and stf comic books and so on.

Ralph H. Harding
38 Central Avenue
Maylands, West Australia

YOU GOT YOUR WISH!

Dear Sir:

The other day I bought your March issue of AMAZING STORIES and just a few minutes ago I finished the first story LAND BEYOND THE LENS by John Bloodstone.

For years I've been interested in science fiction and have read many stories and books. I think this one is one of the best I've read so far.

I wish Mr. Bloodstone would write a sequel to his wonderful story and I hope that in the near future I will be able to find out if Flannigan got safely back to the LAND BEYOND THE LENS.

Suzanne Shaw
4703 Huron Avenue
Washington 20, D. C.

Not only did Flannigan return in "The Golden Gods" (April, '52), but he'll be back again in another short novel very soon now. —Ed.

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THE EYE UPSTAIRS

By June Lurie



MOST OF THE material discussed at the recent trials of the rather numerous highly placed spies of atomic information, has been kept secret, but almost invariably one of the things released for public discussion is "artificial satellite." And that sounds bad, in a way, for if the government were more serious about the matter it would not have released such information so casually. This may be specious reasoning, though, because the details of the proposed satellite are rather well known generally.

It's about time that the United States wakes up and gets out of the dreaming stage. The construction of an artificial satellite can give the possessor absolute control over the Earth—or it can end forever all fears of aggression. The Soviets, for example, couldn't think of fighting a war if they knew every one of their cities was located literally beneath a suspended atomic bomb!

The artificial satellite has often been discussed in science-fiction but it is no longer the property of science-fictionists. It is a matter of cold fact, ever since the days back in nineteen forty-five when U. S. Army search teams lifted German plans for just such a satellite right off the drawing boards. There they were, in black and white, in lavish detail, a fitting successor to the successful V-2. We have those plans. We must put them into practice. It requires money and time, but we can't af-

ford to wait. The Soviets have them also!

The proposed satellite would be nothing more, to begin with, than a simple rocket hovering at an altitude of anywhere from six or eight hundred miles to a few thousand above the Earth's surface. It is interesting to note that this is a much easier task to perform than going to the Moon. The same problems of energy do not exist.

Subsequent rockets sent up after the first one can, bit by bit, build up the floating space station until it becomes a large installation, a "home away from home", equipped with all sorts of instruments, laboratory equipment—and weapons. As a radio and TV relay reflecting point, it could blanket the entire Earth with radiation. Two such satellites, or perhaps three, could keep the Earth covered with radiation at a low cost. Astronomers would have their perfect observatory. Physicists would have their cosmic ray labs, their vacuum labs and their rarefied outer atmosphere labs. In such a station the necessary data for space flight, including the shortly-to-come Moon trip, could be accumulated.

This project is more important than the Moon flight. How far along the services have gotten preparing for this goal we don't know. They're not saying, but we can't help remembering that the plans were once mighty advanced—already on the drawing boards!

MAN AND THE METAL MIND

By E. Bruce Yaches

A HOT, BITTER controversy is raging in academic and engineering circles over the question "do machines really think?" The machines referred to, of course, are the computing mechanisms which are coming so widely into use. Several philosophical scientists have heard so much about "thinking machines" that they've accused the creators of exaggerating claims when they say "machines can think".

Equally fast to respond were the machine makers, who point out that, by every definition of the word "think", machines may be said to perform that action. Remembering, selecting, judging, handling abstractions—all these things machines can do. Perhaps they do them on a relatively primitive level, hardly comparable with the

sophisticated thinking of a human mind, but still they do think.

A particularly strong defense for this claim is brought out by those scientists who have built little "psuedo-animals" constructed of gears and relays and photocells. These psuedo-animals behave in every way like their living counterparts, although the complexity of their lives is severely restricted. But the limitations aren't the point. The fact is they do things—in precisely the way a brain-powered animal would do them.

Where mathematical computers are concerned, those machines which are truly complex and most nearly comparable to the human mind, a similar attitude may well be taken. While for the most part they are restricted simply to handling numbers

and a few elementary symbols, combining them in ordered fashion, they are performing actions for which counterparts may be found in the human mind. You may recall that a group of pseudo-scientists, going a little too far, tried to term the mind nothing but a calculating machine. While this contention oversimplifies the truth, and is not factual *per se*, there is still enough truth left in it to provoke a second thought.

Machines do think! They perform that operation on a trivial level. They do not rival—as yet—the human mind. But it is almost a certainty that the near future will disclose some astonishing revelations as to what metal and electricity can do—compared with flesh and blood. The implications are fearful and make every thinking person shudder. Perhaps the image of a Frankenstein's monster is not so fantastic as once it seemed!

THE ROOT OF LIFE?

By Salem Lane

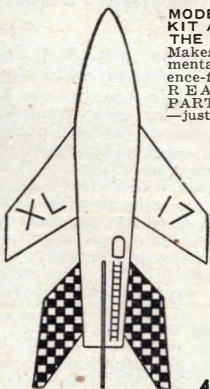
TUCKED away in inconspicuous corners of numerous newspapers and magazines recently was an announcement which has Earth-shaking potentialities—potentialities which most editors failed to note. For the first time in scientific history, the second part of the photosynthesis process—the reduction of carbon dioxide—was accomplished in the test tube! Through this, actual carbohydrates were synthesized!

Anyone appreciating the complexity of natural organic processes will immediately recognize that here is one more great step in getting into the natural basis of life. Synthesizing carbohydrates outside the living cell is, in a way, equivalent to working with the life process itself. Naturally the entire photosynthesis process was not duplicated but, what with science learning more about chlorophyll, and now this, it isn't inconceivable that a sound attack for duplicating the photosynthesis technique of Nature may be found.

Photosynthesis remains one of Nature's greatest accomplishments and secrets! Somehow the energy of sunlight is used to combine carbon dioxide and water into oxygen and carbohydrates. Essentially this is the way all of the Earth's energy was derived—including coal, oil, wood, and what have you. Should a means be found to duplicate the photosynthetic process, the capture of the Sun's enormous energy may be within reach....

It will pay to watch closely for further announcements regarding this experiment, for it means that at long last science is on the track of the life-mystery.

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ESCAPE TO ETERNITY

An "Amazing" Vignette

By Charles Recour

THAN PUT down the metal bowl and stretched. A feeling of well-being crept over him. His work was done and now he could doze until the next work period. He put his six-foot length of hardened muscle into a sleeping chamber and prepared to relax. His body felt clean and warm from the baths and, naked except for the loin cloth, he was ready to retire from the cares of the day. Sometimes he thought—and that was bad. The Arachnida did not want Persons to think—just to work and eat and sleep and consciously felt they were right, though he never mentioned to Spiros, his master, that there were strange feelings in his mind sometimes.

Just as he was about to doze off, he heard the sibilant rustling of Spiros, summoning him to the Chamber. Without hesitation he arose, picked up his trident, and went toward the Chamber.

As often as he had been in that circular room, he never failed to feel a sense of awe each time he re-entered it, for Spiros was an imposing creature beside which the puniness of Persons was depressingly clear.

Spiros was an Arachnid, a huge structure of hair and chitin seven feet in diameter, resting firmly on the eight pillars of his legs, squatting ever, rarely moving save for the motion of antennae or the swiveling of multifaceted eyes. Than entered and bowed before his master. "You called, Magnificence?" he inquired.

"Ah, yes, Little Than," the peculiar whistling sounds came from Spiros, "I have a task for you, an unpleasant task it is, for through you I must destroy an Arachnid. Corpus—he who occupies Chamber Seven—has gone mad. Do you understand?"

"I understand, Magnificence," Than answered humbly with lowered eyes.

"Take this—and your trident," Spiros said, extending one hairy leg toward Than, in which was clasped a small glass cylinder. "It contains an agent, a poison which will kill Corpus—but it may take some short time. You will enter Chamber Seven, smash this capsule beneath the Arachnid, and then not leave the Chamber until you are certain of Corpus' death—even if you have to expedite it with your trident. Is that clear?"

Than, felt himself tremble as he took the capsule. He knew the dangers of this mission. "Yes," he acknowledged, "I will destroy Corpus...."

"You will not!" Spiros snapped in reply. "I am destroying Corpus through you.

Than, you are only a Person, and an extension of me. Remember that," he added sharply, as sharply at least as the hissing of his voice chamber could manage.

Minutes later Than had emerged from the Arachnid's Chamber and had made his way over the few hundred feet of jungle-like ground that separated Spiros' Chamber from Corpus'. Fearfully he approached the open lid of the Chamber and, summoning all his courage, descended into it. He made his way the fifty feet to the bottom and prepared to walk into Corpus' Chamber. He could hear the ghostly scrapings and the weird moaning sounds coming from it. He knew some Persons must have been trapped by the raging monster and he could visualize the shambles in the room. Sweat beaded his forehead but he went forward; he knew he could not escape Spiros' commands.

He flung open the door. The room was dark, the lights smashed, but his eyes had become accustomed to the dark. Along one edge of the wall he could see the crouched bulk of the mad Arachnid. The room was a holocaust of butchered Persons and the horrible sounds of the Arachnid's feeding terrified him. Corpus did not at once detect him.

Than started with fright as something warm pressed against him.

"Oh, please..." a voice, terror-stricken, horrified, said—and he realized a girl was clinging to him. Blood was trickling from a slight wound on her cheek and her eyes were wide with fear. Than had never been sent to the Mating Chambers and his experience of women was nonexistent, but suddenly a powerful awareness went through him and his fear vanished. Only intention held him, a confident mastery of himself and his situation.

"Be quiet," he cautioned. "I will destroy Corpus," and he exulted in his use of the personal pronoun. For some reason he realized it was he and not Spiros who was doing this. And, like a light in his brain, the thought occurred to him that he need never go back to Spiros—and perhaps the woman—but his thoughts were interrupted by Corpus, who had suddenly detected him and was now moving toward him.

Without hesitation Than flung the capsule and watched it burst in a violent spray, covering the monstrous Arachnid with an evil-smelling red liquid. At once the Arachnid forsook his soft moaning and burst into shrill, tormented screams, twist-

ing and writhing as the fiery spray ate into his hair-covered chitin. He recognized the source of his agony, and, slowly, dragging his body on his mangled eight legs, came toward Than.

Than clutched his trident firmly. He went to meet Corpus, and this movement surprised him as much as the Arachnid. Without hesitancy, he aimed a vicious blow at the beast-thing and the three prongs of the trident destroyed, in a single stroke, the vision of the mad Corpus. Corpus reacted in convulsive, squirming agony, blinded and dying. Than stepped back, conscious only of the soft form of the girl pressed against him.

Slowly the two left the Chamber and ascended to the outside. Than glanced across the intervening space to Spiros' Chamber and wonder acted within his mind.

"We are not going back to Spiros' Chamber," he said slowly.

The girl looked up at him. The fear was slowly vanishing from her face.

"No," she breathed, "we are not going back to the Arachnida..."

FOOD IS WHERE YOU FIND IT

By Omar Booth

WHEN MALTHUS proposed his famous Malthusian Law, he didn't know that it would go through a series of ups and downs, alternating between scientific approval and then disapproval. He honestly believed that the population of the world was growing, one hundred years ago, at a rate which would outstrip the rate at which the food supply could be maintained. But then, the Industrial Revolution came along and knocked his theory into a cocked hat because the use of machinery on a farm increased the productivity enormously. But the specter of that ghost of over-population and under-feeding is back with us again. The world's peoples are increasing at a tremendous rate, in spite of war, famine and devastation. They are increasing so fast that with the latest in mechanization everywhere, there will simply not be enough arable land to provide all the necessary food.

Into this gap the scientist has stepped with synthetic materials and laboratory foods, with hydroponics and protein-yeast concentrates. These still will not serve, for longevity is being increased, and the hordes of the Asian land-mass are spawning like fish!

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are turning to the Earth's last reservoir—the sea. It is known, even from casual observation by fishermen, that the sea has inexhaustible amounts of food. And recently, aided by probing, penetrating test instruments like "sonar", technicians have "un-seaed" gigantic schools of fish and discovered huge amounts of vegetable and plant life existing at all levels ranging from the surface to a mile or more down.

As yet no concerted effort has been made to mine the oceans of their food supplies. Desultory fishing tactics, fired by recent governmental edicts, have only served to deplete some fishing areas. Casual probing with sonar has somewhat increased the catches of certain fishing groups. But, as yet, no real, ultra-scientific effort has been made to drain the sea.

This is coming though. The world of the future must have food. Even when the living standards of the poor all over the world are brought up and the birth rate down, the elimination of disease and the increase in longevity will give this planet a population of as many as ten billion! This means that every food source, synthetics, ordinary farming, hydroponics and, of course, the sea, must be tackled with a fury.

It is wise to note that at the same time, this exploration of the sea for food may also be a beginning step in mining the oceans for metals which we know exist there. Already magnesium is being dragged from the sea—and that deposit we can't exhaust! Eventually copper, and other metals, may be tackled. But regardless of these things, food, with which the oceans are endlessly laden, will remain the major hope of Man!

BIG BABY

By Leo Lewin

CONTRARY to generally held opinion, the site of the world's greatest meteorite pit is *not* Arizona—it is the Hudson Bay area of Northern Canada. What made this announcement doubly startling is the odd coincidence that it occurred at about the same time as the release of the film "The Thing", which has created quite a stir in s-f circles and whose setting is the desolate Arctic. The new meteoric crater is not the site of an alien spaceship, but it is one of the most imposing modern discoveries.

"Chubb Crater", as the area is called, is a fantastically imposing picture of the power of Nature. Flying over the rugged terrain of Northern Canada, you see rough ground heavily dotted with irregular lakes and glacial cracks—really Devil's land. Then suddenly your eye lights upon something completely out of keeping with the

random shapes beneath you—a perfectly circular lake glistening in the sunlight! You notice that the lake has a peculiar shoreline—it slopes upward in a puckered fashion. This can be only one thing—a meteoric crater! But what a crater! It is twice as big as its famed Arizonan counterpart; it is two miles in diameter! Chubb crater looks like nothing so much as a gigantic crater lifted from the surface of the Moon, transported to Earth, and then filled with water.

The fact that the crater is two miles in diameter does not mean that the meteor was of that dimension. Undoubtedly it was much smaller but, traveling with incredible velocity, when it hit and splashed it disturbed that much area. The tremendous heat generated, as with most large meteorites, caused it to be utterly consumed in its own blasts. The result is that there are no direct traces of meteoric material. These will remain for excavators to uncover. Splash marks—lines and crevices radiating outward from the point of impact—surround the crater, confirming its meteoric nature. At present, plans are being made to conduct a detailed survey of this new discovery. In the unlikely event that it should prove *not* to be a meteoric crater, what could it be? Could it be the site of the landing of—of—of—The Thing?

THAT SOUNDS BETTER!

By Pete Boggs

CHANGING electricity to sound, as is done in an ordinary loudspeaker, is not a particularly happy process. The scientists don't like it, but to date it's been the best they could do. The trouble is that what goes into the loudspeaker doesn't come out! A loudspeaker cannot handle great amounts of electrical power without distorting and changing them considerably. It is massive and inert and bulky, and consequently cannot follow the delicate variations of each minute electrical impulse. In a word, the loudspeaker is a schmo when it comes to doing its job.

Recently, from France, has come word of an amazing device which will undoubtedly revolutionize the principles of sound engineering, of converting electrical currents from radios to audible sounds. It is based on a very simple idea, but putting it into practice has, till now, been the drawback.

A French engineer uses a vibrating column of ionized gas to generate his sound! The gas, contained in a glass cylinder, is ionized, or electrically charged, by a hot filament. Two metal electrodes immersed in the gas are connected to the

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source of electrical impulses, say, a radio or a TV set. When the charges on the plates vary with the incoming electrical wave, the column of gas vibrates in precise accordance with them. Since molecules and ions have so little appreciable mass and inertia, they follow the electrical changes with perfect fidelity, and what goes into the impromptu "loudspeaker" comes out—unchanged and unmodified, clear and distinct.

Whether this device will have practical application is of course another matter, but at least it enables the laboratory to do things that have hitherto been impossible. It is another step in the fast-expanding field of electronics, whose advances are made with such terrific acceleration that tomorrow's inventions all but obsolesce as they appear!

SECRET OF THE BLACK PLANET

(Concluded from page 63)

"Somehow, somehow—there's the power to reach the stars on that little black globe. A whole new universe waits for man out there. And it won't be waiting long. Just a generation or so."

"You mean our children?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I hope you mean that literally. I mean, well—" She began to blush.

But Suuki was laughing. "By the gods of Karn, you'd better marry that girl! She won't give you a moment's rest until you do."

And so we've been married half a year already. Ellen's busy planning and knitting, but every day she stops to ask me if I know what Johnny, Jr. will be like. And we dream of what he'll possibly discover on the Black Planet.

NEXT MONTH . . .

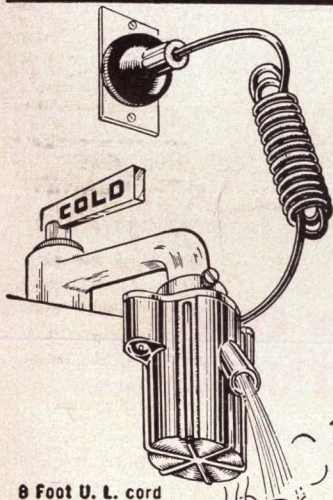
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