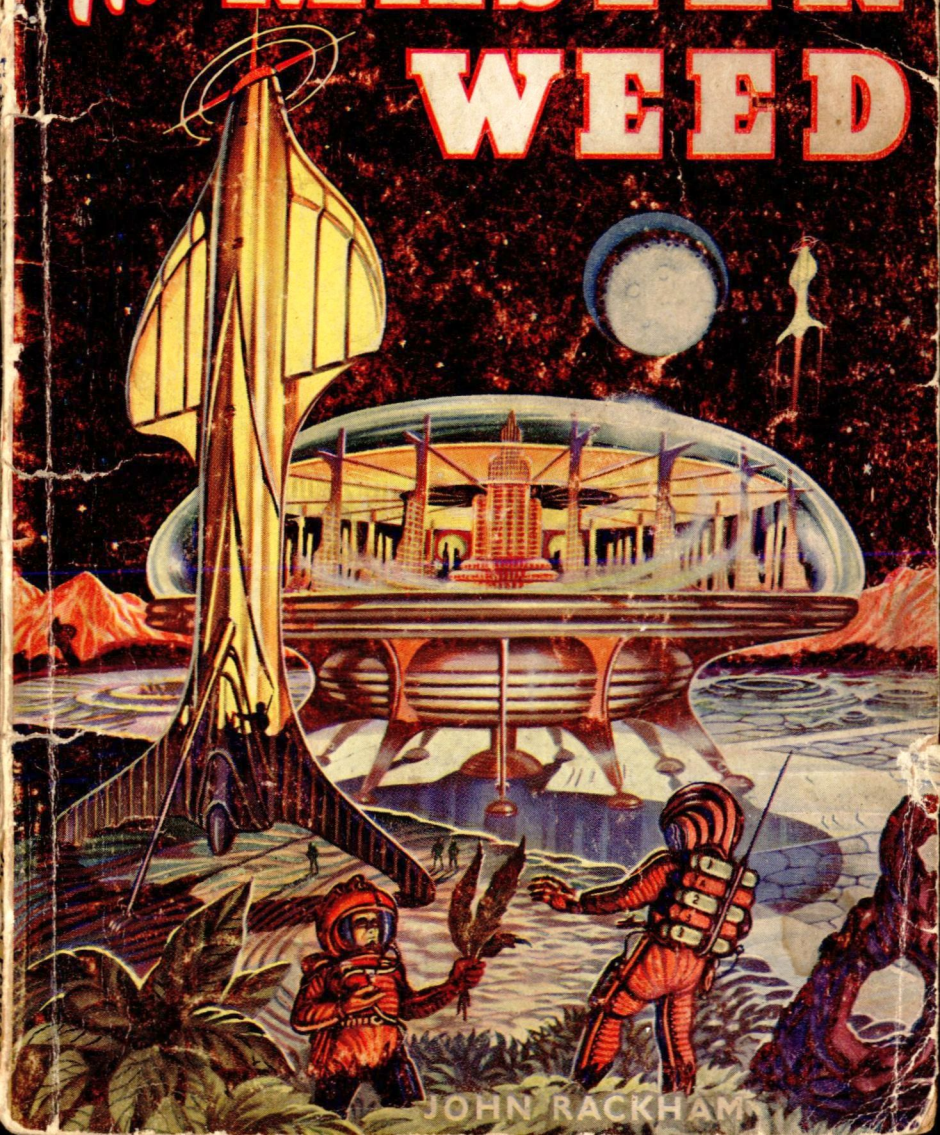


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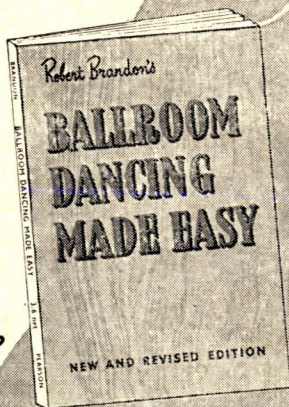
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THE MASTER WEED

(Another Adventure of the Space-Puppet)

By JOHN RACKHAM.

CHAPTER I

CANAL CITY consists of seven domes, six arranged concentrically about the seventh. The office of the Governor of Mars is in the heart of the Administration Dome. In the outer Chamber of this office, three people waited to see the Governor. They had been waiting some time, and one of them was showing considerable impatience. Commodore Gale, of Space Service, a small, spare man, sharp featured and acid of temper, was not used to waiting on any man.

"Damn it, Steve!" he growled, shifting himself irritably. "We've been here close on half-an-hour now—anybody'd think Clarke didn't want to see us!"

Beside him sat Dr. Sven Norden, one time head of Research Physics to Space Service, and the inventor of the magnesium-fission pile-drive which bore his name. He showed mild amusement.

"Take it easy, Windy," he advised, his voice a deep rumble in keeping with his burly build. "He could be busy, y'know—being the Governor must be a full-time job."

He was relaxed, and at ease, but, beside him, his niece, Kate, was almost as impatient as Gale.

"It's all right for you, Uncle Steve," she chipped in. "You'd sit patiently if your pants were alight—and study it as an interesting phenomenon!" She shook back strands of wayward red hair from her ice-blue eyes. "I think the Commodore's quite right. After all, we aren't just run-of-the mill guests—we've got important news for him, and he knows it—or should!"

"Important!" Gale was bitter. "If Fairless is right, the most important part is yet to come——"

He broke off as the outer door opened to admit two newcomers. In the lead came Flight Lieutenant Frank Fairless, followed by his friend and colleague, Lieutenant Space-Mechanic Henry Lester. They halted by the Commodore, giving him a brisk salute.

"Ship checked, nothing to report," Fairless announced.

"Mechanically perfect, refuelled, ready to go," Lester added.

"At ease, men," Gale ordered. "As you can see, we're still waiting to see the Governor. Better find yourselves seats."

Fairless, lowering his hefty six-foot-three into the seat beside Kate, took off his cap, revealing a crop of curls as red as hers.

"What's the delay?" he whispered. "Clarke busy?"

"Seems like it," she murmured, "only we haven't seen anybody go in or out, all the time we've been here, only Shel."

"Ah, well"—Fairless relaxed—"it's nothing to worry about. For my part, I'm glad just to be here, safe and sound. How about you, Hank?"

Henry Lester struggled back from the depths of a pleasant reverie inspired by the name "Shel".

"Huh! Didja say something, Frank?"

"Yes, I said it's good just to be here safely——"

"Oh, sure!" Hank went back to his dreams of Michelle Laurent, the Governor's lovely, black-haired secretary. At that moment the inner door opened, and he saw his vision made real. It smiled, seemingly right at him, and said:

"The Governor will see you now."

"About time, too!" Gale snapped, leading the way in.

Governor Clarke was designed by a kind Providence to be a bright and breezy little man, dapper, brisk and efficient. At this moment, however, he was as near glowering as his features would allow.

"So!" he greeted them. "You've come back again!"

"There's a dam-fool remark, if you like," Norden murmured, his impersonal stare examining the Governor calmly. Clarke flushed.

"Not nearly as foolish as the cock-and-bull tale you lot spun me, the last time you were here."

Norden digested this, his eyes, as icy blue as those of his niece, half-closed in thought.

"Windy!" he rumbled. "I smell something wrong here!"

"Damned right, you do!" Clarke snapped. "That fishy story you told me—pirates in space, stealing our radioactive ores—my friend, Carter Wallace, supposed to be a desperate criminal you call Marvin Lacey—a gang of criminals, here on Mars! I should have had more sense than to listen to you in the first place."

"Here! Not so fast!" Gale was bristling with rage and amazement. "Are you calling me a liar? You measly, ten-credit, tin-pot official! Just you try remembering that if it wasn't for Space Service, and Steve here, in particular,

there wouldn't even be a colony on Mars, let alone a——"

"Just a minute, both of you," Kate interrupted. "This isn't getting us anywhere. Obviously there is some misunderstanding—I'm sure the Governor isn't calling *me* a liar, at any rate!" She gave him her most dazzling smile, and he softened enough to look a little uncomfortable.

"Well——" he hesitated, "maybe not that—but——"

Gale was about to burst forth again, but she got in first, hurrying to follow up her advantage. "What's happened to make you change your mind?" she asked. "You were very much on our side when we left so hurriedly. Won't you tell us about it?"

"All right," he declared, putting his hands flat on the desk. "You told me you were chasing two people, Marvin Lacey and Nina Orloff. You made out a case for recognising them in the persons of two people well known to me, Carter Wallace, the well-known naturalist-artist, and his mate, Nanette Oliver. You planned to contact her, and question her. You left Mars hurriedly, without any word to me—without permit—taking advantage of my name to ensure full co-operation from Traffic Control——"

"We were chasing 'em," Gale snapped. "They were making a get-away in an unregistered space-craft—your own T.C. officers can confirm that. We didn't have any time for sending farewell messages!"

"Truly, a ship did take off from the hills near here," Clarke conceded, "but it could have been one of yours. You are, after all, the Commodore of Space Service!"

"Why in blazes would we do a thing like that?" Gale was completely astounded by the suggestion.

"I wouldn't know." Clarke sounded tired. "I only know that a ship did take off—and that your ship, Hercules, followed. My version of that makes as much sense as yours. Whoever heard of a private individual owning a space-craft?" He let the rhetorical question hang in silence, then went on: "What happened after that—what you did—I don't know about."

"Well, we do—and we're here to tell you about it. But maybe that would be a mistake—maybe you'd be calling us liars again?" Gale's tone crackled with sarcasm. Clarke flushed again, angrily, but kept silent.

"We took off in pursuit of Lacey and Orloff," Gale said, flatly, "we followed their lead, out through the main asteroid belt, and into Jupiter's orbit, into the middle of one of the Trojan groups. They homed in on an uncharted asteroid, and put up a fleet of space-ships to intercept us. Yes—a whole fleet of 'em," he repeated, glaring at Clarke's look of disbelief, "and every last one of 'em stolen from Space

Service by Lacey and his crowd, with that damned knock-out gas of his——”

“And you fought off the lot, captured the criminals, and brought them in to justice, I suppose,” Clarke sneered.

“No, we didn’t,” Gale snapped back at him. “We destroyed every last one of ’em—and their asteroid base, too.”

“Oh, really, Gale, don’t stop now. Don’t spare yourself. Go on! Tell me you have a secret weapon that works in space; that knocks ships down like skittles!” Clarke pushed back from his desk. “Can’t you see how ridiculous all this is? That’s the sort of tale to tell a child. You can’t expect me to swallow it. What I don’t understand is why? Just what do you hope to achieve by all this?”

Gale stared at him in baffled amazement, his fury giving way to cold, wry amusement.

“It’s almost funny,” he commented, finally. “We do have a secret weapon or two, and we intend to keep them secret. They were developed with that intention in mind. Whether you like it or not, there was a plan afoot to attack and injure Earth, the method requiring first the subjugation and control of Mars. To implement that, the consignments of radio-active ores mined on Earth’s Moon, destined for you here on Mars, were being stolen. Without them, this colony would fold up, you’d have to evacuate back to Earth, and the rest would be easy pickings for a gang of clever men. Well, we stopped the stealings; we traced the leadership to Marvin Lacey and his accomplice; we traced them here; we uncovered at least six more of the gang right here in your city; we’ve blown up their base. But, and it’s quite a ‘but’, we’re not at all sure that we’ve seen the last of the plan. Lieutenant Fairless has expressed the opinion, and I agree with him, that Lacey was too clever to stop at one method. We believe that there is certainly at least one alternative plan about to be put into operation any time now; a plot to gain control of this planet; a plot which, therefore, directly concerns you—personally. We have been risking our necks, and we are willing to go on doing so, to save yours—and you don’t even believe us! As I said, it’s almost funny!”

The Governor’s face could be seen to change colour. He was obviously shaken by the chain of ideas Gale had strung together. After the manner of a man clutching at straws, he harked back to a phrase Gale had used.

“You said you had unearthed six more crooks here in the city?”

“Lieutenant Fairless was set on and very nearly done in. He’s no infant, as you can see for yourself, and was able to give as good as he got, but they weren’t playing games,

believe me. I saw them myself, when I went to his assistance. Lieutenant?"

"That's about the size of it," Fairless agreed, quietly. "The woman, Orloff, was trying to slip me a whiff of the gas, but I was a little too quick for her. She believed me intoxicated and was discussing my disposal with a hefty-looking character she called 'Max'. When I cut up rough she ran for it, while five more thugs piled in to help Max. I don't remember very much about how it all ended, but I'll swear I put my mark on most of them, and we made a shocking mess of the apartment."

"That's a point, Windy!" Norden put in, quietly. "Unless someone's done it up, that apartment should tell its own story."

"How about that, Clarke?" Gale demanded. "And how about those six men? Surely someone'd notice half-a-dozen badly battered men in a city like this?"

"I'm afraid the point will count against you," Clarke said, firmly. "In an orderly community like ours six men bearing the signs of combat would stick out like a sore thumb. What's more, it would certainly be reported to my ears. My secretary will tell you there has been no such report."

As they turned to Shel she shook her head slowly, but her dark eyes were thoughtful. She snapped her fingers, suddenly.

"Those men could have gone North to Workington with the work-shift," she suggested. "Atmosphere suits would help to cover up any bruises, and they'd be in overalls when they got there."

"Workington? Work-shift?" Five puzzled faces turned as one to the Governor, to see him staring in surprise. Shel's soft voice went on to explain.

"Once every thirty days a work-shift leaves here for Workington. They do sixty days there, then return. They're technicians and machinists mostly. That way everyone does a turn of work and gets a turn of rest. They travel overland in pressurised tractors, but they're not very warm as it would be too expensive in fuel, so everyone wears atmosphere suits—a sort of fur-lined coverall. According to my figures there was a shift leaving the morning after the incident you mention."

Clarke was plainly impressed, but he bit his lip, stubbornly. "It sounds all right," he conceded, "but it's negative. It *could* have been that way, but it's not proof!"

"You're really against us, aren't you?" Norden growled. "What more do you want, man? On your own admission it would be the logical thing to do. In a community like this, where no-one wears anything above the waist, and

precious little below it, six injured men could never get by. Obviously, then, they've gone some place else!"

"It may seem obvious to you, Doctor, but only if you admit the existence of these men in the first place, and that I'm not prepared to do, not without something much more like a proof."

"If I may suggest, Governor——" It was Shel's quiet voice again, "I could check with Stores, Medical Section. We don't get much run on first-aid materials. Any undue expenditure would certainly be recorded."

"Bless you, my dear," Gale said, quietly, and with obvious sincerity. "It seems we have at least one friend here."

"Good for you, Shel," Kate murmured, and Hank was muttering a worshipful "Gee!" when Fairless nudged him in the ribs.

"Better keep an eye on the 'Old Man' Hank—strikes me he's making a play for your girl-friend." Hank's homely face went a bright red. "Aw, shucks, Frank! She ain't my girl-friend. Sure wish she was, though." Hank's low whisper carried much further than was his intention, and as Shel blushed, he learned, fascinatedly, that a blush is not, of necessity, confined to the face.

"It checks," she announced, excitedly, her eyes glowing as she put down the 'phone. Their records show a big 'out' in plasma, sutures, dressings and antiseptics for that date. They're sending round the full figures. Judging by the quantities, that was some scrap, Lieutenant." She turned a radiant smile on Fairless, and if he noticed that she seemed to be looking a little to his right, he didn't comment on it.

"Well, Clarke?" Gale glared at the discomfited Governor.

"All right!" he gave in, wearily. "You've made your case, for that point, at any rate. Now what?"

"Let's go and take a look at that apartment," Gale demanded. "I crave the chance to show you a certain plastic table-leg that I recall. I betcha Lieutenant Fairless remembers it, too!"

"There were certain aspects of it which struck me very forcibly, don't mind admitting," Fairless agreed, grinning at the thought.

Fifteen minutes later they stood in the middle of an apartment which looked as if a large sized tornado had spent its force there. Clarke took one good look and surrendered completely.

"I give you best," he sighed. "This is awful. I don't mean this wreckage, though that's bad enough. I mean the implications. You realise what this means?"

"Sure we do," Gale snapped. "What we've been trying

to tell you for the past hour and more. It means that we've only stopped one line of attack, that Fairless was quite right, there is still the remains of an organisation of some kind, a criminal organisation, and a pretty efficient remainder, too. Those six men weren't smuggled out of here without team-work and planning. Our problem is—how do we identify the rest of the bunch, how do we find 'em, what are they planning to do next, and what should we do to be ready for 'em."

The little group pondered the questions in silence awhile, then Fairless said, slowly:

"We might take a look at Workington, sir? It's a long shot, but there isn't much else we can do at the moment——"

"What do you say to that, Steve?" Gale put the question to Norden, and the stocky scientist nodded.

"Makes sense to me, Windy. Any plot would have to include that city, and, chances are, Lacy would have a subordinate chief there, to take care of developments at that end. Couldn't do any harm!"

"How about it, Clarke, can we do that without arousing suspicion and advertising our presence too much?"

"You could never conceal your presence, my dear Gale, but you could pass as tourists. They do, occasionally, visit Workington. As for transport—how about that, Shel?" He turned to his secretary. She shook back her heavy black hair from her shoulders, and frowned in deep thought. Then, suddenly, she smiled and snapped her fingers.

"The mail-plane!" she said, and bent her head to consult a note-book she had taken out of her cuff-purse. "The mail-rocket is due in this evening, and there will be the routine mail flying North in the morning. There are no passengers booked as yet. Will that do?"

"Couldn't be better," Gale was jubilant. Clarke sighed.

"I still can't help hoping that you've made a mistake somewhere, Gale," he said, as they left the apartment and boarded the rubber-treaded tractor-car which had brought them to the Residential Dome. As they drove off, Shel broke a long and thoughtful silence.

"Governor," she said, in her usual quiet tones, "I'd like to go along with them in the morning, if you can spare me?"

Clarke stared at her. "Of course—if you must," he nodded. "But why?"

"Well"—she hesitated—"Workington *is* rather a busy place, and terribly confusing to find one's way about in. They will need a guide—I could help them quite a lot—and, I feel, they deserve some sort of co-operation. That

is, if they will have me along."

She turned to Gale.

"Glad to have you," he nodded. "And I don't think I'm alone in expressing those sentiments."

Hank was sitting in the back of the transport, beside Fairless, but he heard Gale's words clearly, as he was meant to. He went crimson but was obviously pleased, and Fairless smiled in sympathy.

"Looks like you're in luck, old man," he mocked, with the liberty of friendship to take the sting out of the words. "She can't bear to let you out of her sight; must be the possessive type!"

"Aw, layoff, willya!" Hank growled. "She don't mean nothin', just trying to help, like she said."

Fairless stifled a chuckle in sudden amazement as Kate turned in her seat and gave him a withering glare.

"You be quiet, Frank Fairless!" she hissed. "Just because you're so cold-blooded English, and don't have any feelings, is no reason why you should mock those who have!"

It was her turn to be amazed as Hank turned on her, rejecting her defence, using a tone he had never directed at her before.

"You layoff Frank," he growled. "'Tain't none of your business what he says to me. He's all right, see!"

"Well!" she gasped, her face scarlet. Further words failed her, as she met a mockingly cold stare from Fairless, and saw him turn, to smile at his homely friend and throw a friendly punch at his shoulder. She bounced herself round, furious and feeling foolish.

"Men!" she snorted under her breath. "Men!"

CHAPTER II

FRANK FAIRLESS was the first to show up at the check-out counter of Traffic Control next morning.

He was a conspicuous figure, his gold-badged cap several inches above the heads of those of the staff who were about at that hour; his space-black breeches and boots in sharp contrast to the brilliant pastel shades seen on all sides. It was not surprising, therefore, that a petite, blonde girl, entering the lobby, made her way straight up to him and said:

"Lieutenant Fairless? Commodore Gale's party?"

"That's right," he murmured, looking down at her. She was a typical second-generation Martian, slim and small-

boned, almost fragile, yet with the depth and fullness of chest which was the inevitable result of a lifetime spent under reduced air pressure. Her exquisitely tailored shorts were a deep green which matched her calf-high boots, and if she had stood on tip-toe her taffy blonde head would still have passed with ease under his outstretched arm. He judged her to be about twenty, as she gazed demurely up at him, and noted that the green also matched her wide eyes. Then, calmly, she said:

"I'm your pilot!"

Frank Fairless had generations of British breeding behind him, and a life-time habit of self-control to help, so he neither goggled, gaped or stared. Despite himself, however, he couldn't keep a slight tremor from his voice as he said, faintly:

"Would you mind saying that again?"

"I'm your pilot," she repeated, innocently. "I'm flying the mail-plane North this morning."

"I'm a pilot, too," he told her, with a great effort. "Pleased to meet you"—and held out his hand in the conventional manner. Her small hand lost itself in his great fist as she laughed, crestfallen but unabashed.

"You're English," she hazarded. "I might have guessed. I've heard about them."

"Nothing bad, I hope?" He looked worried, and she laughed again.

"Just that they don't have any emotions like other people."

"That's the second time I've had that thrown at me in less than twenty-four hours," he complained. "I can assure you it isn't true."

"I don't believe it." She shook her head. "That little routine of mine always shakes 'em rigid, but you didn't turn a hair. Where's the rest of the party?"

"Still feeding, I expect. They should be along any time now——"

"Well, we can pick up the mail and coveralls while we're waiting," she decided. "Come on!" And she strode off. He stared after her, smothering a smile. "Five feet nothing, pretty as a picture—and she's a pilot!" he mused, shaking his head. A few strides of his long legs brought him level with her.

"You weren't kidding, then; you really are our pilot?"

She shot him a quick look, and laughed, delightedly.

"It did shake you, after all," she gloated, happily. "Of course I am; what's so wonderful about that?" He shrugged and bent his strength to the task of humping the mail-bags.

"I suppose you never have any trouble getting someone to help you with these?" he guessed.

"You're catching on fast, aren't you?" she smiled, saucily, and he had to laugh.

"I've never done any atmosphere flying to speak of," he admitted candidly. "What's it like—tricky?"

"Nothing to it," she assured him, airily. "Dead simple, once you get the hang of it."

"Oh, yes," he agreed solemnly. "It always is—once you get the hang of it, or should it be 'the knack'?"

She stared at him suspiciously, then giggled.

"I like you," she decided, "and I take back all I said about the English. Tell you what, I'll teach you, if you like? This is a dual-control job I'm taking up to-day. You can sit up front with me, if you like, and see what I do."

"That's a promise I won't forget," he grinned. "Ah, here they come. I can't wait to see the look on Hank's face when he sees you!"

Unfortunately, Fairless did not know that Kate had been watching for some time, or the look on *her* face might have given him a thoughtful moment. She was a moment ahead of the others, and that moment, as she saw them laughing and joking together, brought her a pang such as she had never known before. Nevertheless, she recognised it for what it was, instantly. "Green eyes," she told herself, incredulously. "Me, going green eyes over Frank! I must be mad. He doesn't mean a thing to me, nor me to him. We're just friends, associates, partners—Kate Norden, get a grip on yourself! Forget the whole thing!" But the ache was still there, despite all her denials. She stood quite still, fighting the emotion, then, with a forced smile, she marched over to them.

"Hullo there," she called. "What's the joke?"

"Hello!" Fairless turned his cheery grin on her. "Meet Miss Lee, our pilot. Mara, this is Miss Kate Norden."

"Mara—first names already," Kate thought, miserably, as she faced up to Miss Lee's bright eyes. Woman-like, she took in every detail of the girl's appearance in one comprehensive glance, and it was not until she put out her hand in greeting that the word "pilot" began to register.

"A pilot! Not really! You mean you're going to fly us?"

"That's right." Miss Lee nodded, then shrugged, prettily. "That's nothing, but gosh, your hair—Miss Kate, that's really something. I wish mine was that colour. We don't have red hair on Mars, you know."

"Yes, I know about that. I happen to know, as a matter of fact, that it's something which has been puzzling biologists and geneticists for some time."

"Nothing puzzling about it," the girl declared. "There just isn't any, that's all. Blonde or black—but no red. D'you mind if I just touch it?" Despite herself, Kate found that she was beginning to like Miss Lee, and that, illogically, made her feel all the more miserable.

"Gosh!" the girl breathed, running appreciative fingers over the red-gold mass. "It feels strong—sort of firm!"

"The word you want is 'Coarse'," Kate admitted frankly. "My hair isn't nearly as fine as yours, remember."

"Maybe not," the girl agreed. "But such a lovely colour!"

Fairless, in the background for the moment, thought of his own red hair, and decided to keep it literally under his hat for the time being. When the rest of the party had arrived, and recovered from the surprise, the demure Miss Lee took charge in no uncertain manner.

"Pay attention, now," she ordered. "When you get your furs on, see they're zipped up tight, and make sure your oxygen-masks are working O.K., 'cause it's a long walk to the field, it's plenty cold out there, and there isn't a lot of air. When we reach the 'plane, climb aboard, and make up your minds where you're going to sit, as that's where you'll be for the rest of the trip, and that's just over three hours; there will be no moving around once we're airborne. Soon's I get the engines rolling I'll pressurize and heat the cabin, and you'll be able to take off your suits, but keep 'em on till I give you the O.K. Any questions? No? Right, let's get started."

Fairless stared with frank curiosity at the ungainly looking aircraft as he climbed the ladder to the cabin door. With one gloved hand he reached up and shoved against the huge sail-like wing. The whole flimsy fuselage shook. He pulled his hand back sharply, ducked through the door, and slammed it behind him, stopping to stare round the roomy interior. Fascinatedly, he watched the girl as she cut in the twin motors and ran them up to half-throttle, switched on heaters and air-pump and settled herself in the cushioned seat. Her eyes twinkled over her mask as she waved him down to the seat beside her. She slipped off the face-piece for a moment.

"Just sit still, watch, and save the questions 'till we're airborne. I'm going to be plenty busy," she said, hastily, and replaced the pad. He nodded, understandingly, and watched in silence as an indicator moved from Minimum to Normal and stayed there. Above it a small pressure-gauge crept round to the red line which stood by the numeral 10. She pointed to it with a gloved finger, slipped off her face-piece once more, and turned back to the passenger-space.

"All right, folks—you can strip now—we're pressurized!"

She shrugged out of her furs, bundled them, and stowed them under her seat. The rest followed suit. As she checked fuel-pressures and temperatures once more, she shot him a grin.

"This is going to seem awful slow to you," she warned. "We can only do two hundred, all out!"

"That's fast enough for me," he said warmly. "What's this crate made of, anyway, cardboard?"

"That's right! How did you guess?" He shuddered, and shut his eyes. She laughed again. "Don't worry, big feller, I've been flying this craft for four years now, and never lost a passenger."

With apparent carelessness she pulled the engines down to a slow rumble, did several things, all at once, to screw-pitch and aerofoils, took the half-wheel in her tiny, baby-like hands, and opened the throttle.

"O.K., Control!" she called into the mike. "Take 'em away, we're leaving." As the remote-controlled chocks and ladder slid back the craft began to roll bumpily forward. Despite its clumsy appearance, the monoplane took off like a bird, the huge wings making the most of the thin air. Fairless admitted himself fascinated by the ease with which the girl nursed the craft round in a slow circle and set its nose in line with the arrow-straight road below.

Back in the passenger-space, Shel was kept busy for a few minutes pointing out landmarks and objects of interest, but the featureless landscape offered little in the way of diversion.

"It is rather dull from here," she admitted. "None of the plant-life grows to more than a foot or so high, but, on the surface, it's well worth a visit, just to see the flowers. The road runs dead straight all the way to Workington. It's glassite surfaced. We are rich in silicates on Mars, so it's hardly surprising that we use glass in some form or other for anything durable. Even the working suits are spun-glass."

"Why such a prosaic name as Workington?" Kate queried.

"It's the place where we work," Shel replied, simply. "Of course, everyone on Mars does some form of work, in its broadest sense. There are no idlers, no privileged classes, everyone contributes in some way to the maintenance and well-being of the colony. We do distinguish, however, between physical effort, manual labour, if you like, and other forms of service. Those who are called upon to give physical effort we call workers, and it's done in shifts, as I told you. Sixty days on, thirty days off, and as this is the

place where they go to do their work, we call it Working Town—Workington!”

She turned in her seat. “By the way, Commodore, I almost forgot. There’s a package of mail for you. At least,” she corrected herself, “for your party. Here.” She handed it over. Gale took it, snapped the plastic wrapper, and leafed through the letters.

“One for you, Steve—and one for you, Miss Kate, from Space-base.”

“That’ll be from your chief chemist, Dr. Grunther,” she guessed. “He promised to let me know how he got on with his researches into the ‘Lacey gas’ samples.”

“Don’t you ever get any mail, Mr. Lester?” Shel asked. “You didn’t look as if you were expecting any.” And Hank, who had summoned up the courage to pick out the seat beside her, shook his head.

“Who, me?” he muttered awkwardly. “Don’t rightly know anybody as would be wanting to write to me.”

“I would,” she stated, gently. “I’d love to—but you’d have to promise to answer my letters!”

Hank writhed in an agony of embarrassment, and could find no words.

“Of course,” she sighed, “if you’d rather not——”

“Gosh, Miss Shel, don’t say that sure I would like it if you wrote to me. I’d like it fine—and I promise to write back, honest.”

“All right, then, Mr. Lester—I’ll keep you to that.”

“Don’t call me Mister,” he begged. “Couldn’t you make it Hank?”

Kate looked up from her letter. “Uncle Steve, listen to this—you, too, Commodore. It’s Dr. Grunther’s report. He says he’s done a lot of trials on the gas, with animals, and the earlier results have all been confirmed. One dosage of the gas appears to have no harmful effects, apart from the twenty-minute catalepsy, but repetition produces certain irregularities which do not admit of rational explanation—that’s what it says here. I won’t read it out to you—what with the handwriting, and the German-English! The gist of it is that ten doses of the gas, at twenty-four hour intervals, produces a stasis in the cellular structure—there’s a lot of technical stuff about molecular structure, fixed phosphorus and so on—but it means that the organism so dosed does not age, the physical structure becomes static so far as maturing is concerned. It also becomes sterile——”

Norden looked thoughtfully at Gale. “That means that we guessed right about Lacey and Orloff, Windy, they did have the secret of youth.”

"It's not as simple as that, or as pleasant," Kate interrupted. "He goes on to say that the behaviour patterns of all the animals he tried became modified in the same way, their characters changed!"

"Animals with characters yet," Gale scoffed.

"It's not funny," Kate shuddered. "He says they developed a sort of ruthlessness, a fanatic devotion to purpose regardless of personal safety. All of them—rats, mice, guinea-pigs—even rabbits and sheep. They became hard, determined—as he puts it himself, 'a total loss of all sense of discretion, caution or evaluation of consequences'." She stopped there, staring at the two men. Gale's face hardened.

"That makes me feel a whole heap better," he said, harshly. "I've tried not to think too much about what we did to those crooks and the base they had. Felt a little regret, I guess. You might call it a touch of conscience. But now, according to what you just said, Miss Kate, they were insane, and dangerously insane at that. It's my guess that the Universe is a better place without them." Norden grunted, suddenly, explosively.

"It may not be as simple as all that, Windy. We have no reason to believe that Lacey and Orloff shared their secret with anyone else, but"—and his voice was harsh—"it's a possibility we can't overlook. We might just be up against a whole pack of these 'immortals'!"

They fell silent, each considering in his own way the ominous implications behind those last words. Kate sat for a long while, holding the letter between her fingers, not seeing it, her mind full of fantastic horrors, until her psychology training made her come to with a start.

"This will never do," she told herself firmly. "That way leads to a fine crop of nightmares, but precious little else." She folded the all-important letter into the pocket of her scanty shorts, and looked round, idly. Her gaze went, almost unwillingly, to where a curly red head was bending close to one that was sleek and blonde, and a brawny, bronzed, muscular shoulder rubbed intimately against smooth, pink-and-white satin skin. Her eyes narrowed and became even icier blue, as she saw a pertly lovely face smiling eagerly up into the cheery, handsome grin she had grown to know so well. "If ever a girl invited a kiss, that was it," she thought, as she saw the pretty pilot purse her lips in pretended puzzlement, her tempting mouth scant inches away from his. "But you're wasting your time, my dear." She sent the unspoken advice on the wings of thought. "As I know, from painful experience. He's interested, sure, but only in your abilities, not your appearance. You're just another female to him, and you might as well be an

old hag for all the difference it makes."

She felt a twinge of regret for the girl, then decided that she was probably well able to look after herself. Her thoughts went back to the moment of their first meeting, when she had first run foul of his plainly expressed contempt for pretty women as such.

With his perfect features and impeccable air, allied to an athletic figure and the glamour of a Space Service uniform, it was not surprising that he had been the target for many designing females, nor that he had grown to distrust all pretty women on sight, unless they had some talent or ability that merited respect. In her case she had been quite helpless to start a simple little motor-boat engine. She blushed at the recollection, and at the memory of the consequences, when their two red-headed tempers had clashed, and she had lost her shirt, by accident, in the resulting struggle.

She recalled the pass-word they had agreed on, later, when they had made friends. "If only," she thought, "I could sneak up behind them now and say, 'Keep your shirt on, Frank!' But no, that would be childish. Besides, I've no right—I've no right at all." Quite suddenly she discovered, miserably, that she wanted that right very much.

"What's bothering you, Kate?" Norden nudged her, gently. "You're very quiet, and frowning away like crazy. Still thinking about Grunther's report?"

She started, guiltily, and snatched hastily at the first thought which came to mind.

"No—no. As a matter of fact," she denied, hesitated, groped, "I was thinking about Clarke."

"What about him?"

"His reactions, mostly. They don't make sense."

"They don't?"

"No, of course they don't." She found her mind suddenly full, and plunged into the argument thankfully. "Look. When we first came to see him, only a couple of weeks back, he was courteous and kind, even keen. He seemed to understand and believe us, and he did try to help. You must agree there?"

Norden nodded, and the look on his face made her pause, uneasily.

"I know you, Uncle Steve—you're getting ready to laugh at me. Am I saying something awfully silly?"

"Not yet," he said calmly. "But you haven't finished. Go on."

"Well, all right. This time, when we go to him, what do we find? He's changed right round the other way! I wouldn't

mind so much if he had only just lost interest, or forgotten about us—although that would be bad enough—but he seems to be directly opposed, as if he didn't want to believe what we were telling him!"

"That's right," he nodded again, grinning. "That's your answer!"

"What do you mean, that's my answer? That isn't an answer. It's just rubbish. It doesn't make sense. He's no fool. He wouldn't just not want to believe, unless there was some strange reason."

"There is a reason, of course, and nothing strange about it."

"You mean this all makes sense to you?"

Norden chuckled, chestily. "Kate," he said, "there's a bit in your psychology note-book. You wrote it yourself. It says, more or less—'Any analysis from incomplete data must be considered tentative only, and when such an analysis appears unreasonable, the fault probably lies in the unconsidered data', or words to that effect."

"Stop showing off, Uncle Steve," she warned him, crossly. "You know very well that all you know about psychology you got from my lecture notes, anyway. You make me mad, sitting there like a little boy with a bag of candy, gloating."

"Me, too!" Gale chipped in. "But you'll never cure him, Miss Kate. I've known Steve a heck of a long time now, and he just can't get out of that way of saving up his little secrets for a big pay-off line." He directed a stern look at his chuckling friend.

"I've been listening to this little conversation," he announced, "and this time you've talked yourself right out on a limb. Clarke's behaviour don't make sense to me, neither. Now, let's see you show off in front of both of us."

"It's very simple." Norden was quite unrepentant. "Nothing to do with psychology at all, just plain common-sense—and a few facts. Let me ask you a question first, Windy. What would you say if someone came to you and told you that one of the high-ranking officers of Space Service had been caught in the act of—sabotage, say?"

"Couldn't happen." Gale was snappily prompt. "Every man jack is thoroughly tested and psycho-checked——"

"See what I mean? You won't even entertain the possibility." Norden laughed. "It couldn't happen, according to you. How do you think Clarke feels? Can you wonder he doesn't want to believe us?"

Gale's eyebrows went up in slow comprehension, but Kate still looked puzzled.

"I still don't see the connection," she confessed. "Am I

being slow or something?"

"No, just young, too young to know anything about the time when the Mars colony was first set up. That was all of thirty years ago, if I'm not mistaken." He shot a quick, querying look at Shel, across from him, who had been listening with interest.

"It's our thirtieth birthday to-morrow, as a matter of fact," she smiled. "We're having a very special party in celebration. You must be back in time for it."

"We'll try, at any rate," Gale promised. Norden settled himself more comfortably in his seat.

"This colony," he began slowly, "is the biggest and most thorough experiment in selective breeding this world of ours has ever seen. The original idea of those who planned it was that every person selected would be as near perfect as could possibly be got. They set a fixed age, rigid standards of health and physique, and a moral, social and spiritual background that would shake a saint as the preliminary requisites. Only the preliminaries, mind. Those who got through that, and there were a lot who tried and failed, they had to pass psycho-tests. And such tests! Not just for brain and ability, though they were counted in, but for ingenuity, adaptability, stability, loyalty, ideals—and lots more.

"The wonder of it all is that they got anybody at all. But they did, only a handful, of course, but enough to set up a norm. From then on, being admitted to Mars as a permanent colonist has been one of the most difficult things in the world to achieve. Those old-timers figured that life on Mars was going to be not only tough and difficult, but new, different and with tremendous possibilities. They figured that every last one of the colonists would have to kick in with his full percentage of effort."

He smiled across at Shel. "That's what the lady said only a few minutes ago. 'There are no idlers'. That's why they have no police system, very few regulations, or laws, and no lawbreakers. You see, in theory, at least, any group of intelligent, mature people should be able to get by without a string of rules and regulations. The only reason why we have police on Earth is because there is a small percentage of mal-adjusted people, and a great big percentage of those who take things for granted. The theory has worked out. In thirty years Mars Colony is streets ahead of us in everything except numbers, and particularly in mental and emotional maturity. I'm not saying they're all geniuses. It doesn't work out like that, but they are all mature, they live with all of themselves, not just part of the time, like we do."

"That's a funny thing to say!" Kate commented. "I

never thought of it like that. I suppose it *is* true in a way, but it makes it sound as if we wasted such a lot of time, us Earthans."

"So we do!" he countered swiftly. "And most of it in conforming to rules which were set up to suit the lowest common factor. Look at clothes, for instance, and decency and morals, the whole lot all tied and tangled together till it would baffle a master-mind to make sense of it. It's hot on the beach, so you wear the minimum. It's just as hot in the street going home, but you have to dress decent, and sweat, or be arrested. Pants are recognised male dress, skirts for women. Right? So, you fancy you'd like to wear slacks—it's O.K., nobody minds, but if I try to walk along the street in a skirt, Heaven forbid, I'm arrested straight off! They have a saying, here on Mars, I guess you've heard it back home. 'Morals are for Morons'. The people back home make a fuss about it, and try to spread the word that this is a home for lechery, but it doesn't mean that at all. It only means that people who are old enough to know how to behave don't have to be told.

"Take another instance." He gestured round. "Here we are, all of us, stripped to the waist, and why? Not because we want to exhibit ourselves but because it has been found practical. Low air-pressure is unavoidable when you have to make every cubic foot the hard way. That makes it necessary to exercise the lungs much more than usual. It also makes it intolerable to have any sort of restraint on the chest at all. So, they decide not to wear anything on their chests. How obvious—and yet how impossible for any but a fully mature society to do. We're mature, as it happens, so we follow suit, and feel comfortable. But"—he punched one palm with the other fist—"you wait, and if we do happen to see any visitors, sightseers—you watch 'em. Watch 'em struggle, and gasp, and cling like mad to their shirts and vests and blouses and such."

"All right, all right—you've made your point a dozen times," Gale pretended to stifle a yawn.

"So that's why Clarke just couldn't accept our story about——"

"About criminals, about any sort of activity directed against the well-being of the community." Norden filled in for her. "Exactly. He could accept our story about Marvin Lacey and Nina Orloff, with an effort, but when it came to identifying them with two people he knew to be good Martians, that's when he boggled, and as for there being a criminal gang on Mars, it just couldn't be possible."

Gale sat up, eagerly, maliciously. "You're still not in the clear, old man, not by a long way. You just proved,

at some length, that there can't be any such thing as a criminal group on Mars. We know there is. How do you explain that, master-mind?"

"I've been thinking that over, ever since Katey read her letter out to us," Norden growled, and the humour had vanished from his face now. "Everything has its price, anything can be bought, if the price is right, and immortality is a hell of a price to offer any man!"

CHAPTER III

SAM HUDSON was as plain and forthright as his name. Shel introduced the party to him as 'Friends of the Governor, just looking round,' and he to them as the "chief executive" of Workington. He gave them a brief, non-committal stare, and said:

"We're busy folk here." Fairless recognised the accent as being direct from the northern part of his own country. "And we've no time to stand around and gossip in working hours. You're welcome to look about as much as you like, but don't talk to anybody who's working, and don't get in the way." He rose from the desk, moving to a rack on the wall, revealing himself as being as square-built and rugged as his manner. "Here's a map; happen that'll help you to keep from getting lost. If you want me any more, see me in my dinner-hour. Good morning!" He went back to his desk, abruptly, and resumed his work as if they had never existed. As they filed from the office, Norden shot a side glance at the Commodore, half expecting a caustic comment from him, but to his surprise Gale was almost smiling.

"That's what I like to see!" he approved. "Efficiency and hard work. None of this 'Throw out the welcome mat, we've got company' business. I betcha everybody calls him Sam, eh, Miss Shel?"

"That's right!" She smiled. "He's really quite a nice man, when he's not working, which isn't very often. That crack about his dinner-hour is a favourite one. Actually, he never stops for meals, but has them sent in to his desk. But that shouldn't worry us. I know my way about here pretty well, and what I don't know, the map will tell us."

"Is there some place we can go and sit, so that we can study the thing?" Gale asked her. "Then we can come to some sort of arrangement, get ourselves organised."

"Surely," she nodded. "We can find the cafeteria. There won't be many there at this hour. Come on!"

As they gathered round one of the little tables, she spread the map out and pointed.

"Seven domes," she explained. "Just like Canal City, only these are smaller, and their functions are different. This is where we are at the moment, in the very middle of the centre dome. All round us are the residential dormitories and recreation rooms."

"I thought it was work, all work, all the time?" Norden queried. "Recreation rooms?"

"You would most probably call it 'exercise'," she told him, "but we find that an hour or so spent in some form of game is better for recreating energy than just lazing about."

"Games?" Fairless put in, with interest. "What sort of games do they play here? Any I would know?"

"You would know some of them, no doubt, although many are unique, in that they were invented, or devised, especially to suit our——"

"Look! We didn't come here to play games," Gale interrupted, with a dark glare at Fairless. "Sorry to be rude, and all that, but let's get on with it, shall we?"

"The dome immediately south of us, where we came in, is devoted to traffic, in and out, only here, they call it 'handling'; mostly plants, seeds, bushes and such, coming in from Earth, and our own metal and plastic manufactures going out. Going anti-clockwise, and following the 'in' flow, the next dome is where the plants and seeds are graded, sorted and processed. From there they go to the next dome—loading and despatch for planting and sowing. The next dome, directly north of us, is Records; next is the noisiest dome of the lot. Here they handle all the rough minerals and ores coming in from the mines, do all the fine smelting, rolling and other processing. Rough smelting of oxides is done out on the surface, of course. The processed metals and plastics go from there to the next dome, where it's research and design, construction and make-up, ready for use. The flow from there takes us back again to the 'handling' dome, and that's where we started from."

"Needle in a haystack isn't in it!" Fairless said, flatly. "We couldn't comb that lot in a month. They wear working clothes, too, surely, in most of these departments?"

"Naturally," Shel nodded. "Whatever clothing may be necessary for the job. For instance, in here"—she pointed to the dome she had meant when speaking of 'fine smelting'—"they work in an atmosphere of hydrogen, in self-contained suits. I remember that quite distinctly, as it is one

of the high spots for visitors, to walk round in these suits and watch the showers of sparks and flames."

"Some hopes of finding a black eye, or a bruise, in that lot!"

"I guess you're right, Lieutenant," Gale rasped, biting his lip savagely. "But those men must be here, and there must be some way——"

"Sir!" Hank had been silent so long that his voice came out as a high-pitched squeak, which surprised him just as much as the others. He coughed and tried again. "Sir, begging your pardon—but we don't really need to find those particular guys——"

"Oh, don't we?"

"No, sir. They ain't important at all."

"Lieutenant Lester"—Gale's voice was very soft, almost caressing—"we've just flown five hundred miles to get here, and I've been of the firm impression that we did this just for the purpose of finding those 'six guys', as you put it. Now you tell me that I've been wrong all along, that I'm not really looking for them at all. You should wait till now to tell me this! And, having told me so much, you can't leave it like that. It wouldn't be kind. Lester"—his voice began to shake with emotion, and Fairless shuddered for his friend—"would you mind us knowing what *you* think we came here for?"

"Why, sure, I was going to tell you, in any case!" Hank was a little puzzled by the Commodore's manner.

"This had better be good," Gale declared, to no-one in particular.

"It's like you were saying," Hank said, looking at Norden. "This is big stuff. It would have to be organised. There would have to be a 'big shot' at this end, too, to take charge. Those six guys, they're only small meat. What we want to find is the guy in charge at this end, ain't that right?"

"Go on, Lieutenant." Gale was very patient, ominously so.

"Well, why don't we ask?"

"Ask! Ask?"

"Sure! Why don't we ask if Lacey was ever seen hanging round these parts, and if he was, who did he come to see?"

There was a stunned silence, then Gale struck himself smartly on the forehead and groaned.

"What a damned dumb bunch we turned out to be. The obvious answer, sitting right under our noses, and it had to wait for a—no, I won't say what I was going to say. Lester, I give you best. That was a fine bit of logical deduction. Thank you. The trouble with the rest of us is that

we're too clever by half."

"Aw, 'tweren't nothing," Hank denied, grinning. "It's always that way with machines, too. 'Tain't no use to go poking and prying with tools and such. No, sir. You just have to sit right down and figure out why it went wrong, and then you can fix it, just like that!"

"Just like that," Gale echoed, passing a quivering hand across his brow. "Very interesting, Lieutenant, but spare us the rest. Some other time, maybe?" Fairless stared fixedly at the table, not trusting himself to meet the Commodore's glare, outwardly calm, but inside he was one big, aching grin. Shel, however, took it all in her stride.

"Good boy, Hank," she murmured, patting him on the arm, then, to Gale, she said, briskly: "That's something I can take care of, Commodore, if you wish. I have one or two errands to carry out, and I can make the enquiries at the same time. It won't take long. If you'll just stay here, I'll be right back."

Gale sent her hurrying off, but looked after her with a frown.

"I hope she will be discreet," he muttered.

Norden reached out for the plan which still lay on the table.

"Harking back to what I was saying on the 'plane," he rumbled. "This plan will give you some idea of how far these people have advanced in thirty years. We came to this planet in the early days, Windy and me, and we remember what a prospect it was then. Scarcely a trace of moisture, except at the poles; precious little air, at a pressure about one tenth Earth-Normal, and hardly any oxygen in it, at that."

Gale nodded, quietly, a grim smile on his sharp features.

"Cold, too," he added. "You think it's cold out there now, but you can at least walk about in it with furs. You can't imagine just how cold it was then. Zero degrees, fahrenheit, doesn't mean a thing unless you take into consideration the dispersal effect of the thin atmosphere."

"Right here, in this dome," Norden prodded the plan, "and in the surface smelters they're busy changing all that. You heard Shel mention hydrogen. It's a funny thing, but most people remember that hydrogen will burn, but forget that things won't burn in it. If you take a metallic oxide and heat it in hydrogen, it becomes pure metal, the oxygen combines with the hydrogen and becomes water. Mars is lousy with oxides, and in particular iron oxides. Even the vegetation turns brown instead of green, mostly because of that. So, what do they do but mine all the ore they can

lay hands on, reduce it to pure metal, and release water. The last I heard, they're expecting to have rain soon."

"Isn't that part of the 'Three Point Plan' they talk about?"

"That's right, Kate—that's one of the points, to release oxygen, in a form so that it won't just revert back to oxides again. The second line of attack you can see in this business of plants. They can take the minerals direct from the soil, and release quite a lot of oxygen in the process. The third point is, of course, the gradual process of getting accustomed to low pressure anyway, whilst waiting for the planet's air-blanket to catch up. Right now the air pressure out there is very nearly up to one-third Earth-Normal. It isn't as cold as it used to be; the surface isn't as barren. It has been said that Mars is being brought back to life, but that isn't true——"

He was interrupted by the return of the secretary.

"Hank was quite right," she announced, excitedly. "I've dug up a lot of references to Carter Wallace. Apparently he visits here quite often, but I can only find one person he seems to be thick with. So far as I can discover, he always came to visit the chief of the 'plant-biology' section."

"His name?" Gale asked urgently.

"Rask. Doctor Floyd Rask."

"You didn't talk too much, did you? We don't want him tipped off, or anything silly like that!"

"Certainly not!" Shel was almost indignant. "I should hope I know my job a little better than that."

"Good." Gale got up from the table, his whole air showing a sort of 'This is it' tenseness. "Where did you say we would find him?"

"Just a minute, Commodore!" There was something in the tone of Kate's voice which made the rest of them stare at her. Fairless noted a dreamy, far-away look on her face, and almost rubbed his eyes in disbelief. He was not to know that the look was meant almost exclusively for him. She turned to Shel.

"Doctor *Floyd* Rask, you said, didn't you, and a plant-biology man. It must be the same!"

"You mean you know this guy?" Gale almost screamed at her.

"I'll tell you," she decided, slowly, "and you see what you think. About four years ago, it would be, I was doing biology then, pretty nearly finished, in fact; we had a series of visiting lecturers, and this Rask was one of them. The same name, exactly, and I couldn't forget him, because he was down on the list as a plant-biologist. You see, we thought it was going to be extremely dull, but he spent the

whole time showing us how certain cells in plants resemble similar cells in the human brain, and the way in which these cells seem to be responsible for the various seemingly intelligent reactions of certain plants. I remember all the girls were fascinated by him." She faded off into a thoughtful silence, crowding on the dreamy look as hard as she could.

Her thoughts were anything but dreamy. With one part of her mind she was reaching back the fingers of memory to dig up all the details of Rask that she could find, but above it all ran the theme that was like a vicious chant: "Mara Lee, indeed! Blonde pilot! I'll give him blonde pilot, the big ape—see how you like this, Frank Fairless!"

Gale assessed her information swiftly.

"I think it's worth taking a chance on, Miss Kate, but the point is, how do we use it?"

"It's very near the lunch-break," Shel noted. "There's a fair chance he'll be coming in here anyway. It might be policy just to sit and wait for him."

"Would you know him again?" Gale asked Kate.

"Definitely—I'd know him anywhere," she replied, hoping the emphasis was being noted in the right quarter. Gale made up his mind.

"We'll move to a table nearer the section he's in," he decided. "Which way is that? There? Right, let's go!"

They threaded their way through the groups of tables, and were only just in time, as the cafeteria was beginning to fill up with busy, yet quiet workers. Hank was intrigued at the meal-system.

"I'll be darned," he muttered. "I thought we had packaged grub down to a fine art in the Service, but this beats our'n. Say, Shel, don't they never eat nothing but biscuits?"

"They do look like biscuits," she smiled. "Really they are much more complex than that. We call them food-cakes, and they're made up in hexagonal slabs for space-saving. Each one is plastic-wrapped, and labelled with the contents: protein, vitamin and calorie value—and flavour. See, they fit in the under side of the container, leaving the upper side for liquid."

Hank watched a couple of smiling girls helping themselves from a nearby dispenser, and was debating following their lead. Gale was in high spirits, literally rubbing his hands.

"I can't help feeling that this is a break, the first we've had so far. It only wants for him to walk in that door."

"And then what?" Norden put in, mildly.

"I'll tell you, Uncle Steve," Kate spoke up before the Commodore could appear doubtful. "We watch where he

settles, give him a minute or two, then I march over to him and say, 'Why, if it isn't Doctor Rask, fancy meeting you!' And then take it from there."

"You realise this man may be dangerous?" Fairless spoke up, not liking the idea a bit.

"Beat me to it, Frank," Norden growled. "Remember that letter. If this guy is what we think he is, he's mad."

"I like 'em dangerous." She flirted her red hair, obstinately. "Besides, if you're so smart, tell me a better way of getting at him without making him suspicious? And, what's more, if he's the guy I think he is, then you're all wrong. The Doctor Rask I knew was——"

"Was what? Or should I have let you go on, I wonder? Maybe I would have confounded the old saw about eavesdroppers? Traditionally, they never hear good spoken of themselves."

The light, high-pitched, almost effeminate drawl came from a stranger who had approached their table unnoticed. He was tall, slim, dark of hair and eyes, and with a calculated languor of stance that gave one the impression of a frilled and flounced dandy, about to take a delicate pinch of snuff at any minute; this despite the fact that he wore only a brief slip and sandals of gleaming black. It was Fairless who noted the less obvious points; that the slimness was accompanied by adequate whip-like muscular development; that the lazy-seeming eyes were none the less sharp and attentive, and that the stranger wore a viciously gleaming knife clipped to his forearm with chrome mesh bands.

Kate got over her surprise and turned on a smile with commendable speed.

"Doctor Rask, isn't it?"

"Naturally. And if I'm not mistaken, and I very seldom am, I have the honour and pleasure of addressing, once again, Miss Kate Norden, surely?"

"How nice of you to remember me, Doctor!" she said, delightedly. "I intend to take that as a personal compliment. I'm sure you don't recall all the members of your casual classes so perfectly."

"You're quite right, of course," he drawled. "And I should say, 'How could I forget one who gave me such an interesting concept on the validity of sub-threshold impulses, and then went on to write a monograph on the subject'——"

"You read my little effort, then?" She tried to look modest.

"In view of the fact that you sent me a copy, anonymously, but addressed in your handwriting, I could hardly fail, could I?" Kate began to look murderous, but wore her

smile bravely, hoping it was going to be worth-while. "But," he continued, still in that bored, stilted drawling tone, "it wouldn't be honest for me to admit that I recalled you by any other method than recognising the colour of your hair. There just couldn't be another red like that!"

"May I introduce my companions," Kate turned away from him, and performed the ceremony, mechanically, the while her mind fought out the question as to whether it was worth being pleasant to such odious conceit just for the problematical satisfaction of making Frank Fairless squirm. It was not until she caught a square look at his face that she noticed that the tall spaceman, usually so calm and withdrawn, was frowning like a thundercloud. In that instant the bliss of revenge swept aside all other considerations, and she hastened to make space for Rask to sit by her side, at Gale's invitation. When the doctor had mouthed the expected surprises at meeting such distinguished company Gale got down to the business in hand with typical brevity.

"Carter Wallace! Oh, yes, I know him well," Rask admitted, at once. "Only in a professional sense, of course, or perhaps I should say 'semi-professional'."

"Just what do you mean by that?" Gale demanded.

"That I don't know anything about his private life, naturally."

"No one asked anything about his private life." Gale was at once suspicious. Rask smiled.

"Don't tell me you want to discuss painting with him, or flora, or other phenomena of Nature!" he jeered, and the little Commodore reddened.

"Never mind what we want to see him about, we just want to find anybody who knows him, all his friends—to ask them some questions."

"I'm here, go ahead and ask me," Rask sighed, "and make the most of me, for there isn't anyone else, not in Workington, anyway."

Gale pondered this a moment, then:

"All right, you'll do for the moment. Tell me all you know about the man, and the girl, too!"

"My word!" Rask opened his eyes a little wider. "Wallace must have done something really bad. Fortunately, there isn't much to tell. He comes to see me occasionally, brings me a plant or two, new species or types, and I show him any new ones that I've come across. And that's all—sorry!"

Gale began to cross-question him as to appearance, regularity of visits, personal peculiarities and so on, but it was very evident that here was a sterile field.

All this while, Fairless had been studying the Doctor very

keenly. He had taken a violent dislike to Rask on sight. Being essentially an honest man, he sought diligently to find just what it was that had aroused such a feeling. "I've never known this before," he told himself. "For no reason I can think of I hate the sight of the man—but there *must* be a reason." He studied Rask again, taking in all the detail, item by item. There were several points he disliked, in manner, speech and appearance, but nothing to account for that violent feeling of loathing. "Must be getting psychic, or something," he decided, at the finish, "for he's a wrong 'un, or I'm crazy, and I feel fine." He came to in time to hear Gale decide, out loud:

"Doesn't seem to be much point in our staying here, so far as I can see, unless anyone else has got any ideas?" In the silence which followed, Fairless leaned forward across the table.

"That's quite a weapon you carry there, Doctor?"

"My knife, you mean? That's no weapon, Lieutenant," Rask was condescending enough to explain. "We don't carry weapons on Mars, you know, and this little toy would hardly be classed as a weapon, anyway. Actually it's a little conceit of mine, but it does come in handy for pruning, or slicing a specimen."

Fairless thought swiftly. It trembled on his tongue to call the supercilious scientist a liar, but he decided against that. Rask rose from the table.

"If you'll excuse me," he said, "I must go for my recreation now, but, no doubt, I'll see you again later."

"Could we come with you?" Kate was snatching at straws in the endeavour to turn this to her advantage. "We haven't seen any of the recreations yet, and we might as well see something while we're here."

Gale, too, was far from satisfied with what he had been able to get from Rask, and was reluctant to let him escape. As Kate looked round the table to get the reactions of the others, he nodded.

"We'll all come, Doctor, if we may?" If there was an undertone of threat in the question, Rask affected not to notice, but smiled to himself, and made one of his affected bows.

"Of course, come along, although I'm afraid it won't be of much entertainment value."

He led the way to a large room where half a dozen others were busy with the various pieces of apparatus. Fairless was close behind him, still wearing that frown of concentration. He had a considerable acquaintance with knives, and there was no mistaking a throwing-knife, yet Rask was

pretending to be ignorant of its real purpose. He was quite sure the scientist *was* pretending, as there was no other possible justification for carrying such a knife in such a manner, and as for using it as he had claimed, nothing could have been less practical. So Rask was lying, but why? As they came to a deserted end of the games room Rask turned to them.

"Of course," he said idly, "all Earthans are athletes, on Mars, because of the lesser gravity, but we have made a speciality of games which place stress on the other factors. My favourite is 'Wild-ball,' where the accent is on speed and judgment. This is the machine, here."

He indicated a large, glittering, bullet-shaped device, and the net in front of the open, business-like end. He touched a switch and they saw the interior begin to whirl at ever-growing speed.

"It reminds me of a concrete mixer," Norden grunted. "What's it do—throw balls at you?"

"The scientific mind!" Rask bowed. "You have it, Doctor. I throw in a ball so—and after an irregular interval, it is thrown out again, and I catch it. The blades inside are so arranged that the ball may emerge at any angle within the target area, as shown by the net. The interval between throw and return varies strictly in between ten and fifteen seconds; the ball emerges at the same speed at which it is thrown in. And that's all there is to it."

He swung round on Fairless, who was close behind him.

"You were curious about my knife, Lieutenant? Have a closer look at it," he murmured, and his right hand moved like a striking snake, across to seize the haft, withdraw, and lunge. No doubt he had intended to stop frighteningly close to the spaceman's bronzed chest, but his intention was frustrated painfully, as a huge fist clamped on his wrist, seemingly from thin air, just as he had seized the haft. From inches above his head he heard a mild voice say:

"You should try throwing your left hand to meet the right, it's very much quicker that way."

Rask forced a sickly smile, and made a great show of unfastening the chrome clips, laying the knife and sheath aside. Kate looked at her uncle and smothered a grin, seeing him do likewise. Between them, they had spent months timing the reflexes and reactions of this huge, mild-looking Englishman. "Damn lucky Frank didn't take it off him and dig him with it. Been me, I would!" Norden growled, under his breath.

Rask stepped into the space between the net and the machine, gave his maltreated wrist a flex, then took two of the solid rubber balls, threw them casually into the

machine one after the other. The few who were using the games-room had left their apparatus and were gathered round to observe. By the look of their faces Kate judged that they had come to admire also. After a while she had to admit that Rask was good. He began throwing the balls in with all the force of his arm, trapping them on the rebound with deft ease. Finally he turned to another piece of apparatus, wheeling it along until it stood almost behind him. As he dropped a ball in the hopper they saw its purpose, for it shot the ball into the whirling machine like a bullet from a gun. They saw him tense, warily, and then swerve and snatch. The heavy net shook as the ball hit it. He tried again. In an aside to Gale, Norden whispered:

"The trick here is to get out of the way of it. That pellet'd crack a rib if it hit!"

"Maybe it will," Gale murmured, philosophically. "Maybe it will."

Amid soft "ooh's" and "ah's" from the appreciative crowd, Rask continued to evade the bullet-like emmissions, and then, at last, to the applause of the audience, he succeeded in catching the ball. The impact could be distinctly heard, as the force of it turned him half way round, but he held it, threw it up in the air, and emerged, breathing rather quickly.

"That looks like good fun," Fairless exclaimed. "All right if I have a shot at it?"

"By all means," Rask invited, and Fairless stepped into the target area, seizing one of the balls and examining it closely. It felt, he found, very like a golf-ball, but without the dimpled surface. There was a box full of them by the side of the hopper of the throwing-machine. He took a couple more, tossed them, one at a time, into the whirler. As they emerged he caught them, easily, then, very quickly, he threw one, violently. As it came out, whizzing, he slid aside and let it strike the net, making no effort to catch it. He repeated this a few times, and the crowd around began to snicker. Kate felt her face flushing red.

"Uncle Steve, what's he fooling about at?" she muttered, in some rage. "I suppose he knows everyone's laughing at him?"

"At us, you mean!" Norden chuckled. "You're backing a loser if you expect Frank to get in there and show off. He's just interested in the way of it. He's no gallery player!" Norden's voice had been softened, but Rask's ears showed red as he moved to the side of the net.

"Try the mechano-thrower, Lieutenant, like this!" he sneered, and his hand, round the side of the net, grasped the box full of balls, appeared to fumble.

"Frank! Look out!" Kate screamed, over the concerted gasp of the spectators, as the whole contents went into the waiting maw of the thrower. Fairless snatched a quick, wide-eyed look over his shoulder, and fell into a crouch as the machine began to cough out the white pills at half-second intervals. He decided in a flash that it was going to be quite impossible to dodge so many rapid fires, so, concentrating all his attention on that dark, cannon-like mouth, he counted, sub-consciously, the number of balls thumping over his shoulder into the whirler.

His eyes narrowed to slits as he prepared to match his speed and co-ordination against the senseless irregularities of the machine. Rask was only one among many who held his breath in sheer unbelief as those two snatching hands went into eye-baffling action, picking white blurs out of the air and releasing them, robbed of their hitting speed.

After a few minutes which seemed an age to the spectators he walked calmly out from behind the net and grinned cheerfully at the speechless Rask.

"How did I do?" he asked. Before he could reply, one of the onlookers rushed up to Fairless, clasped him by the hand.

"Magnifique! Incroyable!" he cried. "That was a formidable performance, monsieur." Fairless shrugged, smiling.

"*Pas mal du tout,*" he admitted. "*Je ne sais pas bien entraine.*"

The Frenchman went back to his companions shaking his head in bewilderment. "Not trained!" he muttered. "As if one would want to train for such suicide!"

Gale brought the atmosphere back to mundane level, characteristically.

"If you've quite finished enjoying yourselves, I suggest we get back to that food we were so close to, a little while ago."

"If you're still decided to return to Canal City, and take up your search there, Commodore," Rask had regained all his supercilious manner during the meal, "I may be able to help you. I shall be there myself to-morrow. I'm flying down in the morning, for the celebrations. I know most of Wallace's acquaintances; I could round them up for you."

Gale hid a wince at the incessant use of the first personal pronoun, and considered the offer. Kate tugged at his elbow.

"We could fly down in the morning, too!" she suggested. "Then we'd all be together." Gale nodded thoughtfully.

He was, like Kate, reluctant to lose sight of the doctor, but for different reasons. Rask was quick to take advantage of the decision.

"Don't be bored all this afternoon," he suggested. "Allow me the pleasure of showing you round our little city."

"I seem to have got this place all wrong," Norden announced. "I was given to understand that you people had no time to stop, you were so busy working all the time!"

"I recognise the fine hand of Sam Hudson, there," Rask smiled, "but that refers to workers only. I am a mental. This city is my home. I work where I please, and as I please."

Gale drew Fairless aside.

"I hate to do this to you, Lieutenant, but I'm detailing you to go along with Rask and Miss Kate. Don't know why, but I don't like the guy at all, and I'm not taking any chances."

"My feelings exactly, sir." The tall spaceman looked grim. "The very sight of him makes my hackles rise, but for the life of me I can't tell why."

"After that little fracas with the throwing dingus, I shouldn't be surprised if he hates your guts, too. However, that order still goes. I'm holding you responsible for Miss Kate, and him."

"It'll be a pleasure," Fairless grinned. "But aren't you overlooking one thing? Suppose Miss Kate doesn't want me along?"

As it happened, however, the suggestion met with her full approval. She had not been looking forward to being alone with Rask, in any case, and the thought that she would have Fairless along to observe, and, if she could manage it, squirm under her eyes, made the prospect seem a lot more attractive.

CHAPTER IV

FOR two people, at least, the atmosphere in the 'plane was a bit oppressive, as it touched down outside Canal City the following day. Fairless had spent a thoroughly miserable afternoon and evening, in attendance on Kate and the plant-biologist. Torn between his instinctive revulsion for Rask, and Kate's too obvious admiration of him, he had been in a foul, self-accusing mood, which had persisted through the night and was still with him the following morning. As a consequence he plunged even deeper into the mysteries of air-flight under the eager assistance of the

pert Mara Lee, in an attempt to take his mind off his troubles.

Kate had found the supercilious doctor almost more than she could stand. It had been her custom, in the past, to set a man on his way in no uncertain terms if he did not suit her taste, and the novelty of pretending to admire a man whose every other word was intended to betray his own superiority was wearing thin very rapidly.

She had firmly intended to evade him in the 'plane, but the sight of Fairless still fraternising with the beautiful blonde spurred her on to one more effort. Her one uncertain crumb of consolation was that Rask would surely succumb to the attention she was giving him. "I'm sure," she thought, "that no woman in her right mind would ever have fawned on him the way I'm doing. Maybe his head will swell so much that it'll burst." But, as she came to dwell on her own phrase about a woman in her right mind, she had her doubts.

As they entered Traffic Control, however, there was an air of high spirits and bright, bubbling gaiety which caught at them in a moment, sweeping away all the little problems. Broad smiles greeted them on all sides; officials and staff, forsaking their usual calm, were chattering and laughing as they hurried to and fro on their many errands. Norden was the first to catch sight of a huge banner in glowing letters over the archway of the main air-lock. He drew the attention of the others, and they stared in perplexed wonder.

"There's another," Kate cried, "and another—lots of them, all over the place, and they all say the same thing. Whatever does it all mean, I wonder?" The notice was brief. It bore, in big numerals, the figure 30, all by itself, and at the other end of the strip, in smaller numerals, $4/5 \times 4/5$. Fairless murmured to himself.

"The thirty has something to do with their birthday celebrations, obviously, but the four-fifths times four-fifths! That's got me beat." Shel, overhearing him, smiled.

"You're quite right, Lieutenant." She turned to the others. "The thirty is obvious, and for the rest, you must wait till this evening. The Governor will be explaining it all to you then, and there's a big surprise that goes with it. Doctor Rask knows all about it. In fact, it's the reason why he's here." Kate turned on him, archly, but he shook his head at her as if she were a child.

"It's the Governor's own secret. I wouldn't dream of spoiling it. Besides, it's nice to know that I still have the power to refuse you, my dear." Kate's smile stiffened, but she hung on to it, grimly. "You will just have to wait and hear all about it this evening; look, we have distinguished visitors from Earth, and the satellites, especially invited for the occasion."

They followed his indication and saw a group of people emerging from the air-lock which gave access from the landing-pits. Gale was standing between Norden and Fairless, and they heard him gasp as his eyes took in the visitors.

"Get a load of that lot, men, and think in millions. That tall horse-faced feller, that's Corliss of Lunar Mines; the little dark one with him is Saltori of Asteroidal; Morrow, chief of Interplan Commerce; Peacock, the zirco-beryl boss; DuQuesne of Omniplastics—and there's Starvel himself, my Chief—I'd better go see him!"—and he strode off towards the glitter and wealth, a small, spare, yet dominating figure, to make himself known to the United Nations Secretary for Space.

Fairless watched after him, aware that he was watching the one man who had the authority to tell Commodore Gale what to do. As he watched he saw the group of fabulous people being shepherded away by a T.C. official, and reflected that he could see more square inches of expensive clothing on that small group, maybe a couple of dozen all told, than on a hundred similar citizens of this young city.

He was deep in a philosophical muse on how essential clothing was when the difference between people rested in their worldly wealth, when he heard Shel speak. She had just returned from booking them in, and held a note in her hand.

"With the compliments of the Governor," she announced. "You are invited to join him, at his table, for the evening's celebrations." She put the note away, and raised a hand for attention. "Don't forget, not in the salons to-night. Tables will be set in the park, in the Pleasure Gardens!"

"Let's hope we get through this party a bit better than the last one Clarke gave us, eh, Hank?" Fairless was sorting out his very best space-black trousers, and uniform jacket, as he spoke, and recalling how, at the last party, they had recognised Lacey and Nina Orloff, and had gone chasing out into space after them. Becoming aware that his remark had not been answered, he turned to where Hank was leaning over his bunk, gazing out at the bright glow from the domes of Canal City. Hank was dressed, and had been for some time, impatient to be off. He, too, became aware of the silence.

"Didya say something, Frank?"

"I did; I said this was something of an anniversary for us, and let's hope—— Oh, never mind. You've obviously got something much more important on your mind. Why don't you get along. She'll be looking for you; mustn't

keep a lady waiting!" Much to his surprise, Hank turned on him.

"You ain't so smart, even if you think you do know all the answers. At any rate, I can see something when it's poked under my nose!" Fairless put down his trousers, slowly.

"I'm not at all sure that I catch the hidden meaning in your remark, old man," he murmured. "I don't claim to know all the answers, as you put it, but I do know this. Something's bothering you." He came over to the bunk. "Look, don't pay any attention to my wit about you and Shel. She's a fine girl, and I envy you, in a way." He stared in surprise as Hank assumed an expression of fierce concentration.

"It ain't that," the lanky space-mechanic muttered. "It's you'n Miss Kate."

Fairless stiffened.

"Don't fly off the handle, Frank. I know it's none of my damn business, but if you can't see it, then somebody's got to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"You didn't see Miss Kate's face when you was hobnobbing with that pilot dame. You shoulda done. It's a wonder you didn't get an itch or something. If you ask me, that's why she's making so free with this Rask feller, and he's mean——"

Fairless gripped his arm, fiercely.

"Hank—don't say any more. This is where I go all conventional, and say, 'What a blind fool I've been'—how true that is."

"Leggo my arm, then!" Hank rubbed the ill-treated member, and eyed his friend, anxiously. "Is it O.K., I didn't talk out of turn, or anything?"

"Not a bit of it. Hank, as you would put it, you're a good guy. You've answered a whole stack of problems for me. Now, hop off and meet your lady. Don't wait for me. I have things to think over."

Hank grinned, still a little anxiously, looking at his watch. "Don't be late, willya?" he warned. "The shindig's due to start in half-an-hour." He gave one last flick to his jacket, and climbed carefully up the ladder from the sleeping space. Fairless watched him go, then, still in shorts and sandals, shinned quickly up the ladder after him, making his way to the main control cabin. The swift precision of his behaviour indicated that he had completed any thinking he had to do, and that his decisions were made.

He sat himself at a small, subsidiary panel, settling himself in a padded shock-chair which moulded itself to his every movement. Under his flung fingers the panel before him

glowed into life, and a quiet but powerful hum developed in the transmitter-amplifier unit by his side. From its place on the panel he picked up a complex arrangement of hair-thin silver wires and pliable plastic, fitted it over his head like a skull cap, pressed the neck-pad into precise contact with his skin, clipped a throat-mike into place, flipped a ten-second delay switch, and sat back, relaxing utterly, his eyes attentive to the tri-dimensional screen before him.

Below, in the compartment he had just quitted, a hitherto inert figure on the topmost bunk stirred into life, sat up and slid, in one sinuous twisting movement, to the floor.

The identical twin of the man controlling it, he stretched, flexed its arms and legs and smiled its satisfaction. Turning to the bunk, it began to dress in the crisp space-black, murmuring to itself as it moved. The voice was that of the man in the control-seat, its actions were the amplifications of sub-threshold impulses in his nervous system.

He saw through its eyes, heard through its microphonic ears, felt what it felt through the medium of the thousands of hair-like contacts built into the incredibly durable and equally incredibly human-like plastic skin.

Frank Fairless, in body and mind, sat in the control-room; in thought, sensation and awareness he stood in the crew-space adjusting his uniform jacket and appreciating the convention which made it unnecessary for him to wear a shirt.

The puppet, within its accurately human frame, carried the end-result of thousands of hours of experiment and discovery, and the combined efforts of several people. It had all begun many years ago, when Steve Norden had perfected his magnesium-fission atomic pile.

The test model had fulfilled all the theoretical results except one; the power-output in electron-volts was only two-thirds of what the figures had predicted. Others had dismissed this as an error in maths; the pile worked, its by-products were non-radio-active, its working size, therefore, was small, it was almost fool-proof, in that any attempt to boost its output beyond a certain ceiling, either by increasing the quantities of fission-elements, or the intensity of the uranium catalyst-trigger, merely resulted in excess temperature, and fusion instead of fission.

The general concensus of opinion had been "Why worry—it works, and it couldn't be better for rocket-drive; who cares if the output isn't all it should be, it's still a lot more than we can use, isn't it?"

Norden had put the problem to one side, in favour of more urgent problems, but it had not been forgotten. Many years later, after he had seen Space Service grow from a lusty, exciting, problem-packed effort, into the slick, efficient

routine job of interplanetary flight, he dug the problem out of the mental junk-box it had occupied, and decided it was time to crack it. He quit Space Service because he was a man who thrived on problems, and the service had few left to offer. He took with him a bunch of like-minded experimenters, set up a base on a tiny key off the Florida coast and set to work to find "the missing third".

That had been seven years ago, seven years of hard work and exciting discoveries. As a team, they discovered, by chance, that the Norden pile was broadcasting power, megawatts of it, in a tight band in the micro-wave range; they learned how to detect it, use it, pick it up at long distances; they developed whole new techniques in micro-wave radio. In fact, they had the time of their lives.

At the same time, Norden's niece, Kate, majoring in biology, bio-chemistry and psychology had become fascinated by her researches into the nature of nerve-impulses. It was almost inevitable that their ideas should overlap, that they should try to pick up nerve-impulses, record them, amplify them, transmit them, and that sooner or later they would crack the long-standing problem of a humanoid robot. As Norden had said, "The trouble with the human shape is that it doesn't allow enough room for the power-unit and the brain. Either one would be bigger than a man by itself. If, however, we can use broadcast power, and a remote brain, we can make a machine that not only looks like a man, but thinks with a man's brain, acts like a man, and has the strength of fifty." There was no good reason why they should have done it. There was, also, no good reason why not, and the idea was too tempting to miss.

Fairless had come into the picture almost by accident. Norden saw that he needed someone as a basic model, therefore someone big, tough enough to stand the risks involved, intelligent enough to be able to help and understand, and with split-second reactions. It was natural, therefore, that he should turn to Space Service, and his life-long friend, "Windy" Gale. Gale, legless as the result of a crash in the earlier days, had stuck with the service, and by sheer razor-like nerve and efficiency, had risen from one chair-borne position to another, so that it was as Commodore—executive chief of the service—that he greeted his old friend, and thus introduced him to Frank Fairless. It could not have worked out better if it had been planned.

Fairless had all the attributes Norden needed, and a host more. In fact, fate had been unkind to the big Englishman only in giving him so many assets in such a high degree, that he was unable to find anything difficult enough to be interesting. With Fairless had come Lester, his boon companion, and a natural genius with anything that moved by

mechanical or electrical means.

The four of them, backed by a crew of technicians, had made the puppet—the absolute twin, in zirco-beryl steel and indestructible plastic, of the man whose thoughts were now animating it. So well had the experiment succeeded that Gale had jumped at the offer to have himself a new pair of legs on the same style, to be in space again, instead of watching others.

The thoughts of the tall, hefty figure in the gold-faced uniform were far from miracles of electronics, as he climbed the ladder and moved to the air-lock of the ship. "I knew Rask was a wrong 'un, as soon as I laid eyes on him," he mused, "but Kate seemed to like him, and her judgment's pretty sound. If it hadn't been for Hank I'd be still wondering what was wrong with me. Now—now that I know what she's doing, and why—well, I hope Doctor-superior-Rask starts something, that's all. He made one mistake about me yesterday; I think he's in a good way to making one or two more to-night." With characteristic honesty he also attempted to evaluate the concept of Kate being jealous of his interest in some other woman, but found he had to give it up. He was too close to the problem to be able to get a perspective on it. Altogether he was in a mood of grim, yet enjoyable expectancy, as he hastened along the tube to the dome air-lock. To the solitary T.C. officer on duty, he reported.

"All out, I'm the last. You can pull in the tube."

The centre dome of Canal City is known, appropriately, as the Pleasure Dome. Around its inner periphery are the salons, the shopping centres, the places of entertainment and recreation, the huge dining-rooms. Its centre, walled by translucent plastic, is set aside as a garden area. Here, nature and artifice have worked hand in hand to produce an idyllic scene, a fitting spot to restore to people who spend their lives under artificial conditions the illusion of open country. Here is controlled wilderness, tropical luxury, beauty run riot.

In these gardens the choicest blooms, the loveliest trees and bushes grow with a magnificence exceeding anything they could display in their own home soil, tended and trained by the most expert of hands.

Here are nooks, grottoes, areas of cool turf, and even a cool, clear stream, cascading over miniature water-falls and winding by weeping willows, in its carefully controlled journey from the precious storage-tanks to the fall-tank where it is trapped and returned.

In the centre of the garden is an arena-like space of firm turf, where one may stand, any evening, and, looking up

through the dome, which is crystal clear at this point, see the myriad stars, bright points of light against the black velvet back-drop of space. For this all-important evening the sward had been set with small tables, in a dozen rainbow shades of crystal plastic. Cunningly arranged lighting caught a myriad sparkling facets from the goblets ready set for the wines which would flow freely as the evening progressed. Over all hung the heavy, heady scent of a hundred thousand gorgeous blooms.

Governor Clarke was in a merry mood. Around him the arena was full to capacity with a gay, colourful throng; at his own table were guests who tied for interest-value with the group of industrial magnates at the table nearby. He looked round at them with a benevolent smile. At Rask on his left, resplendent in a purple cloak, slashed with flame-coloured strips, secured with a rope of silver at his throat.

Beside him, the sombre space-black and gold of Fairless's uniform stood out in startling contrast. Next to him, with Hank on her left, Michelle was radiant in frothy white, laced with glittering silver threads. Then Gale, small, severe, but blazing with gold bars and many-hued ribbons. Norden, thick-set, blue-eyed, white-haired, had chosen to wear a loose jacket and slacks of royal blue, as fitting harmony to his niece.

The Governor was especially benevolent when his gaze reached Kate, as it had done often, during the evening. She was in green, in a smooth, almost metallic material the green of which glowed like the flare of a copper salt in the analyst's flame; a simple, pleated garment like the kilt worn by a Greek shepherdess, falling from one shoulder and caught at her waist with a single, golden clasp. The vivid colour accented the glowing golden bronze of her hair, and Clarke was well aware of the many admiring glances which were being cast from the surrounding tables. He transferred his gaze to the black plastic box which had the centre place on the table. There was one just like it in the middle of each of the rest of the tables. Like all the others, it bore a simple, but intriguing notice: "DO NOT OPEN—YET". He suppressed a chuckle as he thought of its contents, then, looking at his watch, he saw it was very near time for his speech. Bending his head, he whispered to Kate:

"Your patience is about to be rewarded, my dear—the signal will sound any time now." Right on cue, there came the sound of a deep, mellow chime, lights dimmed throughout the garden except for the one spotlight focused on their table, the low rustle of whispering gossip died away, and Clarke stood up in a hushed silence. Quietly, in the centre of that small circle of bright light, he began to speak.

"Friends—fellow-colonists—this is a great occasion. Most of you will understand the full significance of this, our thirtieth anniversary, and the banner we have employed to announce it." He waited for the low rush of subdued applause to subside. "There are those among us to-night, however, to whom the banner is a mystery, and the day just a date on the calendar. For the benefit of these, our distinguished and welcome guests from Earth and the other colonies of space, I will ask your indulgence while I explain. In all honesty I must admit, at once, that this is also in the nature of a good excuse for me to talk about something I like talking about, anyway!" A muttering chuckle ran through the darkened assembly.

"Thirty years ago, when the first official colonists were settled here, they had many hardships and difficulties to face. To-night I wish to emphasise only one of them; the problem of air. In the beginning we had a planetary air-pressure of less than one-and-a-half pounds per square inch, and most of that was inert gases. Thus, for thirty years we have lived under domes, in an artificial atmosphere, at a pressure two-thirds that of Earth, but correspondingly high in oxygen percentage. In fact, many of you now listening to me have never known other conditions. The purpose of this was two-fold. First, and simplest, it was a lot easier and cheaper than maintaining full Earth-Normal. Secondly, it would get us used to, adapted to, a lower air pressure. In thirty years this adaptation has been very successful, but it has altered our whole way of life, and even our physical characteristics, so it is permissible to ask why. Why was this adaptation considered necessary?"

There was an intense silence as he paused, letting the question linger on the air.

"In that thirty years we have not been idle in other ways. We have been very busy with what must surely be the most ambitious scheme ever contemplated by man. We have been modifying the entire atmosphere of our planet! We have been extracting oxygen from the mineral oxides of its crust in various ways and releasing it into the atmosphere. Ideally, of course, we could go on doing this until the pressure and oxygen content reached that of the planet from which we came, but, again, that would be expensive and lengthy; and we are, first and last, Martians!"

There was a sudden rumble of sincere and wholehearted agreement from the appreciative audience.

"We are Martians," he repeated firmly, "and we therefore felt we should not only adapt our planet to suit us, but adapt ourselves to suit it, thus lessening the gap between endeavour and reward. To-day I am in the happy position of being able to inform you that we have reached a significant point

in our long efforts. The surface-pressure is such that we are able to borrow some of it directly to augment our own supply in the domes. In short, ladies and gentlemen, our inside air-pressure now, this evening, by the grace of our efforts, and the work of our engineers, is no longer two-thirds, but four-fifths Earth-Normal. It is now at a pressure which will no longer change; which will be the new Mars-Normal from now on."

When the quick clatter of applause had died, he smiled. "Now you know the reason for the first four-fifths. The second is equally important, and, to celebrate it, I have arranged a surprise for you, a little triviality, no doubt, but pleasant, and doubly so to people like us who have had to forego many little luxuries. Most of you will recognise this." He raised his hand, and, in the spot-light, a small, cylindrical object glittered brassily. There were soft laughs and mock groans as the object was identified.

"All of us enjoy tobacco in some form or other. It was one of the indices of mental stability, the desirable and harmless vice, incorporated in the original psycho-tests. Because of the high percentage of oxygen in our air a naked flame would be a flare, a cigarette like a torch—so, we were forced to use this little gadget, designed to damp down the combustion rate, whenever we wished to smoke. It is all too true that a poor smoke is better than none at all. But now, all that is a thing of the past. With the raising of our pressure we have also altered the ratio—to four-fifths inert gases. Hence the second sign on the banner. If you will now open the mysterious cabinets on your tables you will find therein a choice of cigarettes, cigars, pipes, tobacco—and ignition. In fact—friends—you may smoke!"

There was a moment of breathless silence, then the whole park filled with a roar of applause and amused, delighted laughter, together with clatters and clickings as a thousand boxes were hastily opened and the contents brought to view. Lights grew into multi-coloured brilliance on all sides. Clarke sat down, reached for the box, opened it and handed it to Rask. To their looks of mild wonder he said:

"As Doctor Rask has played such a big part in making this little incident possible, I think it is fitting that he should have the privilege of handing round."

"That was quite a speech," Norden rumbled, "and quite a moment for you, Governor."

"Pretty slick organisation, too," Gale commented, "to ship in all that excess tobacco without giving the game away."

"That's just the point," Clarke smiled through a cloud of blue smoke. "We didn't. That's why I said Doctor Rask, here, deserves credit. You see, we grew a lot of it, right here,

on the spot. Actually, it was coincidence that tobacco leaves proved to be good 'breathers', so we were furthering our own ends, in more ways than one. Doctor, I'm sure you can tell us a lot of interesting details about it?"

Fairless, behind his customary expression of mild indifference, was watching Rask keenly, still trying to find something to account for the revulsion he felt against the man. Mentally, he was blessing the foresight which had prompted Norden to incorporate into the puppet the mechanism for simulating breathing, for it would have been a great discourtesy to refuse on this great occasion. Rask wanted no further inviting.

"There were problems, of course," he admitted, in his high-pitched drawl, "but we overcame them. As a matter of fact we were helped by the fact that there are one or two indigenous plant forms which bear a strong resemblance to tobacco. We class them as weeds, for want of a better name, and there is one particular species which deserves special mention, and is sure to be of great interest to the scientific minds of one or two of us." He favoured Kate with a particularly meaning smile, inhaled luxuriously, and hid himself, momentarily, behind a blue veil. Across the table there were attentive faces, but by his side a pair of keen eyes, trained in noticing fine detail, were taking in the fact that Rask's cigarette had a slightly crumpled, handled appearance, as compared with the impeccable perfection of the others. Fairless had no ready explanation, but was unwilling to put it down as coincidence. He registered it as just one more oddity, and maintained his close attention on Rask.

"This weed caught my attention in the most unusual way. I had noticed, as had the more observant of my staff, that wherever it grew, it seemed to dominate the surrounding plants, no matter what species they happened to be. Let me put that a little more precisely, as it may sound a little misleading. The weed is not a true parasite, yet, in its vicinity, any other growth permits itself to be grown upon, pushed aside, starved of light, even strangled by it, without resistance."

Gale gave a sharp, barking laugh. "I don't want to seem rude, Doc, but isn't that a bit—you know—— Sounds as if you were crediting plants with intelligence and feelings!"

"I suppose it does," Rask agreed, with surprising mildness. "And I'm not so sure that it can be proved otherwise. However, I became curious. I made many experiments, which led me into many strange fields, and produced some very strange, surprising results. Miss Kate—as a student of biology, and also psychology, you must be reasonably familiar with the brain and its structure?" Kate nodded,

and Fairless noticed, suddenly, that her face had dulled. It was not the effect of any one particular feature, but general to her whole expression, as though a flame had died down a little, within. He sent a quick scan round the rest of the table. His expression of indifference almost slipped into alarm as he noted the same expression, in various forms, on all their faces; to his left Shel, Gale, Norden; on the right Clarke and Kate. Hank alone appeared normal, but then, he reflected, it would take an earthquake to make Hank's homely features appear more blank than normal. Rask, after that one quick glance aside at Kate, appeared to be intent on the thin curl of smoke from his cigarette. He went on:

"You will know, therefore, that certain areas of the brain are believed to be concerned with certain functions of the organism. There are other areas which do not appear to have any function at all. One such is the pituitary body."

"The function of the pituitary body is not known," came a slow, dull confirmation that Fairless had difficulty in recognising as Kate's voice. He became tensely alert, aware that something strange, something uncanny was happening.

"Why are you telling us all this?" the same flat monotone came, this time from Norden.

"You will soon know," Rask said, gently, silkily. "My researches on this weed eventually showed me that the leaves exuded a vapourising oil with the most peculiar properties." He was speaking quite slowly now, and Fairless realised, suddenly, that he was not watching the cigarette in his fingers, but the sweeping hand of his wrist chronometer. "Inhalation of the oil-vapour, or the fumes from a preparation of the weed, has the effect of blanking-off the properties of that mysterious gland. I also found out what the function of that gland is."

He moved slowly, sat back in his chair with an air of finality, and the triumph in his voice was very evident as he went on:

"In the course of a lifetime, we all acquire standards, sets of values, things we call principles. They can all be lumped under the term loyalties. They all have their origin in the basic drives which are self-preservation, preservation of the species, and the desire to be of value to someone or thing. The pituitary controls and regulates these drives, these loyalties. If you give a person a sufficient dosage of the oil-vapour from this weed his carefully built-up loyalties are lost to him. Not destroyed, but shut off, inaccessible. He is then in a state such that he will accept any new loyalties which are given to him in the form of a command—without question."

With a crushing sense of helplessness, Fairless made some split-second additions, got answers which chilled him, made equally fast decisions, and drew again on his cigarette to mask the shaking fury which was boiling up in him.

"The cigarettes in *this* box," Rask drawled, to a stricken and silent audience, "were carefully prepared by myself, except, of course, this one which I have myself." His voice became imperative, commanding, yet so quiet and controlled that the occupants of the nearby tables had no suspicion that anything unusual was afoot. "You will now listen very carefully, you will understand, you will obey!"

CHAPTER V

"I AM Floyd Rask. From henceforth you will place me first in all things. You will not injure me in any way, in thought or deed; you will be loyal, whole-hearted and devoted to my welfare, well-being and prospects; you will prevent others from attempting to injure me; you will do all in your power, even to the extent of your own safety and life, to serve, aid and obey me; you will call me Master; and in all these things you will be happy and rejoice in your good fortune!" As the shocking statement came to an end, Rask repeated it, in the same low, compelling tone. Then, to Clarke, on his right, he said:

"You will now declare all that I have said to be true, repeating all the conditions, and acknowledging me as Master!"

Fairless writhed inwardly, as the Governor recited the obscene ritual in a clear voice, slowly, but with every indication of humility and reverence. Rask passed up Kate, "I'm saving you till last," he smiled, gloatingly. One at a time, relentlessly, patiently, he went round the table, to Norden, Gale, Hank, Shel and then to Fairless. If the puppet had been fitted with sweat-glands its forehead would have been streaming with the effort he made to steel himself, to ape the slow, dull manner of his companions, to mouth the sickening phrases to the sneering, jubilant "Master."

"And now," when Kate, last of all, had pledged herself, "apart from the new loyalties you have just incurred, you will all behave as if nothing had happened. There are no harmful reactions. You all feel quite happy about it, don't you?" He smiled the question, condescendingly, and Fairless smothered murderous impulses under a faked smile.

"Amazing!" he heard Norden declare, in his normal, rumbling tone. "Doctor Rask, I want to be the first to congratulate you, and to offer my abilities, and my resources, to assist you in any way you may need."

"That goes double for me," Gale snapped briskly. "Off-hand I can see no immediate way in which I can be of service, but you can count on myself and my men, any time, any place." Fairless took his cue, swiftly, and added: "You can count on me, too, Master."

"Yeah, and me!" Hank echoed.

Rask laughed openly, a high, thin, neighing snigger. The sound made Fairless grit his teeth. "Splendid, just splendid," he said, "but right now—let's enjoy ourselves, shall we?"

The three hours which followed were the longest Fairless had ever known. He kept up his act, doing his best to ape the others, fawning on Rask as they did, and racking his wits for some way of dealing with the fantastic situation. Bit by bit his fury died, to be replaced by a cold, murderous calm. He gave up writhing and fuming at the ridicule and indignities being heaped on himself and his friends, but instead applied himself to the problem, grimly determined that if Rask was let alone long enough he was bound to make a mistake. At last the play began to pall on the supercilious doctor.

"Enough of this," he declared, grandly. "It's high time we got down to business. Clarke, here is your task. I want you, and your secretary, to get busy right away, to get out a list of all the executive and scientific chiefs of the city. You will send a note to each one, summoning him or her to your chambers for a conference, to be held early to-morrow morning, at eight. You will also arrange for all our distinguished guests to attend on you, half an hour later. At the conference you will formally resign, and nominate me as your choice of successor. You will take with you these cigarettes, just to ensure their co-operation. This list"—he held out a slip of paper he had prepared while giving the orders—"bears the names of those who are already with me in this. As you will see, I have not been idle."

Clarke beamed with pleasure, and rose from the table eagerly. "We will get on with that, right away. Thank you for this splendid opportunity of serving you, Master." Rask gave him some last-minute instructions on the correct timing of the cigarettes, and watched him hurry away with Shel. Turning to the others, he looked thoughtful.

"I can't quite think of a use for you lot yet"—Fairless was a little late in copying their crestfallen air, but it passed unnoticed—"but I am sure you will serve your purpose when the time comes. For now, as it is past one o'clock, I suggest you retire to your quarters, and there await any instructions. As for you, my Kate"—she smiled up at him fondly as he rose from the table—"you are a great temptation. There's no fun quite like deliberately exposing

oneself to temptation, especially as there is no penalty for failure. However, I am a discriminating and a patient man. I can wait till later, when things have settled down. Then I will give you the antidote." He smiled at her frown of disappointment.

"There is an antidote, of course," he explained, as the faithful expressed surprise. "It's absolutely essential. I am your master"—he tittered—"but"—and his face hardened, suddenly—"I am not alone. I am but one of the new race, the new rulers of the masses—the 'Immortals'!" His voice rose to a scream of fervour. Fairless was devoutly thankful that most of the revellers had deserted their vicinity and, as he noted yet another flashing change in Rask's expression, he recalled what Norden had told him of the news in Kate's letter.

"I tell you, Frank," he had said, "if Lacey has given this gas to anyone else, we've got the prospect of fighting a bunch of ruthless, insane immortals, and each one will be a near genius. Lacey was no fool, and he would have no truck with fools." Watching the rapid ebb and flow of emotions over Rask's face, Fairless realised that this man was no longer quite sane, but he dismissed the thought as he gave his attention to the all-important word "antidote".

"Yes," Rask went on, "I am but one of many. At the moment I am the leader, the Master, but—suppose something should happen to me? Let us assume the extremely unlikely, that there should be a successful attempt on my life. Ah, yes, you look horrified"—Fairless did so quickly, to match the others—"but that would be only the beginning. If I die, you all die. I am all you have to live for, and without me your lives would have no purpose—pretty thought, isn't it?" He sneered. "The supposition is extremely remote, but we are scientists, we have taken everything into consideration. If I fall, another will take up my guerdon; he will need loyal followers; he will need you. That is why we have been to some trouble to prepare an antidote." He stared at them in silence awhile, then laughed suddenly, explosively. "The funniest aspect of it all is that I can quite safely tell you about the antidote, I could even provide you with an injector each. It would be quite safe. You wouldn't use it, would you, Doctor Norden, or you, Gale?"

"Certainly not," they chorused, indignantly, "that would be disloyal, we wouldn't dream of it!"

"Precisely," Rask sneered, "precisely! Well, good night, gentlemen. Come along, Kate."

As soon as they had passed through the gateway leading to their Resi-dome, Fairless began to slow his strides a little, to lag behind the others and make his escape. To his annoyance, Hank slowed up, too and he was just con-

templating taking violent action against his friend, when he heard him mumbling and muttering to himself. He drew nearer, and was amazed to hear a steady stream of violent, blood-curdling abuse coming from his friend. He missed a step in astonishment, then called, in an urgent, fierce whisper:

"Hank! Are you all right?"

Hank shied away in alarm, then stared.

"Gosh!" he breathed. "You, too, Frank. How didja do it?"

"I might ask you the same thing," Fairless retorted, "but I won't, not just now, save it. The thing is you're all right, that's the best news I've had in some time. Now we've got to take action, and quick!"

"Yeah, but what? I can't think of a thing."

"I'm not too clear, myself," Fairless gritted, "but one thing we can do for a start. We can get Windy and Steve back to the ship, out of Rask's way; then, maybe, we can think of something."

"What about Shel—and Miss Kate?" Hank snarled. "We can't just leave 'em!"

"I haven't forgotten," Fairless muttered, "but we can't do them any good till we have the antidote. That's my job, but I can't get on with it, if my friends are against me, meaning Steve, and the Commodore. If we get them back to the ship, out of the way, then I'll be able to get moving; then I'll go after that antidote, and I'll get it, if I have to take Rask apart with my bare hands. Now—when I say. You take the Commodore; he's the lighter one. I'll take Steve."

The domes were almost deserted, and the solitary Traffic Control officer, in charge of the air-lock office, raised his eyebrows in surprise as two tall space-men came weaving into view, each carrying a limp form over his shoulder.

"Our friends are inebriated, officer," Fairless announced, in the exaggeratedly precise tones of one who is trying to prove that he is still sober. "May we have the tube to Hercules, please?"

The T.C. officer grunted disparagingly, but nodded, and turned to operate his panel. The huge door hummed open, the pneumatic tube-way, opening out like a giant concertina, glided on silent tracks to where Hercules stood on end, nose to the stars. Guiding it from his televiewer, the officer saw a red light change to green on his panel. From the yawning doorway came the echoing clack of rim-magnets.

"You're on," he called to them. "Coming back?"

"I shall return." Fairless attempted a bow, nearly dropped Steve from his shoulder. "Must join the ladies, y'know!"

As the door clicked shut behind him, he abandoned his

pose and ran like a hare after his companion. Once in the control-room, they put down their burdens, and Hank grinned as he saw his friend, sitting in the control-chair.

"So that's how you did it, I shoulda known. No wonder those damn smokes didn't affect you."

"I'd like to know how you managed to get away with it," the puppet chuckled, "for me, it was easy. But you, I saw you smoking!" He was busy with a length of plastic-covered wire, tying Norden securely. Hank moved to help.

"Danged if I can get used to talking to you over there and hearing the answers from you over here. Anyway, I've got Shel to thank. She put me wise to what the excitement was all about. You know I don't smoke. I told her that, so she got me some extra mild smokes, and I worked a switch on 'em. Never thought my parlour tricks would pay off like this." As he stood back from the now helpless Norden, Fearless chuckled grimly.

"I imagine it would grieve Rask to know that his perfect scheme was upset by a bit of amateur conjuring. I don't think we need to tie Windy." He slid a hand into a small pocket of the Commodore's breeches, pulled out a small box on the end of a slim lead-wire.

"I'll just remove these two valves, and Windy's legs won't be a bit of use to him. I hate to do it, sir," he said softly to the unconscious man. "I hope you'll be glad of it, soon." He stood a minute in tense indecision. Then:

"I'm going back, Hank. You stay here, and stand by that panel, to boost the power or cut the receptors. I'm going to get that antidote, if I have to smash every dome in the place doing it, and if Rask gets in my way, that will suit me fine, too."

Hank settled down in a crouch beside his friend in the chair, as the puppet strode off. "Better have a club handy," he called over his shoulder, "in case those two get rough when they wake up."

Once clear of the T.C. area, Fairless set out to find Rask, his only lead to the antidote. Despite the urgent need for haste, he had to be discreet, and it was almost an hour later before he found his way to the apartment which had been allocated to the visiting scientist. As he paused outside the door the sound of Kate's laughter made him rage with sudden fury. Stifling it, he rapped on the door. As Rask called, he went in, to find the Master sprawled on a couch, while Kate was dancing for him, to muted music from a recorder. The low gravity coupled with her natural grace made her movements a poem of grace, but the sight sickened the tall space-man as he recognised the melody, and its implications.

"Ah! The pretty-boy Lieutenant. What do you think of the performance?" He gestured, negligently, to Kate.

"Not much," Fairless answered, bluntly. "I've seen better. That's Borodin's Prince Igor, isn't it?"

Rask beamed with surprise.

"An intellectual! How splendid—enforced loyalties are always so much more piquant with such." He got to his feet, still with a smile, and Fairless caught, from the corner of his eye, a glance of pure hatred from Kate. "What do you want?" Rask queried. Fairless had walked into the situation without an idea in his head, trusting to a direct frontal attack to gain his ends. Quite simply, he said:

"Only to serve you, Master. I feel that I have not been able to show my loyalty sufficiently, yet. Isn't there some small service?"

Rask deliberated a moment, cocking his head on one side, and the tall space-man had a sudden, revolting inspiration.

"Couldn't I go and get the antidote for you, for—you know?" he nodded, meaningly, at Kate, and felt sick at the way in which the lean, supercilious face lit up. Kate threw herself at him, imploringly, but he ignored her. There was an evil smile on his face.

"That's a good idea, Lieutenant; too good to be quite spontaneous. I think you're after the antidote on your own account." Fairless stiffened, but relaxed again as Rask began to laugh. "Of course you are. You feel you would like to hold it, to have it near, wanting to use it, yet knowing you won't be able to. It's a form of masochism, a craving for self-torture. I think I would like that." He came near to Fairless, and scribbled a note, hurriedly.

"Here; take this to the laboratory section, lab. five; you will find Doctor Sloane there, preparing some more special cigarettes. Give him this, and he will give you one of the injectors. Bring it back here, to me. You're a big man, Lieutenant, but this is going to be the heaviest load you've ever carried!"

Out in the corridor once more, Fairless took a deep breath. "I couldn't have stood much more of that. I don't know, yet, just what Rask has coming to him, but it won't be anything so nice as an injector, whatever that may be."

He found Sloane, all alone in a long, darkened room, fitted out as a laboratory-workshop. He was a large, beefy man, with a dome-like forehead, sparse hair, and a slow, pompous manner. At sight of the note he snorted, angrily.

"I can't say I approve of this," he declared. "Rask or no, I'm all against throwing temptation in people's way. Still, come this way, young man, but, remember, loyalty to the Master means loyalty to me, as I am one of his kind."

He moved to a large cabinet, drew out a long slim box,

opened it and showed Fairless the contents. Inside, nestling in wool, were a dozen tiny capsules, each one no bigger than a large pea. He withdrew one, gently, and Fairless saw that there was a fine, wisp-like tail.

"This contains one dose, precisely. As you see, the plastic has been fine-drawn into a needle point in one place. It is to be held so." He slipped it between first and second fingers, trapping it with his thumb. "And injected intrathetically."

"Intra who?"

"Into the cerebro-spinal fluid, at the junction of the second and third cervical vertebrae—look, I will show you on this chart." He pointed out, with ponderous patience, the precise spot on the neck. "Care to try it?" he offered, sadistically. "You can't, you know, it would be disloyal," and he permitted himself a throaty chuckle.

"You have many more of these, of course?" Fairless suggested, anxiously, fingering the box.

"We will have, soon," Sloane frowned; "but, at the moment, that's all there is. Rask has the formula, and he is the only one capable of making it up, at the moment." Fairless knew a sinking sensation.

"And this is the only cure—I mean, antidote? There is no other way?"

Sloane stared at him curiously, suspiciously.

"No, there is another method," he said, slowly, "but it isn't very practical. The administration of a high voltage shock to the frontal lobes, by means of simple metal contact on the skull. As you will see here, the lobes in question, separated by a median fissure, are situated in the anterior portion of——"

"I'd be more interested in the electrical side of the business," Fairless interrupted.

"You would?" Sloane peered up at him. "Yes, I suppose that is more in your line. Well, now"—he unrolled a smaller chart—"here is a schematic diagram of the whole thing. Here is the required voltage, four thousand, hardly to be carried about in one's pocket, even if the amperage is negligible——"

"Bop him, Frank," came Hank's voice, exultantly. "That chart's all we want to know."

Fairless raised his clenched fist like a hammer, and hit the beefy Sloane just once. The crunch of beryl-zircon steel fingers smashing that skull was viciously satisfying to him. "You're finished being an immortal now, friend," he murmured.

"Nice work, fella," Hank gloated. "Now, focus your eyes on the chart, then switch off and give me a hand." The puppet, resting on its outstretched hands, peered down

at the chart, and froze, motionless.

Back in Hercules, Fairless took off the control headpiece, and stood up, stretching.

"We'll be able to fix a temporary rig from the main power-panel," Hank called, over his shoulder, as he fished out tools from the repair-locker. They worked in silence, apart from the occasional word of instruction from Hank. In very short order Fairless was advancing on Norden, holding two metal electrodes, while Hank stood by to throw the switch. They were only just in time, as the burly scientist was showing signs of coming round. There was a click, and a clatter as Norden jerked in a sudden spasm against the wires holding him. The two friends watched anxiously, then sighed with relief as those ice-blue eyes opened, and he tried to sit up.

"Boy, oh, boy. What a dream that was," he rumbled. "What—here, what am I doing tied up like this?" Fairless stepped over quickly to undo the wires, then Norden sat in silent wonderment as the process was repeated on the Commodore. Hurried explanations were made as the valves were replaced in Gale's control-box. Characteristically, Norden sat quite still, his eyes vacant with intense concentration, whilst the little Commodore stamped up and down the small compartment, turning the air blue with a stream of invective which surpassed any of his previous efforts. At last Norden growled:

"Save it, Windy. Cussing won't help any. We've got thinking to do. Any ideas, Frank?" Fairless nodded, hesitantly.

"I don't know if it would work, but it seems to be the only way. As I see it, we have to have some way of restoring normality to all the people Rask has got at before we deal with him in person, otherwise we will have innocent people against us, and if he should get killed, and that's more than likely, the way I feel about him, then it's not going to be so good for them, and that includes Kate and Shel."

"Omigosh! I didn't think of that," Hank groaned. "I wondered why you was so easy with him. What it means, then—we've got to treat him gentle till the others are safe."

"That's it," Fairless nodded, grimly. "I don't know whether the drug actually would make anyone die like that, sounds a bit much to me, but we can't afford to take chances."

"What's the idea, then, Frank?" Norden asked.

"The puppet is in a laboratory-workshop, at the moment; it's not likely that anyone will be around for some hours. There are just one dozen of those injectors. The only way would be—adapt the puppet to be able to give a four thousand volt shock—come and see, there's the chart. Can it be done?" Norden stared at the diagram which

showed on the screen, then called the lanky space-mechanic over.

"What do you reckon, Hank? It can be done, sure, but it will need skilled fingers at the other end, fingers like yours——"

"That's O.K." Hank gave him a confident grin. "Me'n Frank have done this kind of thing lots of times. You figure it out; I'll tell him; and the 'Pup' will do it."

"Right," Norden said, simply. "I'll get the wiring diagram. Frank, you get back in that chair; we've got work to do!"

CHAPTER VI

THE thin, cold light of the Martian dawn was filtering through the domes as Fairless strode along through the corridors of a silent, sleeping city. Soon, all would be life and bustle, once more, but, for the moment, he was glad of the solitude. The past hours had been very strenuous, even for one sitting in a chair, and the puppet's face showed the image of his fatigue. There were scar-marks in the pseudo-skin, from chest to wrist, but he tugged his loose uniform-jacket into neatness, and hoped they wouldn't be noticed. In the palm of each hand a loose flap of skin lay ready to be folded back, exposing the bare metal below.

At sight of him, Rask flew into an immediate fury of rage.

"Useless, bungling idiot. What kept you so long? Is this how you serve me—keeping me waiting all night? Give me the injector, and get out." He thrust out an imperious hand. Fairless did his best to look ashamed, and cowering, while seeking the chance to slip past and get to Kate. He had not dared more than a glimpse at her, but he had seen, in that flash, that she was drooping on the couch, her face drawn and white with lack of sleep.

"I didn't get it," he mumbled. "I couldn't find Doctor Sloane anywhere. I've been looking for him all night!"

Rask almost screamed at this. "After all this time—you come back here without it! Fool, blockhead, how dare you fail me!" He made a step towards the huge, grinning figure, and snarled like an animal. "You—the quick one, the clever one! This is the second time you have earned my displeasure." He began to finger his knife, and Fairless prayed that he wouldn't try to use it, as it would give the game away at once. "You won't be so fast now, with my drug dulling your wits," he sneered. "I order you to stand quite still. Now, how do you like that!"

He slapped viciously at the bronzed face before him. Fair-

less interpreted the order quite literally, stiffening his neck. Rask had undoubtedly meant to go on, saying, "and that! —and that!" But he didn't. He began nursing his hand instead, almost crying with pain and rage.

"I am sorry, Master, that I have failed you," Fairless said, in deep humility. "Is there some other way in which I can serve you?"

Rask gave him a glare which should have scorched the skin, but the tingling in his fingers gave him a touch of caution. He looked at his watch, and began cursing afresh. Fairless, nursing one of the injectors in his closed fist, felt like cursing in his turn. Whether by accident or design, Rask was effectively blocking him from a rapid pounce on Kate.

"All right, Lieutenant." Rask made the title sound like abuse. "I'll give you one more chance. By this time Clarke will be waiting for me, with his bunch of followers, ready and loyal. You go on ahead; make sure that everything is ready; tell them I'll be along in half-an-hour." With another of his bewildering changes of mood, he was now the imperial, commanding figure, brooking no opposition. Fairless recognised the hopelessness of any attempt to get at Kate. Outwardly humble, but raging inside, he left the apartment, and made his way hastily to the office of the Governor, apparently carrying on an involved argument with himself, in several different voices, as he went.

Clarke was at his desk, Shel by his side. Both were still in their festive finery, but they looked worn and weary. Fairless made his way through a crowd up to the desk, and whispered, urgently, to the Governor. Clarke nodded, tiredly, and rapped for silence. Fairless moved to stand behind, and between them.

"Gentlemen!" Clarke announced, enthusiasm fighting a losing battle with weariness. "Our Master has sent this messenger to say that he will be arriving soon. He has suggested that as a gesture of welcome we should form ourselves into two groups. On this side, those who are his colleagues and fellows; on the other, the rest of us who are new to his service, but strong, I trust, in his cause."

Fairless watched, keenly, as the immortals identified themselves by moving over to his left. Fifteen of them, and a dangerous-looking bunch, he thought. Quickly he counted the rest, and his spirits sank. With Clarke, and Shel, he made it fourteen. "Can't be helped," he gritted to himself, his fingers groping in his pockets for capsules.

With deceptively fast movements, he pressed one hand to Clarke's neck, just on the hair-line, the other hand sliding out in an apparent caress on Shel's shoulder, under the

heavy tresses. They both began to frown in surprised annoyance, and froze in that attitude, but Fairless had shifted, cat-like, to the "smoked" group. It was all done so smoothly and swiftly that by the time the silent, staring immortals began to realise something was wrong, he had used the last of the injectors.

"All right, Hank," he muttered. "Stand by!" and did strange things with his hands. One of the immortals, a little faster on the uptake than his friends, leaped forward.

"Stop him—stop him! He's giving them the antidote!"

Fairless whirled. His clenched fist, hammer-like, descended once more. There was a soggy crunch, and the bright one ceased being immortal immediately. As the rest of his fellows stood in stunned amazement, the tall space-man spun round again, seized the nearest of the two remaining "slaves", thrust him firmly against the wall.

"Stand still!" he rapped, and pressed his palms to the other's forehead. "Right!" he said, and the dazed man stiffened convulsively, then slumped against the wall. Fairless released him, grabbed the last one. "Same to you, chum," he ordered grimly, and repeated the ceremony.

A quick glance round showed him that the injectors were beginning to have their effect, but there was no more time for study. The remaining fourteen immortals surged forward, not at all sure just what was happening, but certain that Fairless represented a menace. He set his back to the wall and prepared to enjoy himself, when the door opened, suddenly, and a nasal voice announced, irritably:

"Say, Governor, what is all this?" It was Morton J. Starvel, U.N. Secretary for Space, and he was not pleased. "What's the idea of holding this meeting now, just when we're waiting to blast off for home, all packed, bags aboard."

"That's right," Morrow of Interplanetary Commerce chimed in. "The women are all waiting in the lobby to go aboard. It had better be something pretty important. Say! This don't look right to me, at all!" His voice died as the door was kicked shut in his face.

The slam of its closing was the signal for an all-out rush at Fairless by the desperate immortals, to be met by the furious and fighting-mad department chiefs. Caught in the middle of a welter of bodies, Fairless caught a glimpse of the door being thrown open again, and a crisp voice declaring:

"Nobody slams a door in my face and gets away with it, no, sir!" and then the dignitaries were in the melee, too. Punches, kicks and swipes were being tossed about freely, and, in the middle of it all, Fairless planted his feet firmly, ignoring everything else, and began to pick off the immortals as they came within reach of his huge hands. It was the

first really satisfactory release he had had for all the fury he had been containing so long, and he revelled in it. One by one, he plucked them from the arms of the raging officers, brushing aside their blows gently. It was grab, smash; grab, smash; until the awestricken chiefs fell back in fear and wonder.

Before the grim, implacable, blood-spattered colossus, the remaining immortals tried to flee, but the room was too well guarded, the door blocked by three bodies. As the last one gave his final screech before being pulped by that inhuman, smashing fist, there was a silence that hurt the ears. Fairless shook himself like a man coming out of a coma. For a while he had been swamped by a terrible rage, but now the white faces of those who stared at him in fear brought him back to his senses, suddenly.

Starvel made an effort to control his shaky knees, and would have spoken, but there came the sound of voices from the other side of the door. Fairless raised his hand for silence.

"There's the granddaddy of all the scraps there was going on in there right now," an excited voice reported.

"But I must go in, stand aside!" came the retort, in tones which hit Fairless like a whip.

"Okay, bud; it's your funeral—and I'm not kidding neither. If that big loot gets hold of you! Brother, what he was doing to them in there, the last time I had a look in! Hold on a minute, seems like the door is stuck, can't get it open."

"Rask!" Fairless roared. "Come on in here!" And could have bitten out his tongue for a fool, the moment the words were out. His amplified voice shook the room, but, despite that, he heard an almost feminine squeak, the patter of feet, the faint call.

"There he goes, look at that guy run, willya, and the dame with him. Guess he must know the big feller!"

In that instant, the remaining shreds of self-control in Fairless vanished like snow-flakes in a flame, he spanned the distance to the door in one leap, tugged at the handle, gently, then fiercely. There was a screech of tortured plastic as it came off in his hand. He gripped it, threw it savagely aside, then, taking a pace back, threw himself at, and half-way through the offending door. A quick double-wrench of his hands completed a hole big enough for him to pass, and in silent purposefulness he raced down the corridor after Rask.

The crowd outside, getting one look at the grim, red-spattered apparition, fell back hastily, out of his way. Back in the wrecked office, one of the visitors bent to pick up the discarded door-handle, his eyes wide in wonderment

as his fingers fitted into the deep grooves which had been crushed into the metal ovoid.

"I dunno who he's chasing," he breathed, "but I'm sure glad it ain't me!"

Fairless had only the noise and tumult as a guide, but it led him direct to the Traffic-Control departure lobby, where a crowd of angry, arguing people were stunned into momentary silence at the sight of him. He stood a moment at the corridor exit, his eyes raking the mob, and more than a few stomachs retched at the sight of him; his uniform jacket had long since gone in shreds, his hands dripped with the red which was liberally spattered over his face and chest, his attitude that of one ready and eager to pounce and rend. Then he saw the huge air-lock door standing wide, and before it a small group huddled about a figure prone on the floor. They fell back as he rushed over to them.

It was the T.C. officer, his life ebbing fast through a bubbling hole in his chest. Fairless knelt a moment, heard him gasp, faintly:

"No good—can't follow—inner door won't open—must have left tube-door open at other end." Fairless understood, in a flash, that the automatic mechanism prevented all three doors being opened at once.

"If I shut this door here—all right then?" he demanded, urgently, and the officer nodded weakly.

"Look out for the knife—it's sharp!"

Fairless gave him a grim smile, dived across to the control-panel, set the huge door swinging shut, then, at top speed, raced back and shot through, with inches to spare, feeling it thud close behind him. In front, the five hundred yards of dim-lit tube were sealed off by the inner door, and he had to fume in impatience while the motor hummed to open it enough to let him through. The rush of air that went with him told him that the tube-end door was, indeed, open. That meant that Rask had boarded the ship, and Fairless, racing along the tube, revised hastily, all he knew about the luxury liner ahead.

The Space-Service-Ship "Mars" was the latest, and most luxurious of a class of ships of which their own ship "Hercules" had been an obsolete member before they had taken it over and renamed it. Basically, the lay-out was the same, but there was one refinement which he recalled at once, and with a feeling of hope. Her panel had been so designed that any attempt to blast would fail if there were any compartment doors open anywhere in the ship. This was fairly standard in any large ship, but the S.S.S. "Mars" had the additional precaution that any such attempt would trip-off the "Howler," a hideously loud and penetrating siren, audible throughout the ship.

In addition, there was no way of shutting off the Howler, except by killing the whole panel, and setting it up again, unit by unit. The mere prospect of setting off the Howler was enough to make any pilot take extraordinary care of his safety arrangements. By this time, Fairless thought, he'll be in the control-room. "If I can only get to the air-lock in time!"

"What are you aiming to do, Frank?" came Norden's anxious query. "If he's aboard, and it looks like he is, you'd better cross over to us, and we'll follow him."

"Not likely!" he retorted. "If I can catch him before he blasts, he won't leave at all."

By this time he had reached the end of the tube, which, sagging as the air-pressure was released, was feet away from the ship air-lock. He glanced down, past the gleaming hull, and saw the first wisp of vapour emerge from her main tube.

"Too late, he's firing!" Hank called, over his shoulder.

"Too late nothing," Fairless snapped. "I'm going with him. Get ready to cut those receptors as soon as I get a good grip." And he launched himself out and up, in a mighty leap.

At that moment there was a hissing, snarling roar of sound as a belching red flame jetted down from the main tubes, bounced off the concrete, and wrapped the tail of the ship with a flaming shroud. Fairless saw the sleek metal lift in front of his searching, grasping fingers, then, in the nick of time, he managed to seize one of the rungs of the outside ladder. The sudden lift slammed him against the hull, but the inhuman fingers held.

"Cut!" he yelled, over the deafening scream of jets. Hank deftly threw the switches which cut off the relays transmitting the puppet's tactile sensations back to its controller. Fairless sat quite still in the chair, concentrating on holding on, while Hank turned down the volume from the speaker-relay, and unfastened the throat-mike.

"O.K. to talk, Frank?"

"Yes. I can't do much else except hold on, not for a while, at least."

"What do you figure on doing now," Norden demanded. "Wouldn't it have been better to come across, and follow, like I said? This way we stand to lose the puppet, and we don't gain a thing."

"What good would it do to follow?" Fairless asked, quietly, his eyes unmoving from the tele-screen. "Katie's in that ship, with Rask. You can bet your boots, if we made a hostile move it would be all over with her. What could we do, anyway?"

"Yeah—you got a point there," Norden conceded. "But

what can *you* do, come to that?"

"Just wait till he stops blasting, and you'll see."

"But suppose he doesn't; and why should he?"

"I can wait. He will, anyway, soon. He hasn't had time to work out a course-pattern yet. My guess is, that as soon he's made E.V. he'll cut his tubes and figure out a course."

"I'm backing you, Lieutenant," Gale cut in, unexpectedly. "You've been pretty right, so far, and what you just said makes good sense to me. Steve, we've got a tracker on that ship?"

"Sure, right here." Norden indicated the little needle which fed on the power being broadcast by the fleeing "Mars", and pointed, unwaveringly, to it. "He won't shake this baby, not in half a million miles."

"Right. Stand by to take off. We'll follow him, just in case!"

CHAPTER VII

IN the control-room of S.S.S. "Mars", the two fugitives lay flat, while the auto-pilot took the ship in a zenith-course, its electronic brain checking, balancing, counting until the all-important figure of three miles per second had been exceeded. Then, efficiently, it cut the drive, and the passengers gasped with the relief from the down-drag of acceleration. Rask was the first to move, unfastening his straps and gliding over to the operating seat. Clipping another strap to hold himself steady, he reached for the star-maps, idly snapping on the rear tele-viewer as he did so. What he saw there wiped the complacent look from his face as if it had never been.

"We're being followed," he snarled, turning to Kate. "I'll wager this is some other game of that damned pretty-boy Lieutenant!"

Kate raised weary eyes to the screen, then smiled.

"No need to worry, Master. That's Hercules, Uncle Steve's ship. Don't you see? They've been standing by, just as you ordered, and now they're following, to be near if you require their service!"

"Of course!" he crowed, accepting her suggestion at once. "I should have seen that myself. Thank you, my dear. But—you look tired, in a few moments, as soon as I have worked out our course, we must both have a good rest."

She was, indeed, a pitiable sight. Her eyes were heavy and drooping, her face drawn with sleeplessness and strain, a few shreds of glittering green fabric at her waist, all that remained of her festival dress, mute testimony to the hands which had clawed at her in that mad passage through the

Traffic Control lobby. Now, floating weightlessly in mid-air, it was all she could do to keep her eyes open, yet, at his words of praise, she brushed back her tangled red hair and worked up the travesty of a smile.

"I am pleased to have been of service," she croaked. He nodded, waved her back to her couch, and turned, once more, to the study of the star-maps. Humming gaily, he made notations on a small pad, fed the information into the flight-computer. Then, somewhat clumsily, he took a three-angle fix on Polaris, Altair and Sol, added the result to the computer.

As the punched tape emerged, he fed it into the autopilot, set the delay-switch for five minutes, and was about to switch it in, when a red light flickered, catching his eye. His hand froze in mid-motion, then trembled as the significance of that winking light came home to him. As he watched it, incredulously, it winked out. Seconds later another green blinked out and became red.

"There's someone in the ship," he breathed, hardly able to believe his own words. "It can't be—the lights are faulty—but there is, look!" His voice rose to an hysterical scream. "It's coming this way!" He gazed wildly at Kate, then stared about for the knife he had clung to in their mad flight. She shuddered as she saw it.

"Not that, Master, please!" she begged. "It sickens me, all covered in blood. Besides, you might get hurt!"

He had grasped it fiercely, ready to throw. "Whoever it is, he won't stop me now!" He was snarling to himself, when her words made him pause and think.

"True," he nodded feverishly. "I might miss my throw—there might even be more than one!" His brow wrinkled in furious thought. "Ah!" his eyes gleamed, "I know—I have it!" He laughed harshly. "Just give me one minute, and I don't care who comes, or how many. Pay attention, Kate, and do exactly as I say. I'll beat them yet!"

Fairless made his way cautiously across the main passenger lounge to the foot of the ladder leading to the control-room. He was tense, wary, alert for anything. He knew full well that Rask must be aware of his presence, and, although he could think of nothing the Master could do to injure him, he was not going to be guilty of under-estimating the resources of that unbalanced intellect.

Slowly he hauled himself along the ladder, reaching for the button to set the door swinging open. He felt grim amazement as there came from the open door nothing more dangerous than a blaze of light, but it was nothing to the surprise which came when he thrust himself into a position where he could see the inside of the room. Rask was seated at the control-panel, coldly, patiently waiting. He stopped,

every nerve and sense shrieking "Trap!"

He saw Rask's jaw drop, and his eyes widen in stunned disbelief as he recognised the intruder.

"Fairless! The damned pretty-boy Lieutenant! Always you!" he screamed, his eyes staring. "But this is the last time, this time I shall not make any mistake—no, don't try anything silly—look! Over there!" He gestured, and Fairless, following the movement with his eyes, saw that which stopped him utterly. On her acceleration couch, Kate was sitting, motionless, cross-legged, a quiet, tired smile on her lips. One hand gripped the upright support of the couch, the other was clutching, firmly, the handle of that wicked little knife; its razor-sharp edged point was turned inward, resting with gentle pressure against her bared breast, the white flesh dimpled slightly where the point rested.

"You devil!" he gasped hoarsely. "What does this mean? Is it another of your filthy stunts?"

"A stunt? Yes, I suppose it is." Rask smiled, leeringly, "And a very effective one, I think you'll find. Kate, tell him what you are to do."

"If anyone or anything offers a threat to my Master, or menaces him in any way, I shall kill myself."

There was no possible shadow of doubt that she meant exactly what she said, and that she would do it. The obvious adoration in her glance towards Rask was enough to convince Fairless. He thought furiously, a dozen fantastic schemes coming to mind and being discarded in as many seconds. Always the thought of that razor-point just fractions of an inch from vital spots, made him pause. Even allowing for slowed reactions in her drugged condition, and his own phenomenal speed, the handicap was hopelessly against him.

"Neat, isn't it?" Rask gloated. "Come in, Lieutenant, carefully now, and keep your distance!"

Fairless drew himself up and over the combing of the door, gliding carefully into the cabin, a look of stunned resignation on his face. At the main panel, Rask hit the switch which closed the door, and then settled himself comfortably.

"Frankly, Lieutenant, you present something of a problem," he confessed. "There are so many things I would like to know. How did you evade the influence of the 'weed', how do you come to be here, anyway, and what was all that rumpus in the Governor's office? I can see there was some bloodshed." He glanced at the flakes of dried blood which were peeling from those clenched fists. "However, all that can wait. Most of all, I would like to know what am I going to do with you now? I could kill

"You, of course, but that would be too easy!" He showed a sudden viciousness. "You have interfered, many times, and for that I will have my revenge. Already I can think of half-a-dozen-ways of finishing you off, none of them very pleasant, but none of them very practical, at the moment. He fell silent, chewing his lip, then brightened.

"You seem to be possessed of more than average ingenuity. Maybe you could suggest what I might do with you, eh? That should be interesting. Any suggestions? Not that I feel bound to accept them, you do understand that, don't you?" He chuckled, evilly.

To his surprise, Fairless nodded, tiredly. "You could tie me up!" he said, in a dull, defeated tone.

"Eh?" Rask stared at him suspiciously.

"Tie me up!" Fairless repeated, heavily.

"Why should I do that? What game are you thinking of?" Rask's eyes almost shut as he tried to see some hidden meaning in this quite unexpected suggestion.

"If I'm free much longer," Fairless explained, with obvious effort, "I can't guarantee to keep my hands off your filthy neck—and I don't want Katie to die!" There was utter resignation in his tone. Rask thought it over carefully, critically, still suspecting a trap. At last he nodded.

"You have a point there, Lieutenant. I, too, do not want Katie to die. That would, indeed, be a pity. Especially now. Careless of me not to have realised that there would be an emotional tie between you. It will make matters much more interesting, later. A whole range of new possibilities opens up before me. I am grateful to you. Of course," he added, his face twisted with insane craft, "you may be harbouring some wild thought of escaping from your bonds!" He watched the downcast space-man closely. "In which case, I can assure you, you will not escape, not the way I shall secure you. I have had medical training, remember." He moved to the tool locker, under the auxiliary panel, and rummaged until he found a coil of fine, steel wire, thin as thread, but so strong that he cut his hands trying to snap it. Armed with this, and a pair of cutters, he advanced on Fairless.

"Kate!" he cautioned, "Be alert with the knife. Now, Lieutenant your hands behind you, fingers spread." He proceeded to tie each finger to its corresponding finger of the other hand, tightly, so that the wire bit into his skin. "There!" he sneered, when all was complete, "the experts in escapology of all ages have agreed that this tie is one that can't be beaten. I think you'll be quite safe. You can still move about, so, just in case you might make yourself a nuisance——" he hauled out a length of grapnel cable, and lashed the helpless man to one of the support stanchions of the compartment.

As a finishing touch, he found a long-handled screwdriver, and, using it as a lever, twisted the heavy cable into a tight knot.

"There!" he glided back, admiring his handiwork, "I think you'll think twice before you get out of that!"

"Tell Katie to put down that damned knife!" Fairless grated, and Rask chuckled, evilly.

"Of course, of course. Kate, you can relax now, and save your boy-friend any further worries."

She lowered the blade, and Fairless drew the first full breath he had had since entering the compartment. To his instant chagrin, however, she did not let go of it, merely put it across her knees, keeping a firm grip on the handle. So intent was he on the knife that he missed the utter hatred in her glance at him, and it came as a bitter surprise to hear her declare, vehemently.

"This man means nothing to me, Master. This assumption that there is any understanding between us—it's false, a trick on his part! I want only to serve you, to be yours in every way!"

"Quite, my dear," Rask nodded, idly. "But you mustn't upset the brave Lieutenant. He is genuinely fond of you. He was merely trying to save your life. A little short-sighted of him, perhaps, as there are worse fates than death; eh, Fairless?" He made his way back to the control-panel, thus missing the awful fury which blazed on the space-man's face for a moment.

"Dear me, I shall have to reset these co-ordinates," Rask complained, clearing the computer-keyboard, and reaching for the star-maps again. Fairless fought himself calm, and prayed for just one break.

"May I ask where you're heading for?" he queried, playing for time. The sneer on Rask's face became more pronounced.

"I could tell you, but you wouldn't be any the wiser. There is a small asteroid, in the Trojans, approximately midway between Achilles and Nestor. You wouldn't know it, it's not charted." Fairless gave him a grim smile.

"You should say 'was', Doctor. I do know of the asteroid you mean. In fact, I was one of the last people to see it."

"The last! What the devil are you getting at?"

"Just that the asteroid no longer exists. Together with Doctor Norden, Commodore Gale, and others, I helped to blow it to atoms."

Rask goggled at him, his lean face suddenly slack with shock.

"Why do you think we were seeking information about Carter Wallace, or, if you prefer, Marvin Lacey?"

"You know that, too!" Rask had shrunk visibly.

"Of course! We know all about his 'knock-out' gas, and his plan to take over Mars. We scared him, and he fled, just as you are doing. We followed him. He led us to this fancy asteroid-base of yours, and we got it, in a big way."

"But what about our fleet of ships, and their weapons? You can't have—it's not possible——"

"Oh, yes, your fleet of stolen space-ships, and their torpedoes. We got them, too, all of them!" Fairless grinned, mirthlessly, as Rask clawed at his throat, finding difficulty with his breathing.

"Fantastic!" he choked, his eyes staring. "You couldn't knock out a whole fleet of ships. There is some trick——"

"Quite a trick," Fairless agreed, coldly. "We got all the ships, and the last one registered a direct hit on the stockpile of atomic weapons you had put by. So it's all gone; base, asteroid, fleet, Lacey, Orloff—all totally destroyed. Hercules is not the innocent ship she appears to be, Doctor." Fairless kept his voice to a hard, remorseless, driving tone. "She could blow this ship to atoms, right now!"

"Hercules!" Rask babbled. "Right there, behind us—my God! But—but it won't happen, Lieutenant; those men in that ship are my slaves, in my power."

"Like Hell they are!" Fairless laughed, harshly. "Not any more, not since I gave them the antidote!"

"The antidote! But—but how could you? It's impossible!"

"Come now, Doctor, do I look as if I'm your loyal slave? And what do you think really happened to Sloane, after he had told me all I wanted to know?"

"Sloane—Sloane——" Rask mumbled, stupidly.

"Of course. I gave them the antidote, and though they are in that ship back there, they are watching you, listening to you, right now!" Rask could only stare, wildly, his eyes glazed, fingers trembling at his slack, slaverling lips.

"You'd know their voices, wouldn't you, Doctor?" Fairless went on, insistently, mercilessly. "Then listen!" And from the empty air of the cabin, there came the sharp, unmistakable rasp of Gale's voice.

"We're watching you, Rask—every minute!" and the heavy, throaty rumble of Norden, adding, "You can't get away with it, Doctor, we've got you cold!"

Rask sucked in a shuddering breath, drew back in the chair, and began to laugh, hysterically.

Suddenly Kate's dull senses began to work. She dived across the compartment to Rask.

"Don't believe him, Master!" she called urgently. "It's a trick. He's not a man at all, he's——" But this was the break Fairless had been waiting for. His inhuman, machine powered fingers parted their bonds as if they were gossamer,

and, in one eye-baffling movement, he turned, caught up the screwdriver, and threw it, like a glittering bullet, at Rask, then dived across for the knife which Kate had cast aside, caught it, snapped it like a stick, and whirled, ready to defend himself.

As he crouched a hideous, bubbling scream echoed through the small compartment, bouncing back from the metallic walls, to fade into sudden, horrid silence. By sheer chance, the tool, intended only to hit, and distract, had struck point-first, and, propelled by the puppet's super-muscles, had driven through flesh, sinew and bone to plough its way deep into the hard plastic of the instrument panel behind. Its dark handle stood out from the Doctor's chest, as he hung like a pinned specimen in his own laboratory.

Kate threw herself, wailing, on the inert body, but those ears were deaf to her protestations, the eyes would never again observe her deference and servitude. She turned, slowly, in mid-air, and Fairless was shocked at the blankness of her face. The acceptance of death was written there, too plainly to be mistaken. He realised, with horror, that now that the Master was dead, she had abandoned all desire to live, that she was literally dying before his eyes.

"Hank!" he called desperately. "Stand by with the juice!" and began to peel back the flaps of plastic in his palms with feverish haste. He reached out for her, but, even in her urge for death, she sensed that he was going to prevent her, and fought him, desperately.

"Sorry, darling!" he breathed. "Got to be done"—and he tapped her gently on the chin. Her head snapped back, and, as she floated, unconscious, in the air, he pressed his palms to her forehead.

"Now, Hank!" he called sharply, and her slim body jerked stiffly, as the current shocked through her brain. He drew her gently to her couch, and steeled himself to wait, praying that he had been in time. Her slim wrist cradled in his hand, he felt the weak flutter of her pulse under his fingers, her breast barely moving, so shallow was her breathing. After what seemed an age that feeble beat surged, became a strong, vigorous thump, her breast heaved mightily as she drew a huge breath and sat up.

"Are you all right?" he asked anxiously. "I'm sorry I had to slug you like that, but there wasn't any time for gentle measures!"

"Slug me?" she echoed, her blue eyes shining. "If you only knew how much I shall treasure the memory of that slug—just to be free, free of that!" She looked across at the dead figure pinned to the panel, and shuddered. "Oh, Frank—it was horrible! I can remember it all, every moment of it. I don't think I shall ever be clean again." She was

shaking with reaction, and he put his arm round her, protectively.

"Never mind, darling, it's all over now. You're safe. That's all that matters," he soothed her, feeling a little shaken himself, now that it was all over.

"I shall never be able to thank you, Frank," she breathed, looking up at him. "I owe you much more than my life, much more!"

"Not me," he disclaimed, quickly. "The credit should go to the puppet, really. Without it, we'd have been sunk!"

"You *and* the puppet," she corrected softly. "It may sound silly, I know it would never have been possible if it hadn't been for the puppet, but—right now—I wish it was you here, and not the puppet!" His eyes fell in embarrassment, as she went on: "Because—twice, in the last few minutes, you've called me 'darling'—and I'd rather have it at first-hand."

"Unlucky for you, then," he faltered, "'cause I'll never be able to say it in person."

"Oh, yes you will!" she corrected firmly. "After all I've been through to get you to say it, don't think you're going to back out of it now." Her face glowed as she reached out for him.

"Just to show you that I mean what I say!" she whispered. "I'm going to kiss you. Hank, turn those receptors up to full power, I want him to feel this, but good!"

THE END.

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FED up with people telling you that you'll never be a real man? Ashamed of what they say when you strip off for swimming? Just co-operate with me for 7 DAYS ONLY—and I'll show you how to make them eat their words,

Yes, just give me 15 minutes a day—and you'll see how I can add **SOLID INCHES** of powerful **NEW MUSCLE** so fast your friends will gape!

'DYNAMIC-TENSION'

What's my secret? "DYNAMIC-TENSION"—that's all you need! It's the method that developed me from a scrawny weakling to my present terrific physique. It twice won me the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Thousands of other chaps are becoming marvellous physical specimens—my way. I've got no use for gadgets or contraptions. When you have learnt to develop your strength through "DYNAMIC-TENSION" you'll laugh at artificial so-called muscle-builders.

BEGIN TO LIVE!

I can shoot new strength into your weary backbone, exercise those vital inner organs—help you cram your body so full of pep, vigour and red-blooded vitality that you won't even remember what it was like to be always tired and feeble-feeling. You'll feel and look different! Man—you'll begin to live!

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