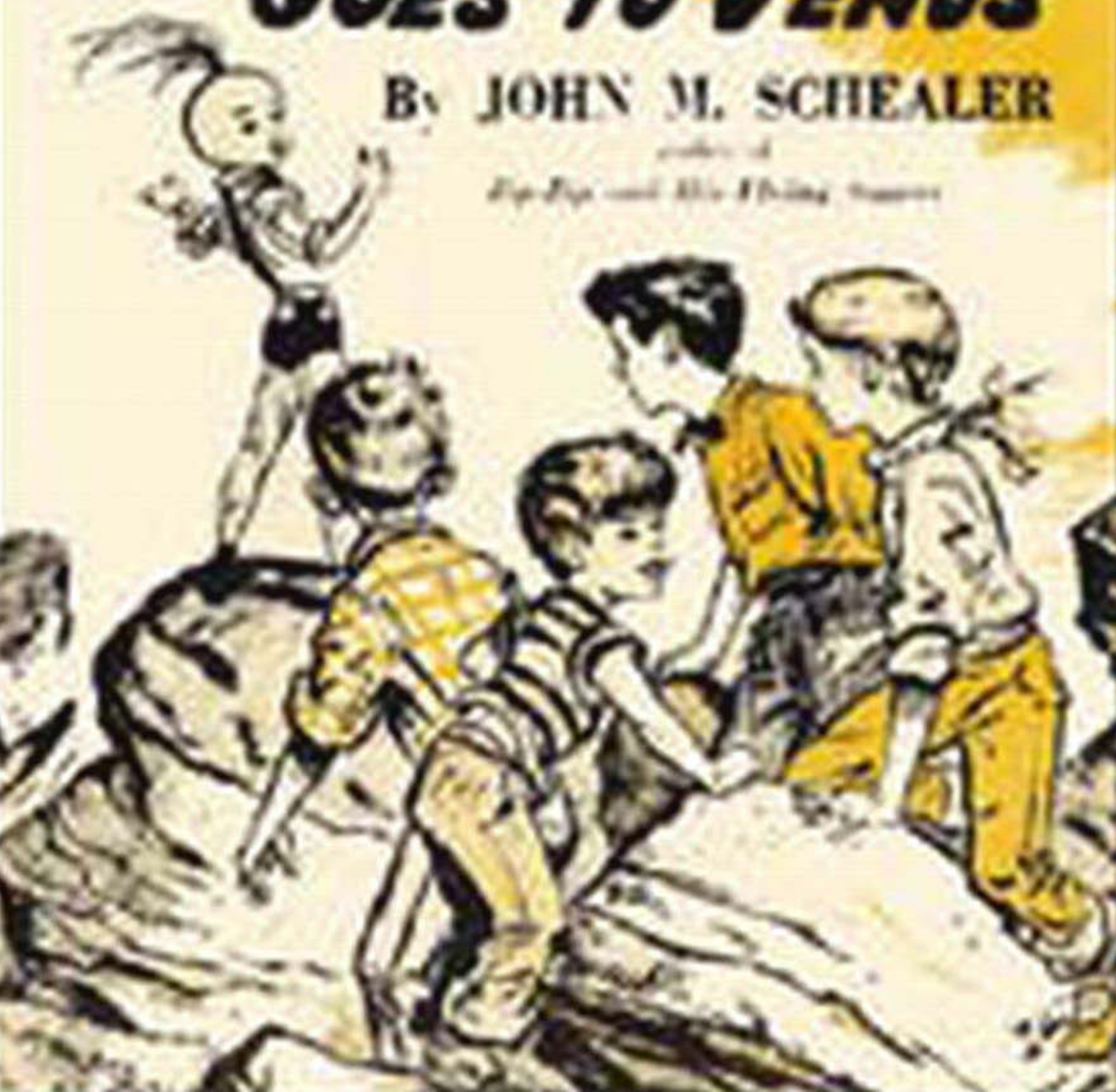


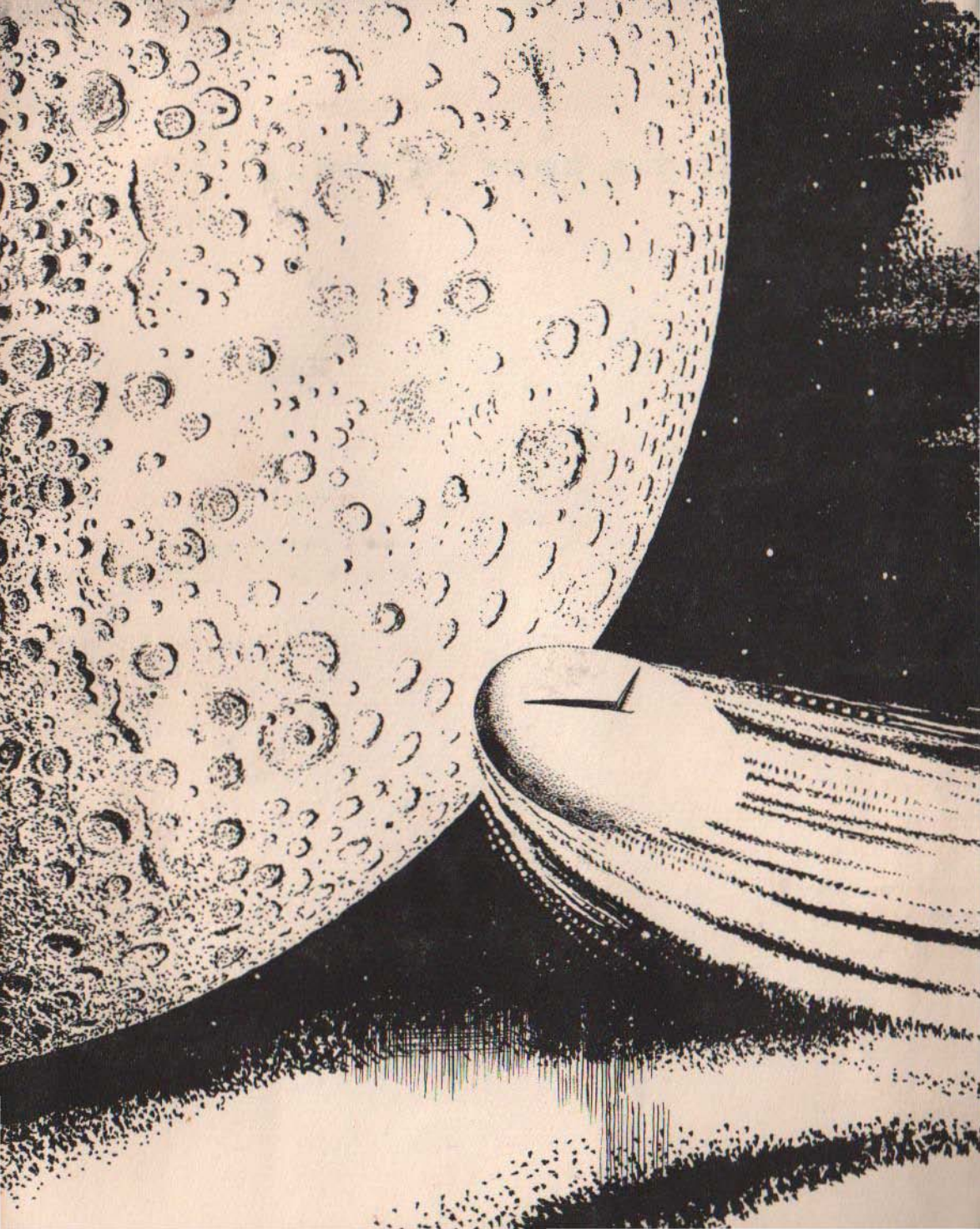
Zip-Zip

GOES TO VENUS

By JOHN M. SCHEALER

author of
Zip-Zip and His Flying Saucer



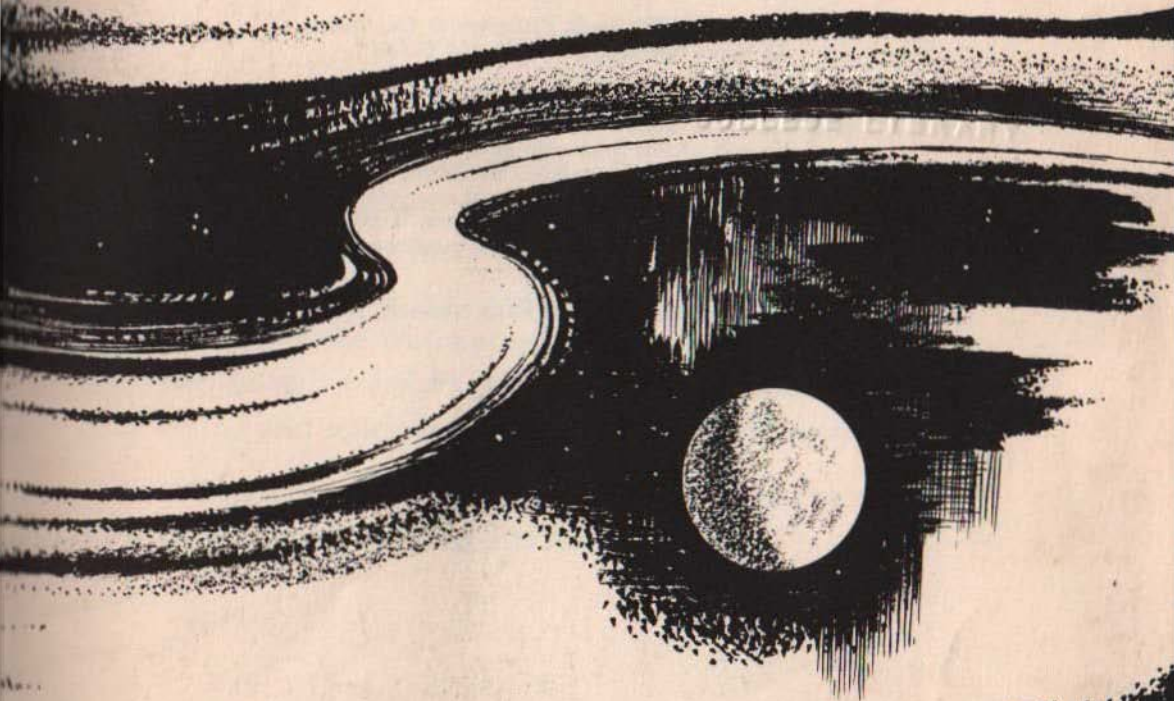


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BY JOHN M. SCHEALER

ILLUSTRATED BY HANS HELWEG



NEW YORK

E. P. DUTTON & CO., INC.

1958

Books by JOHN M. SCHEALER

ZIP-ZIP AND HIS FLYING SAUCER

THIS WAY TO THE STARS

ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS

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PROLOGUE

FOR thousands of years different races of men lived on the continents of the world, separated by thousands of miles of ocean and unaware of each other's existence. Finally some of these men built ships large and strong enough to cross the oceans, and they sailed forth and learned of the true nature of the world: that they were not the only inhabitants of the Earth; that the Earth was round and much larger than they ever dreamed.

We look out across oceans of space. We are curious and have started to build our ships.

ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS

THE FIRST ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE SECOND ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE THIRD ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS...

THE FOURTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE FIFTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE SIXTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE SEVENTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE EIGHTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE NINTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE TENTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE ELEVENTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE TWELFTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE THIRTEENTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE FOURTEENTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE FIFTEENTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE SIXTEENTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE SEVENTEENTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE EIGHTEENTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE NINETEENTH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS... THE TWENTIETH ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS...

THE TWENTY-FIRST ZIP-ZIP GOES TO VENUS...



“WHAT! You kids out of bed this early, and school vacation. Do you have something special cooked up for today?”

This was Ralph Riddle’s greeting to his four children as he entered the kitchen of his home in Raleigh Park, an attractive suburban community not far from Philadelphia. Tom, a brown-haired, sturdy boy of eleven, was filling a glass with water; he said nothing in reply to his father’s question. Sparky, six years old and always in trouble, was too interested in balancing himself on the back of a chair to reply. Bonnie, at nine a cute yellow-haired miss in blue jeans, still had a mouthful of breakfast. She could not speak. Randy, age eight and in his imagination a pioneer explorer of outer space, raised his voice from just inside the screen door.

“*You know!*” he called over his shoulder.

"Randy!" said his mother sharply, for the moment taking her attention off a pan of sizzling bacon and eggs. "That's no way to speak to your father even if you are disappointed. You're all acting very silly."

Mr. Riddle grunted as if in agreement and took his place at the kitchen table. "Don't tell me they're still buzzing about that Zip-Zip?" He chuckled and picked up the newspaper that Tom had folded to the sports section. "All aboard for Venus!" he said teasingly, adding, "Bacon smells good."

"Now, Ralph, that's not exactly fair." Mrs. Riddle's cheeks were flushed from the heat of the stove, making a pretty picture with her serious blue eyes and yellow hair. "A couple of weeks ago you yourself were ready to swish off"—she waved a fork in the air—"in a flying saucer. Mind you, I'm not saying I believe all of their story. But if they weren't telling the truth, how *did* that steam shovel get in the back yard?"

"Yeah, how?" said Sparky, stopping his balancing act.

Naturally Mr. Riddle had been astonished when he discovered it parked in his back yard. At that time he had decided that the huge device had been delivered by a flying saucer, because he could not see any other way it could possibly have gotten where it was.

But time changes even grownups.

The more Mr. Riddle had thought about his children's incredible story, the less he was inclined to believe it. Finally, as the days had added up to weeks, he had put

the story out of his mind entirely. Whenever he did happen to overhear the children talking among themselves about Zip-Zip, he would smile and shake his head, as if to say, "What nonsense!"

Now this morning, before he even had had a chance to get the sleep out of his eyes, he was faced by four stern cross-examiners. Anyone could see by his expression that he was going to have a difficult time of it.

He said: "I don't know how I was taken in by your story about the flying saucer in the first place. I certainly wasn't thinking straight . . . must have been sick, delirious. Flying saucers and boys from Mars are . . . well, it's all right for you kids to have your fun, but it's ridiculous for a grown man to talk about such things."

"Why?" asked Sparky.

"Yes, what's the matter with that?" said Bonnie, usually not so outspoken.

Mr. Riddle made no comment and started to eat his breakfast.

"I don't understand you grownups," said Tom. "You're always changing your minds."

"Oh, is that so!" laughed Mrs. Riddle as she sat down at the table.

"How did the——?" began Sparky, but he was drowned out by Randy.

"We believe in Zip-Zip. Only I wonder why he doesn't answer our letter. He told us to leave it inside the old

barn, and we did. We stuck it on a post. He's gotta see it."

"When did you do this?" asked Randy's mother.

"Yesterday."

"Only yesterday. Do you think your boy from Mars has nothing else to do but answer letters?"

Mr. Riddle looked up from his paper. "Don't say things like that, Laura. You don't have to encourage their pretending."

"How did the steam shovel——?" began Sparky again, and again he was interrupted. Sparky frowned with annoyance.

"We're *not* pretending, Daddy!" said Bonnie spiritedly. "Zip-Zip is going to take us to Venus, and we're going to help him find his father there—you said we could!"

"I did?" said Mr. Riddle, lifting his eyebrows.

Mrs. Riddle shook her head as she caught Mr. Riddle's eye. "Dear, I think you said that you and I would discuss the matter."

"Well then, we have, and the answer is *no*!"

"Aw gee!" whined Randy.

Mr. Riddle burst out laughing. "This is the most ridiculous thing that's ever happened in this family," he said. "Here I am forbidding something I know can't happen. I'm going to work before I think I'm President of the United States."

"Dad!" cried Sparky. He leaped from his chair and grabbed his father by the arm to keep him from leaving.

"How—how did the steam shovel get in our back yard? You didn't say." He smiled slyly.

Mr. Riddle saw the smile and came right to the point. "Sparky," he said, "you're trying to trick me. I don't know how it got there any more than you do. Maybe the fellows in Chicago played a practical joke on me—I don't know." He waved an arm hopelessly. "But," he added, "I want *you jokers* to come down to earth before I get home. Help your mother when she asks you." He kissed Mrs. Riddle and left the house.

Tom moved lazily to the screen door and gazed outside. "Boy, this is the life," he said. "No school for weeks and weeks."

"Yeah," said Randy half-heartedly, "but where's Zip-Zip?"

Mrs. Riddle stood up and smoothed her apron. "Well, before you blast off into space where I can't find you, I do want a few things done around here." A chorus of groans rose from the Riddle boys. "You can make it exciting if you try," she continued, smiling. "Spacemen Tom and Randy, you fly into the cellar and get the lawn mower and mow *some* of the grass, so your father won't have all of it to do tonight. And, Spaceman Sparky, you may take out the garbage as soon as I—" She had picked up a milk bottle to return it to the refrigerator and had noticed a slip of paper sticking to the bottom of it. She set down the bottle and examined the damp paper. "That's strange," she said slowly. "I don't owe the milk-

man a cent . . . and why would he call in the evening?"

Tom and Randy were growling to themselves about having to mow the grass, so only Bonnie and Sparky heard what their mother was saying.

"Can you make this out, Bonnie?" asked Mrs. Riddle. "The letters are all run together. It certainly can't be one word. O-p-e-d-o-x—oh, it's senseless." She gave the paper to Bonnie and went on with her work.

"Let me see," said Sparky, reaching for the paper.

Tom said: "Mother, you don't want us to mow the grass right away, do you? It's early, and I told Joey Freed I'd walk him over to the ball field."

"I'm sure he can find the field for himself," replied Mrs. Riddle. "In an hour you can join him—the back yard shouldn't take you that long."

"Randy! Everybody!" Bonnie squealed. "I think this note is from Zip-Zip!"

"What note?" asked Randy.

"This one! Mother found it sticking to the milk bottle. See! Isn't this Zip-Zip's real name here?" Bonnie pointed to a long word at the bottom of the slip of paper.

"O-pe-do—I can't say it—but *I think you're right!*"

"I'm pretty sure his name ended with a 'd' sound like this funny word," said Bonnie.

"That's right," said Tom.

"I shall visit you this evening.' That's all he says," said Randy.

"That's enough!" exclaimed Tom.

Randy gave a strange little laugh. "You're not kidding! Say, we'd better get ready."

"Whatta ya mean?" asked Tom.

Mrs. Riddle had been listening to the children with only half an ear; now she joined them and said, "Yes, what do you mean, Randy?"

"Well, when you go on a trip, you gotta take stuff with you. Clothes maybe, a comb and toothbrush——"

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Venus! the planet Venus!" said Randy. "Gee, how many times must we tell you?"

Mrs. Riddle waved her hands in a gesture of impatience. "Oh, you children," she sighed. "I agree with your father. You carry things entirely too far. I thought I believed you when you said you flew with someone to Chicago. But *Venus!*"

Like Mr. Riddle, Mrs. Riddle simply could not understand how it was possible for the children to be telling the truth. The whole trouble was that neither she nor Mr. Riddle had ever seen Zip-Zip or his flying saucer. In a way, then, it was natural for them to be skeptical.

When Mrs. Riddle, still talking, stepped out the back door for a moment, the children knew what to do. Like prisoners escaping from jail, they scampered upstairs to the boys' room where they could make plans in private. Tom closed the door and they gathered on Tom and Randy's bed. They read and reread the note they believed was from Zip-Zip until it was worn and frayed

from handling. They talked and talked, growing more excited by the minute with the prospect of another ride in the flying saucer. What would Venus be like? Would the people of Venus be friendly? What time would Zip-Zip arrive? Would he fly his saucer up to Bonnie's bedroom window as he had when he brought them home from Chicago? Had he learned more about his father? Though they discussed all these things, it seemed that the more they talked, the less they really knew.

Then Sparky spoke out, reminding the others that they still had not packed their belongings for the trip. He was going to take his six-shooter and "las-sue," he said, "in case of trouble," which caused some laughter. Then, coaxed by Tom and Randy, Bonnie located a beach bag in her mother's closet, and everyone dropped into it what he thought he would need. Its zipper mouth swallowed up toothbrushes, socks, a cake of soap (Bonnie's idea), a comb, half a tube of tooth paste, Sparky's six-shooter, Randy's star chart, to mention the more important things.

Of course Mrs. Riddle could not help hearing the commotion upstairs. It did not please her. The lawn mower remained in the cellar, and she had had to dry the breakfast dishes herself. She mounted the stairs, planting her feet firmly, noisily on each step; a sign that she was annoyed or angry. When she saw what the children were doing, she warned them that their father would have to hear of it, and accused them of "deliberately playing a

game” just to get out of their work; which was only partly true. It was true that they were not anxious to do ordinary things when they could think about rocketing through space.

That evening when their father received the “bad report” he was as unsympathetic as their mother had been, but he did more than threaten them. He made Tom and Randy mow the grass while he spaded a flower bed. Bonnie had been handed clippers for trimming. And Sparky was put to work carrying the stones turned up by the spading to a pile at the rear of the garage.

“Gosh, Dad,” complained Randy, “what if Zip-Zip comes, and we’re mowin’ the grass?”

Said his father, “I fail to see how that will cause a crisis,” and he urged Randy to go right on pushing the mower with Tom.

As it happened the boys did not finish mowing before twilight set in, but nevertheless Mr. Riddle was pleased with their effort. A rather chill air had sprung up with the setting of the sun, encouraging the Riddles to go indoors, all, that is, except Randy. He stood watching the palely glowing sky until its last glimmer seemed to become the stars. Nowhere in the wide sky had he seen anything that looked like a flying saucer. Through the darkness he heard his father walk up to the inside of the screen door, heard him say, “I think you’d better come in, Randy,” and Randy obeyed.

In the living room Randy found his mother and Bonnie watching television.

"Don't sit there," requested Mrs. Riddle. "That's your father's chair. He's getting something to drink."

"I don't wanna sit down," whined Randy. Then he asked Bonnie where Tom was.

"He and Sparky are up in my room."

Randy nodded knowingly and went up the stairs.

Mrs. Riddle turned a puzzled face to Bonnie. "Why, may I ask, are they in your room?"

Mr. Riddle had just returned from the kitchen, a glass in one hand, a bottle in the other. "They're looking under the bed for a flying saucer," he joked, answering for Bonnie. "Once those kids get an idea in their noggins wild horses couldn't budge it."

"Wild horses is right," said Mrs. Riddle as Randy, Tom, and Sparky thumped down the steps.

"Are you coming with us, Bonnie?" asked Randy.

"Where are you going?" asked Mr. Riddle from his easy chair.

"Oh, nowhere. Just the back yard."

"You're staying inside," said Mr. Riddle firmly. "There will be no more stargazing tonight. If you can't forget this crazy business, we're going to have stricter rules around here."

"Why don't the four of you play a game in the kitchen until bedtime?" suggested Mrs. Riddle.

"Bedtime," said Mr. Riddle, "isn't far off."

Randy shook his head peevishly. "Ah, you don't understand!"

"Come on," Bonnie said quickly.

Once in the kitchen Tom turned on Randy. "You almost got us sent to bed," he growled.

"We're not in bed, are we?"

"Don't fight," begged Bonnie.

Sparky had climbed on a chair. "What are we gonna do now?" he asked.

Randy shrugged. "I don't know."

"We just wait," said Tom. "If Zip-Zip doesn't show up, there's nothing we can do about it."

"Yeah," said Randy, "but what about his note? If it was from him. . . ."

"Maybe he fell asleep," said Bonnie.

Despite his gloom Randy laughed.

"Well, he could have!" came back Bonnie.

"Maybe he crashed," blurted Sparky; "and got killed."

The others groaned.

"Don't say such things!" said Bonnie.

"I think we oughta go back to Bonnie's room," said Randy. "I'll bet Zip-Zip can't tell which house is ours in the dark—but if we put a *light* in Bonnie's window he could."

"Good idea," commented Tom. "Let's go. And easy does it."

A steady stream of music and noises poured from the

television as the children entered the living room. Then a commercial flashed on the screen, and their father looked up and saw them.

"Now what?" he said impatiently. When Randy stammered, Mr. Riddle supplied his own answer. "You're going to bed. Tom, you're first on the bath parade—the rest of you in regular order. Your mother will be ready to take care of Sparky after this next program, so snap it up."

Of all the children Randy was the most disappointed. And there was nothing strange about that. He was the only one who had been interested in spaceships, planets, and stars before Zip-Zip had appeared. What could be worse, he thought, *going to bed instead of to Venus!*

"I'm not going to bed!" Randy had made a desperate decision.

"Randy," said his father, "I don't want to punish you, especially after you made such a good job of the lawn, but I'll have to if—" His head swung around sharply. "What was that?"

"What was what?" asked Mrs. Riddle.

"I thought I saw something go past the window, just out of the corner of my eye."

"Probably a reflection, dear."

"You children see it?" asked Mr. Riddle.

They shook their heads glumly. Suddenly Randy's face lit up. He tried to talk, and when the words would not come, he dashed from the room.

Mrs. Riddle glanced at Mr. Riddle. "What's the matter with the boy? Why don't you see what he's up to?"

"I'll see," said Tom.

"You stay right where you are!" said Mr. Riddle forcefully. He seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

"Well, if you won't do anything," said Mrs. Riddle, getting to her feet, "I will."

"Please, Laura. I think——" Mr. Riddle had heard the sound of footsteps in the kitchen. They continued through the dining room. Randy appeared in the dining-room doorway. His expression might have been one of happiness or pride or surprise. It was impossible to tell which.

"Come on, Zip-Zip, in here," he urged. "Like I said, *they* won't hurt you. And my brothers and sister are here."

An unusual stillness settled over the Riddle living room. Five pairs of eyes strained to see into the half-dark behind Randy. Randy took a few steps into the light and beckoned.

There was the bright gleam of silver in the room as the boy from Mars, dressed in a spacesuit without the headpiece, emerged from the shadows.

"Zip-Zip!" cried Sparky, Tom, and Bonnie.

Mr. and Mrs. Riddle gasped and stared in speechless wonder.

Perhaps it was the boy's large blue eyes that startled them. Or the fuzzy, yellow plume that grew on the top

of his round head. Or the fact that he had no ears. Certainly it was not his pert nose; nor his small, full-lipped friendly mouth; nor his size. He was even a bit shorter than Randy if his plume was not included.

"Ralph," appealed Mrs. Riddle weakly.

Mr. Riddle helped her into a chair and quickly faced around as if afraid to take his eyes off the boy from Mars.

"That's my father and mother," said Randy to Zip-Zip.

Zip-Zip nodded shyly. "I'm very glad to meet you," he said in a clear musical voice.

"He's—he's very glad to meet us!" repeated Mrs. Riddle, her eyelashes fluttering strangely.

Mr. Riddle raised a hand. "Now, d-don't get excited, dear. He won't hurt us, I'm—sure."

"I hurt you?" Zip-Zip's big eyes twinkled as he grinned up at Mr. Riddle towering over him. "That is very funny."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," said Randy.

Mr. Riddle tried to laugh. "Sounds as if we're the children, Laura."

"I suppose my appearance startled you," said Zip-Zip softly. "I had learned in school ZIP that you people of Earth were different, that you heard with what you called ears ZIP and not with antennas like ours"—he pointed to his yellow plume—"but when I saw you for myself I was ZIP still surprised. You had *holes* in the sides of your heads!"

The children burst out laughing.

"I never thought of ears that way," said Tom, fingering his own ear.

"Though we are different in appearance," said Zip-Zip, "we can ZIP be friends."

Mr. Riddle showed signs of relaxing. He said: "That makes sense, fellow, but—er—would you mind telling me why those zipping sounds came out of you just now?"

"That's why we call him Zip-Zip!" cried Sparky.

"Don't shout!" said Mrs. Riddle. "This boy from Mars has better manners than you have."

Zip-Zip's pink cheeks bunched up under his eyes as he smiled. "I don't mind telling you anything about me," he said to Mr. Riddle. "The zipping sound you heard is a ZIP release of energy. Your language is so much easier to think and speak than my own that I must ZIP release excess psychogalvanic energy to avoid a headache."

"Amazing!" said Mr. Riddle. "You really are from Mars . . . a real live Martian. . . ."

All at once, as if determined to prove he was from another planet, Zip-Zip floated off the floor, and the yellow plume on his head brushed the ceiling. It was so unexpected that no one was able to speak until he just as suddenly dropped back onto the floor.

"Gosh, you never showed us that trick before!" Tom exclaimed.

"How did you do it?" cried Bonnie.

"Did you see that, Laura?" whispered Mr. Riddle, his eyes popping.

"Do it again!" said Sparky, beaming.

Zip-Zip looked sheepish. "I'm sorry. That rise was an accident." He drew attention to the silver belt around his waist. "I accidentally turned the activator on my ZIP PG-neutralizer," he said, pointing to what Randy had taken for a belt buckle, a shiny black disk with a white bar across its face. "Neutralizers and pocket rockets are much used on my planet."

"That's how he came here tonight," boasted Randy. "It was Zip-Zip you saw, Dad. He flew past the window, right through the air!"

"What is this PG-neutralizer?" asked Mr. Riddle.

The boy from Mars explained that the "PG" stood for the words "portable" and "gravity." The PG-neutralizer, or portable gravity-neutralizer, could weaken or completely cancel out the force of gravity. "As you know," he added, "it is the gravitational attraction of a planet which holds ZIP all things on its surface and accounts for what you call weight. If it were not for gravity ZIP everything would appear to fall up instead of down, everything would fly into space." He laughed at the idea, and the Riddle children laughed with him.

"Would balls fall up?" asked Sparky.

Zip-Zip nodded.

"And cars and—and buildings?" said Randy.

"And cats and dogs and bicycles?" giggled Sparky.

"Everything," repeated Zip-Zip. "Even you."

By this time Mr. Riddle's fears were entirely erased

by the gleeful, friendly picture made by his children and Zip-Zip. He could hardly believe that they were children of two different planets. And it was with obvious pleasure that he began to question Zip-Zip.

Randy was quick to see the change in his father, and he felt warm and happy inside. Surely his father would let them go to Venus now.

"So it took your scientists two hundred years to achieve weightlessness inside a planet's gravitational field?" said Mr. Riddle after listening to Zip-Zip.

"Yes, sir, but that would be nearly four hundred of your years. You see, your days and ours ZIP are about the same length, but our year is 687 days, and yours is just 365 days."

Mr. Riddle whistled under his breath. "Is that right? Well, it's a tremendous invention, and you're a smart lad," he said. Then a peculiar light shone in his eyes and his mouth curved slightly. "Would you—could I—" he stuttered, "could I try it out—the gravity-neutralizer, I mean?"

"Sure," said Zip-Zip, and he quickly slipped off the belt to which the neutralizer was attached, and handed it to Mr. Riddle. "You must be careful, though. Turn it only on low."

"Oh, Ralph, I wish you wouldn't!" said Mrs. Riddle.

But Mr. Riddle did not hear her, or at least he pretended not to. The children had swarmed around him like Indians around a wagon train, clamoring loud and

lustily for a chance to use the magic belt. Mr. Riddle held the belt up under his chin and ordered them to step back. "I've got to have room," he said.

"Please, Ralph," pleaded Mrs. Riddle. "The belt is too small for you, anyway."

Mr. Riddle pulled the belt around his waist. "No, it isn't," he said, grinning. "It stretches." He looked at Zip-Zip anxiously. "You say the white bar pivots to the left?"

Zip-Zip nodded, and again warned Mr. Riddle that the activator, as he called it, was very sensitive.

No one said a word as Mr. Riddle's fingers closed on the white bar. The bar turned. Mr. Riddle stole a glance at Zip-Zip. Again his fingers tightened on the bar, and again it turned.

"It's working!" he whispered. "I have the strangest feeling—wo-ho!"

There was Mr. Riddle floating in the air as pretty as you please—all six feet and 180 pounds of him! Swinging his arms and kicking his legs, he glided through the air until he was suspended over the television, his back nearly touching the ceiling. The children could not believe their eyes. It is one thing to see a boy from Mars float into the air, and quite another to see your father do the very same thing. Then someone giggled, and that was enough to release a torrent of delighted squeals and laughter. The children ran under their father and grinned up at him.



"Dad," cried Randy, "you look just like you're in swimming."

"Yeah, he's blowin' up his cheeks," said Sparky.

"You're not scared, are you, Dad?" asked Tom.

Whatever the nature of his feelings, Mr. Riddle certainly did not appear to be very happy. His eyes were as stary as an owl's, and his ruddy face had grown pale and moonlike.

"Ralph Riddle, come down here at once!" commanded Mrs. Riddle. "You'll be sick—and you have your feet on the wall!"

Zip-Zip, up to this time, had been a silent but watchful spectator. Now he stepped forward and very calmly reached up and took hold of Mr. Riddle's hand and pulled him, like a balloon, over to the center of the room. "Slowly rotate the activator to your right," he said.

Mr. Riddle's feet lowered and touched the floor. "Wheee!" he sighed with relief. "That was the strangest moment I've ever had."

"You should have known better," scolded Mrs. Riddle. "You know you can't stand height."

Mr. Riddle shook his head. "It wasn't the height. All the time I was up there I felt as if I were falling." He unfastened the neutralizer belt as he talked. Now he held it out to Zip-Zip. Randy and Sparky both grabbed for it.

"No you don't!" snapped Mr. Riddle. "That's not for you."

Before the children could object, Zip-Zip said, "Oh,

I'm sorry. I brought neutralizers for all of us, so we could return ZIP to the saucer as soon and as secretly as possible."

"What's this?" asked Mr. Riddle.

Zip-Zip turned to Randy. "Aren't you going with me to Venus?"

Randy looked at his father, then back at Zip-Zip. "Sure, we're going with you," he said boldly. "We're all packed to go."

"Just a minute—" began Mr. Riddle.

"But, Daddy, you practically said we could go," burst out Bonnie. "And I—I think it's mean if you keep us home!"

"I never said anything of the kind."

Randy took over. "You said Zip-Zip was a smart boy."

"That I admit, but—"

"Don't tell us we're too young and you'd worry," continued Randy. "We're safer with Zip-Zip than with anyone else, I betcha. He's got more inventions than Space Explorers on television, and his are real."

"Well, did you ever hear anything like it?" said Mrs. Riddle.

Mr. Riddle only stroked his jaw and gazed at Zip-Zip until that young man actually blushed. "Think of it," he murmured. "*My children could be the first human beings to leave this Earth and travel through space to another planet.*" Wrapping both of his big hands around his belt over his stomach, he tilted back his head and, with a

faraway gleam in his eyes, said, "What do you say, Laura? Do we let them go?"

If the good people of Raleigh Park had looked into the sky that night, they would have seen one of the strangest sights imaginable. Against a glittering background of stars and a quarter-moon moved a sky-train—not of birds—not of planes—but a sky-train of children linked hand in hand, with legs dangling and hair backswept. It was Zip-Zip and the four Riddles.

"These PG-neutralizers are the greatest, Zip-Zip. I couldn't dream it better," called Randy into the cool night air. Zip-Zip was holding his hand, Randy was holding Tom's, Tom was holding Bonnie's, Bonnie had a firm grip on Sparky's. And in Sparky's free hand was his mother's beach bag that had been packed so carefully that morning. Mrs. Riddle had thought the children should take more clothing, but she had only succeeded in getting them to wear their heavy jackets.

"When we took off I felt like I was going down in an elevator," said Tom, "but I don't feel that way now."

Bonnie's voice trembled as she spoke. "I can't look down, I just can't! We must be *miles* high."

They weren't, of course. However, being as high as a ten-story building, with nothing under your feet, can make you feel high up.



"Don't worry," consoled Tom. "You can't fall. If you feel sick, just look up, or close your eyes. It won't be long before we reach the saucer."

"Who feels sick?" shouted Sparky from the rear, obviously enjoying being the caboose on the sky-train. "I wish we'd go faster. Why can't we go faster?"

"Because," called Zip-Zip, "I have the pocket rocket on full power now." While he talked, he continued to hold the rocket over his head. It was about the size of a flashlight, and a tongue of blue flame was shooting from the end of it. "It will take us to our ZIP destination, although it was designed to navigate one person and not five."

"You know," said Randy, "I still can't believe Dad let us go."

"I think he made up his mind," said Bonnie, "when he said, 'You are the future and it's your privilege to create it.'"

"Yeah," said Tom, "I thought he was going to make a speech. Fathers are funny."

For a time no one spoke. The dimly lighted sky was like a house in the middle of the night, so quiet the children could hear the faint spitting sound made by Zip-Zip's pocket rocket.

"Say, what about *your* father, Zip-Zip?" said Randy. "Did those observer guys tell you where to find him on Venus?"

Zip-Zip hesitated before answering. "Yes and no," he said, sounding a little sad. Then he explained.

When he had left the Riddles after the trip to Chicago, he had flown his saucer to the Martian observation post over Philadelphia. There he had met the Martian observers, including the one who had given him news of his father over the cosmic-phone. Again they had not seemed very pleased that he had come to the planet Earth. But when he had asked them for more information about his missing father, they had suddenly become kind and understanding.

"They told me I had to be brave," continued Zip-Zip. "They handed me two official Lafonee ZIP cosmic bulletins. The first read: *Observation Post Bombay—Picked up weak ZIP radio message from area FX74—Operator claimed to be on Venus—Identified himself ZIP as Lapodoxtromeldee, mineralogist, Atomic Energy Expedition C2—Reported ship crashed on ZIP Venusian desert, with all other members of party killed by break in atomic feeder line—Was ZIP giving approximate position when radio contact was broken.*"

"Did it mean that was your father?" inquired Randy.

"Yes," answered Zip-Zip. "Lapodoxtromeldee is my father's name, and he is a ZIP mineralogist. He knows all about minerals."

"What did the second bulletin say?" asked Tom from his position behind Randy. "That first one didn't sound good."

"The second said no further radio contact had been made with my father . . . maybe ZIP he was a prisoner

of the Venusians. This was reported to the Supreme Council, the leaders on my planet."

"Gosh," said Randy, "that's awful."

"I guess you don't feel so good," said Tom, speaking to Zip-Zip.

"Do you still want to go to Venus?"

"Oh yes, Randy," said Zip-Zip promptly. "I did not say I believed all that was in the bulletins. I think my father is ZIP safe. He is clever and strong. I think his radio just stopped working."

"Yeah," said Randy, "that could be," but in his mind he was very doubtful. He was thinking how hard it would be to find Zip-Zip's father on a strange planet—even if he were alive.

Now Zip-Zip called out that the old farm was below. He pointed the pocket-rocket jet against their line of flight. They stopped moving, and he turned off the rocket. Soon they were standing on solid ground again. Not far away the broken-down barn and other outbuildings of the abandoned farm rose up against the starry sky, looking larger than they actually were. Here the children had first met Zip-Zip.

"I guess you have the saucer in the ground again," said Randy.

"Yes. I used the E-beams to hide it," said Zip-Zip. He led the Riddles across the tangled field in which they had landed. The shrill night songs of crickets and spring peepers filled the darkness; high weeds scratched at their

blue jeans like claws; and in the distance a dog howled. But they were not afraid. Just the faint gleam of moonlight on Zip-Zip's silver spacesuit gave them confidence. The weeds disappeared and they felt soft earth under their feet.

Randy could not conceal his excitement. "We're walking right over the flying saucer!"

"How do you know?" asked Sparky.

"The ground," said Randy briefly.

"Randy is right," said Zip-Zip. "My saucer *is* buried here." He had stopped at what appeared to be a large bush. As the Riddles caught up to him, he took hold of it and it collapsed and revealed a mysterious metal cone sticking out of the ground. It was the top of his saucer, or what he called the hatch. He pushed on the cone and it tipped over on its side. Light from a round opening shone on the children's faces.

"This is exciting," said Sparky. "Better than in the daytime."

"Be careful going down the ladder," was all Zip-Zip said.

Eagerly the Riddles followed him down the familiar metal ladder to the floor of the circular air lock and through the oval doorway into the control cabin. Zip-Zip asked for and received the PG-neutralizers. "Excuse me for rushing," he said politely. "I am very anxious to get started."

"The sooner the better," said Randy as he and the

others re-examined the strange three-sided room where only a few weeks before they had shared many thrilling experiences. Sunk into the walls on each side of the entrance were the cozy double bunks and the storage lockers from which the boy from Mars pulled his unusual inventions. The ceiling—a triangle of light overhead—curved down in front of the instrument panel and control seat to form the third side of the room. Zip-Zip was already on the broad, upholstered control seat.

“Everything looks the same,” Tom remarked.

Bonnie agreed and took time to feel the bunks to see how soft they were.

“Hey, Tom,” Randy said, “do you remember how you and Sparky and me fell down the ladder in the air lock?”

“Do I?” said Tom. “Those state troopers were practically breathing down our necks.”

“’Course we hadn’t broken any laws, but I hate to think of what would have happened to us if they’d caught us.” Randy threw a sidewise glance at Sparky. “And it would have been all Sparky’s fault if they had.”

“You’re crazy!” snapped the smallest Riddle. “Could I help it if that dog licked in my ear? You’d yell too.”

“Phew! I’m hot,” said Tom. He peeled off his jacket.

“Same here,” said Sparky. “And this bag is getting heavy.”

“Well, put it down, Dopey,” sighed Randy.

Sparky grunted and stubbornly held onto the beach bag. When Randy wasn’t looking he set it on the floor.

Bonnie, meantime, had asked where they could put their jackets. Zip-Zip showed her an empty locker. Then he banged shut the air-lock door, and instructed the children to sit on the control seat and fasten their flight belts. Fortunately everyone wanted his old position, so there were no arguments. Bonnie and Sparky plopped down on Zip-Zip's left, and Randy and Tom on his right.

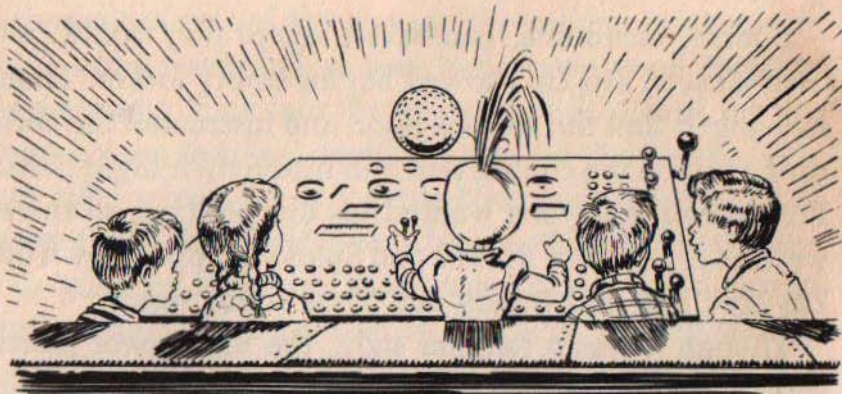
Though it was a familiar sight, the instrument panel spread out under Zip-Zip's busy hands attracted their eyes like a flashy neon sign. It was slanted like a school desk and was supported by a thick metal tube that shot out of the floor. Spread across its face were several lighted dials and row on row of colored buttons and levers. (The colors reminded Zip-Zip what each button and lever was for.) And, of course, no one could miss the cosmic-phone, that funny silver ball peppered with tiny holes, that seemed to be balanced on the upper edge of the panel.

Randy turned to Zip-Zip. "Are we going straight to Venus?" he asked.

Zip-Zip's hand hovered over the instrument panel, then struck a green button. "There," he said. "I've cut off all lateral thrust, and we *are* ready, Randy, to go straight ZIP to Venus. I've charted our course, and we should take off in four minutes if we ZIP are going to follow my original time fixes."

"I don't see a chart," said Tom. "Where do you keep it?"

Zip-Zip's big eyes looked into Tom's. "In my head,"



he said simply. "I meant that I've worked out acceleration and ZIP deceleration periods for meeting Venus in about thirty hours."

"Ax-seller-what?" said Sparky.

"Acceleration!" said Randy impatiently. "It means to go faster. Don't be asking questions all the time."

"Oh, that's all right," said Zip-Zip quickly. "Ask all the questions you want. I'll have to be on my toes ZIP the first fifteen minutes of the flight. But after that, after we've escaped from Earth ZIP my job will be routine timing of acceleration and deceleration, and we'll have ZIP plenty of time to talk."

Randy's small nose wrinkled up. "How's that? Don't you have to steer and watch your instruments?"

"I observe the speed and power output indicators, but I let the automatic pilot ZIP do the steering on long flights. It takes care of gravitational drift ZIP better than I can myself."

"What about meteors?" asked Randy. On television he remembered that Space Explorers often had to dodge streams of meteors.

"There is little danger from meteors, Randy. Meteoric dust vaporizes on impact with the ZIP hull of a spaceship, and on a trip from Earth to Venus the chance ZIP of our colliding with a large meteor is one in a million. ZIP However, running on automatic pilot is still the safest. If a meteor is large enough ZIP to be picked up on the detecto-scope, the automatic pilot ZIP will guide the ship out of danger. You remember I told you the detecto-scope is like your radar."

"Say, that's O.K.!" said Randy, his eyes doing an imitation of two stars.

Bonnie sighed deeply. "Venus! Honestly, if I weren't sitting in a flying saucer, I wouldn't believe it was possible to fly to a planet I can hardly see."

Zip-Zip admitted that the wonder of space travel would never cease to impress him. Then he carefully wrapped his hand around a red lever, larger than the others, and slowly pushed it forward. A thrill of power ran through the saucer, and the Riddles sensed they were moving.

"Are we taking off?" asked Randy.

"No, not yet," answered Zip-Zip. "I'm raising the saucer above ground. It would be risky ZIP to blast off from underground—trapped heat might melt the rocket exhaust tubes."

"Oh," said Randy, admiration for the boy from Mars written across his face. He thought: *I'm glad Zip-Zip is my friend. I'm glad he's flying this spaceship.*

Zip-Zip had shut off the atomic generator. Now he pushed down an orange button and a white button as if he were punching the keys of a typewriter. Overhead the ceiling stopped glowing and the cabin went dark, and the wall before the control seat was no longer a wall. Zip-Zip had turned on the magnivisor, a device that magnified the spaces between the atoms of the apparently solid metal and made it easier to see through than glass. As the Riddles' eyes grew used to the darkness, they saw that they were indeed in the open. There above the black line of the horizon were the friendly, twinkling stars.

"I shall have to delay take-off time," complained Zip-Zip.

Randy watched the lights of the instrument panel reflected in Zip-Zip's eyes. "Something the matter?" he asked.

"Not really. The detecto-scope indicates a plane is approaching this area ZIP and I want to make sure it doesn't see our rocket trail."

"Good idea," remarked Tom. "I remember what those observer guys told you."

"That reminds me of something," said Randy. "Did those men you stayed with, those men over Philadelphia, did they tell you anything about Venus? You know, what it looks like and stuff."

"They did," said Zip-Zip. "I can't tell you everything they told me now. But ZIP one thing, I thought, was very important."

"What?"

"There are two kinds of Venusians. Civilized and uncivilized."

"Yeah!" said Randy, his voice husky with excitement.

Tom and Bonnie strained against their flight belts to see Zip-Zip.

"The civilized Venusians live entirely below the surface of the planet ZIP in an area that is now desert and where the wind never stops blowing."

"You mean," said Bonnie, "their houses are under the ground?"

"No. Their *cities* are underground ZIP and most of the people never leave them."

"They're like ants," said Tom, "but even ants don't stay in the ground."

"I don't believe it," mumbled Sparky, then, apparently changing his mind, he asked, "What are they afraid of?"

"Oh, it's not that the Venusians are afraid," replied Zip-Zip. "They can't live on the surface of the ZIP planet because of the storms and the sand."

"Were the observers ever in a Venusian city?" asked Randy.

Zip-Zip rolled his eyes thoughtfully. "I don't know. They told me how our early explorers examined Venus as well ZIP as Earth. It was on account of the Venusians'

secretive life that the Supreme Council ZIP decided to study only the ways of your Earth. All you can see of Venusian cities ZIP are flat domes rising out of the sand. The large ones look like great windows ZIP and the small ones have ports, or doors, in them, which are little used by the Venusians."

"Goll-ee," said Bonnie, "it's a wonder they don't get tired of being cooped up."

Randy's mind was racing on ahead. "Where do the other people live?" he said.

"The uncivilized Venusians? Oh, they live in the swamps. Mountains divide the swamps ZIP from the desert." Zip-Zip stroked his yellow plume with an easy air. "You don't need to worry about meeting the wild people. ZIP We'll be landing in the desert. That's where my father's saucer crashed, and ZIP that's where we'll begin searching for him."

"If we see any wild men," drawled Sparky, "I'll tie 'em up with my las-sue." He pulled his rope from under his shirt and tried to wrap it around Bonnie's hands.

Bonnie pushed it aside, frowning. "Don't be foolish, Sparky," she scoffed. "And it's not 'las-sue,' it's 'lasso.'"

"If you saw a wild man," said Randy, "you'd run so fast you'd lose your shoes."

Everyone but Sparky had a good laugh.

When the children had quieted down, Zip-Zip noted that they were close to take-off time. The plane had

passed, and for a safe distance around them the air was clear.

"Now," Zip-Zip went on, "all of you, listen carefully. What I'm going to tell you ZIP will help make you good space travelers."

"We're listening," said Tom.

"First, I want you to remember to relax when we begin accelerating. Don't fight the ZIP force that pushes you into the seat. When I shut off the rockets and we coast ZIP you will feel the same as you did using the PG-neutralizers—light as air. ZIP But since you didn't get sick then, I guess you'll be all right. Just keep your ZIP flight belts buckled."

Randy laughed. "I know what you mean. If we don't keep them buckled, we'll float up to the ceiling."

"That's about right, Randy," said Zip-Zip. "Oh—just one more thing. You and I—and I mean all of you ZIP—must constantly be alert while we're in space. We must be on the lookout for *danger*."

"Let's go!" called out Sparky.

Zip-Zip was annoyed and showed it. "Please remember what I've told you," he said.

"We will," promised Randy, adding, "My brother thinks he's funny."

Zip-Zip appeared satisfied. "Hatch locked, air lock sealed, all vertical tubes open," he droned. Then, gripping the red power lever, he said, "Five seconds to go."

Remember, relax!" Slowly he moved the power lever forward.

The flying saucer trembled. A faint hissing sound penetrated the cabin. The stars seemed to move. Zip-Zip nudged the power lever. There was a slight jolt, and the Riddles felt their bodies being pressed back into the soft seat.

"Three thousand miles per hour," Zip-Zip murmured a little later. He yanked back the red lever. Bonnie cried out. They were coasting once more, and everyone was weightless and felt as if he were falling. Randy was getting used to the strange light feeling in his stomach. However, he wasn't sure he liked it. It made him feel uneasy, kind of homeless.

Again Zip-Zip cut in the electro-atomic rockets. And again the Riddles became aware of their bodies, feeling them grow heavier than they had ever felt before.

I must weigh a ton, thought Randy. From the side he watched Zip-Zip's strained face and wondered when he would return to coasting. Zip-Zip had a determined glint in his big eyes, and he was still inching the power lever forward. Randy tried to concentrate on the stars, but somehow they didn't seem important. He became aware of an ache in his chest, and black spots swam before his eyes.

"Help," he gasped. "I can't breathe. . . ."

Quick as a cat Zip-Zip killed the rockets. "Are you all right, Randy?" he cried.

Randy was biting at the air like a fish. "I guess so," he managed to say.

"And the ZIP rest of you?"

"I started to feel light-headed," admitted Tom.

Bonnie smiled proudly. "Well, I didn't mind a thing. Boys can't take it."

"I took it!" bragged Sparky. "I like to feel funny."

"This," said Zip-Zip seriously, "is what I meant when I spoke of danger. It seems that you can't stand the strain I can. ZIP I shall have to accelerate at a slower rate, and for shorter periods. But don't ZIP worry about it. We'll get to Venus."

On Earth Mr. and Mrs. Riddle sat in their kitchen, talking. After the children had been lifted into the night by the PG-neutralizers, they had waited in the yard, hoping to catch a glimpse of flaring rockets as the saucer took off. Finally they had given up their vigil and gone indoors.

"You don't think we made a mistake, Ralph?" said Mrs. Riddle.

Mr. Riddle shook his head, gulped the last of a cup of steaming, black coffee, and sighed deeply.

"So!" said Mrs. Riddle. "You *are* sorry we let them go."

"Not on your life! I'm just sorry I didn't go with them."

The silver saucer steadily streaked into space, tongues

of blue flame shooting from its broad underside. It was as lonely as a toy boat on an ocean. In the snug cabin Zip-Zip called on the almost unlimited power stored in the atomic generator and pushed the tabulator of the speed indicator past the 80,000-miles-per-hour mark. The Earth's atmosphere—that deep ocean of air covering the planet—was left far behind.

“How do you feel now?” Zip-Zip asked Randy.

“O.K. I see what you mean about having lots of time to talk.”

“Yes, an interplanetary ZIP trip can be pretty dull.”

“Oh, I don't think it's dull.”

“I think it's thrilling,” said Bonnie. She held her blond hair off her oval face as she peered around Sparky. “But why don't the stars look like stars? They're so much brighter, yet they look round.”

“When are we gonna pass one?” blurted Sparky.

Zip-Zip grinned. “We shall pass only one star, the one you call the Sun. And Bonnie is right. The stars ZIP are round. They are enormous atomic fires like the Sun. When you see them ZIP from Earth, they seem to twinkle, to have points on them because of the atmosphere. ZIP Looking at stars through air is like trying to see what the bottom of a ZIP pond looks like when wind is rippling the surface of the pond.”

“Gee whizz,” said Sparky unhappily, “I thought we was going to Venus.”

“*We were* going to Venus,” corrected Bonnie.

Tom straightened up. "Why aren't we going?" he asked.

"Who said we aren't going?" demanded Randy.

Zip-Zip looked puzzled.

"Bonnie just said so," replied Tom.

"I did not," said Bonnie. She made a little gasping sound and giggled. "I know what happened. I was correcting Sparky's English, and you thought—"

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" said Randy. "All that because you got to play teacher."

Zip-Zip put his hand on Sparky's knee. "Sparky, what makes you think we're not going to Venus?"

"Well, how can we get to Venus if we don't pass any stars but the Sun?"

"I understand," laughed the boy from Mars. "Sparky, the only star inside the solar system is the Sun, at its center. Right now ZIP Venus is moving in its orbit on the other side of the Sun, nearly opposite the Earth ZIP so we'll be passing the Sun, though at a distance of about thirty million miles. The nearest star ZIP outside the solar system is twenty-six trillion miles away."

"Twenty-six *trillion!*" said Tom almost doubtfully.

Sparky didn't seem impressed. "What's solar system mean?"

"I know that," boasted Randy. "The solar system is the Sun and the planets."

Zip-Zip nodded. "Solar," he said, meant that the system was the Sun's system. The nine large planets with their

thirty-one satellites, the thousands of small planets called asteroids, and the comets and meteors were bodies held in their orbits around the Sun by its gravitational attraction. Their destination, Venus, was the second planet from the Sun. "At the present time," concluded Zip-Zip, "Venus is about 140 million miles from the Earth."

"What does orbit mean?" asked Bonnie. "I think I know, but I'm not quite sure."

Tom hee-hawed and accused Bonnie of pretending to be smart.

"I thought you knew what an orbit is," said Zip-Zip. "Orbit is simply the name ZIP for the path followed by a spatial body."

"What kind of body?" inquired Sparky.

"Spatial body—a body in outer space. Planets, satellites, comets, stars are spatial bodies. They all ZIP follow a regular path like a racer going around a track. Your satellite, the Moon, races ZIP around your planet Earth. The Earth races around the Sun. And the Sun races ZIP around the center of our galaxy, which is a huge family of stars drifting through space. ZIP Each body, you see, has its regular orbit."

"Oh, sure," ridiculed Randy, "Bonnie knew that! Sure!"

Sparky saw a chance to get even with his sister for correcting him. "She can't *spell* orbit," he snorted.

"She's so smart she thinks eyeball's a game!" threw in Tom, and he poked Randy in the ribs, and all three Riddle brothers doubled up with laughter.

Zip-Zip was far from pleased. "I don't know what is so funny," he said, "but I must remind you that while we're ZIP on this trip we must stick together. Arguments can cause accidents."

"Yes, why don't you boys grow up?" There was no doubt that Bonnie was angry.

"All right," said Randy. "Anyway, we were just kidding. We'll behave, Zip-Zip."

The expression of the boy from Mars softened. Turning his attention to his instruments, he struck three blue buttons, pushed forward the red power lever, paused a second, and struck the fourth blue button and several green ones. Once more the children were pressed back into the control seat as the saucer picked up speed, and a large white crescent slid across the magnivisor window. It was a blinding sight.

"I'm using the lateral rockets now," explained Zip-Zip. "I can maneuver with them. As soon as we pass the ZIP Moon I'll fix our course and throw the saucer on automatic pilot."

A murmur of excitement had come from the Riddles. Was that the Moon ahead, they wanted to know.

Zip-Zip replied that it was.

Tom rubbed his eyes. "Gee, it's bright—and rough looking."

Randy grunted in agreement. "You can see its whole shape from here. Even that part the Sun isn't shining on."

"Someone dug an awful lot of holes," observed Sparky.



"Those are natural craters," said Zip-Zip. "No one dug them. The Moon is a dead world."

"Where's our Earth?" asked Bonnie.

Zip-Zip silently worked the controls. The Moon moved out of view. The stars again became bright and crisp in the darkness of space; but only for a moment. Another "Moon," a "half-moon" of breath-taking size and beauty, appeared in the distance.

"The world down there!" said Bonnie finally.

"Yes," said Zip-Zip; "but, Bonnie, you must remember 'up' and 'down' don't exist in space. There is up ZIP and down only *on* a planet because of gravity."

Randy was more interested in what he was seeing than in what Zip-Zip was saying. "You can tell what's water because it's blue. But the land sure is faint looking—green and sort of yellow. What part of the Earth is that, Zip-Zip?"

"Asia and——"

"Australia!" cried Bonnie. "I recognized it right away."

Tom chuckled. "Guess I'm dumb, but I don't understand why the Earth looks like a curved moon, instead of like a ball."

"Because, as Randy suggested, we are seeing only about half of the illuminated side of the Earth. ZIP If we flew directly between the Sun and the Earth, we'd see a disk like the full moon."

"What's that white stuff?" clamored Sparky.

"Clouds," said Randy.

"No, the shiny stuff!"

"He," put in Tom, "means the stuff at the top. Gee, I wonder if that is the top if there is no up and down."

"Sparky, I believe you're looking at the ZIP icecap at the north pole."

Sparky tried to whistle. "Santa Claus!" he said to himself.

"Where's Raleigh Park?" asked Bonnie.

"That's in shadow," answered Zip-Zip. "It's night there."

"Oh, of course. It was night when we left."

Randy spoke out. "Say, the Earth's getting smaller, but how can that be?"

"I know what you're thinking, Randy," said Zip-Zip. "I decreased acceleration and rotated the saucer. Now the ZIP lateral rockets on this side of the saucer are pushing us. We're moving away from the Earth ZIP while facing it. Haven't any of you noticed how your flight belt is pressing against your chest?"

It seemed that no one had. There was too much to see.

Zip-Zip then announced that he would have to return to normal flight. Scarcely was the cold white light of the Moon again flooding the inside of the cabin when Randy appealed to Zip-Zip to land on the barren satellite. Could they land and walk around on the Moon—if they were careful—if they promised to stick together—could they?

Very gently Zip-Zip pointed out that it would be better if they did not. They had a long way to go to reach Venus, he said, and he wanted to find his father as quickly as possible.

"Believe me," said Tom, "it won't be easy to find him either."

"I do hope he's all right," said Bonnie.

Zip-Zip changed the subject. It was plain that he was not as certain of his father's well-being as he pretended. "You'll get a good view of the Moon ZIP before I cut around the bright side——"

Sparky shrieked at the top of his strong lungs. "Look at my rope!"

Everyone jumped in surprise. Randy stuck his head around Zip-Zip and told Sparky to "pipe down."

"Look at my rope, my rope!" Sparky babbled on. "It's alive!"

When Zip-Zip had rotated the saucer, one end of Sparky's lasso had slipped from under his shirt, where he had concealed it. Now that end was sticking up in the air very much like the head of a snake.

The idea that the rope was alive became too much for Sparky. He drummed his feet against the control seat. "Kill it!" he shrieked. "It's crawlin' around my belly!"

Zip-Zip was probably the only one who knew what was really happening. They were coasting, so there was no gravity, and everything in the cabin was weightless.

Even an iron ball would have floated in the air. But before Zip-Zip could speak, Bonnie struck at the weaving rope. It wiggled through the air and caught on the instrument panel.

"Now see what you've done!" said Randy. He made a grab for the rope.

"Don't touch it," warned Zip-Zip. Again he was too late. Randy pulled on the rope and, without thinking, pushed a lever out of the way. The rope jammed between the lever and the panel, and held tight. Randy yanked on it. Zip-Zip quickly put his hand on Randy's. "Let me free the rope," he said calmly. When both the rope and the lever failed to move, Zip-Zip's manner changed. His large eyes grew shiny with worry.

Randy said, "Gosh, I'm sorry."

Bonnie asked what the trouble was, but she received no answer.

"That old Moon is getting bigger and bigger," said Tom.

"Don't I know it," breathed Zip-Zip, and he made another desperate attempt to move the jammed lever. He straightened up. "Randy!" he said sharply. "We must get that lever back in place. If we don't, we may ZIP crash on the Moon."

The children stared at each other, mouths open.

"It's true. You put us on automatic pilot, Randy. I can't change our course. ZIP The Moon is moving into our path, and I'm not sure I can brake against our ZIP

present speed of 220,000 miles per hour. *We must free this lever!*" He gripped it with both hands, pushing then pulling, trying to get the rope out of the way.

Now the Moon nearly filled the magnivisor window. At sixty miles per second the saucer was hurtling toward the shadowed part of it, lighted only by earthshine.

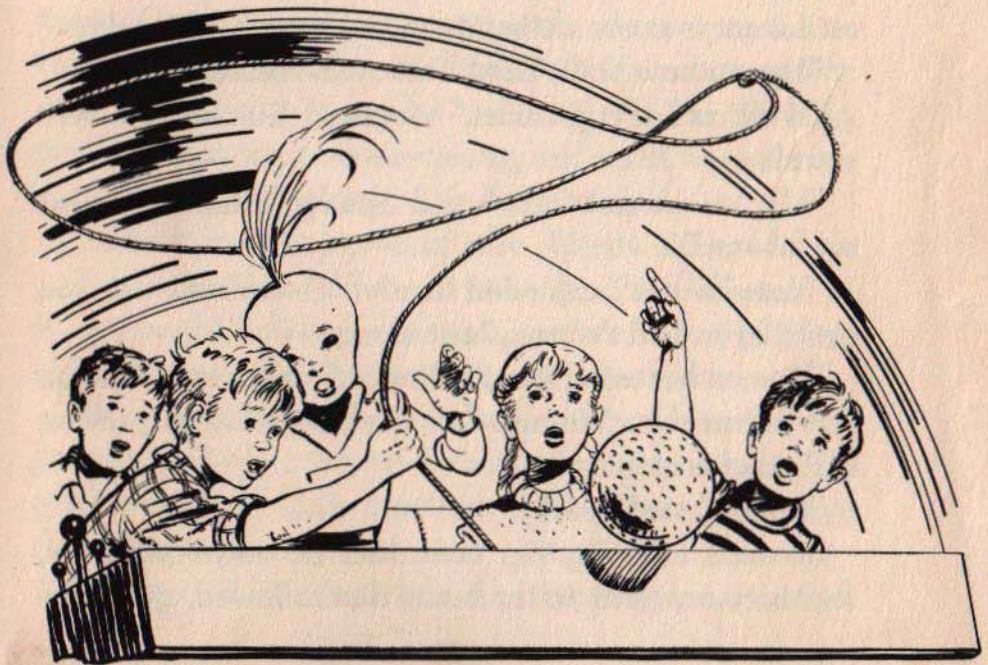
"Can't budge it," gasped Zip-Zip. "I must sacrifice our velocity build-up and brake ZIP before it is too late."

"Hold it!" said Randy. "Try this!" He held up a pocket knife for Zip-Zip to see.

"What is it?"

"A knife. Here, I'll try to cut away the rope."

Randy sawed at the rope close to the lever.



"Is it cutting?" asked Tom.

"Hurry!" said Zip-Zip. "Every second counts—I—I'll give you three more seconds—"

Randy gave a triumphant cry and held up part of the rope. "I cut it!"

Zip-Zip pulled on the automatic pilot lever. It struck the back of its slot with the ring of metal on metal, and the rest of the rope fell to the floor.

"Free!" exclaimed Zip-Zip. "The rocket system is unlocked." His hands were mere blurs over the instrument panel. The saucer veered sharply to the right in a tight arc. Through the magnivisor window the children had a glimpse of a ponderous dead world. Then it was gone.

Randy was first to speak. "That," he said, "is the closest I want to come to the Moon in a month of Sundays."

"You and me both," said Tom with feeling.

"Well, nobody got hurt," ventured Bonnie in a wee voice.

"My las-sue got hurt," said Sparky. "Randy spoiled my las-sue."

"*Your las-sue!*" exploded Randy. "How dumb can you get? If you hadn't brought it along—"

"Remember what I said, Randy," cautioned Zip-Zip. "No arguments. We must all work together to prevent ZIP other accidents."

"Roger," said Sparky.

Seconds later Zip-Zip consulted his astro-navigator, set his course, and, in the hours that followed, gradually

accelerated to the fabulous speed of five million miles per hour. The Riddles could hardly believe Zip-Zip when he told them how fast they were going. It seemed impossible to be traveling fourteen hundred miles every second. When they weren't accelerating, they did not even feel they were moving. The ride was perfectly smooth at all times, and nothing was near enough for them to judge their speed. The nearest spatial body framed in the magnivisor window was Venus itself, and it still looked like just a bright star.

Randy felt very small. He was like the tiniest germ, he thought. He hardly amounted to a thing. A while ago, when Bonnie had asked Zip-Zip whether he had a compass, Zip-Zip had said that a compass was useless in space. On a planet a compass needle always pointed to the planet's magnetic pole, but space had no magnetic pole. Traveling in space, he had said, was like traveling inside a room whose floor, ceiling, and walls were always out of sight. Space seemed to have no end.

Without exactly knowing why, Randy shivered.

Tom noticed it. "What are ya shaking for?" he said as if he thought Randy was afraid. "It's not cold. The Sun's still out there. Remember how hot it looked."

Randy remembered a blinding, nearly white disk impossible to look at for more than a split second, and he pressed his lips tightly together. It took courage to brave the dangers of space.

Bonnie said, "It's just right—the temperature, I mean."

She paused. "I suppose it isn't like this outside the saucer."

"It's awful cold in space," said Randy. He felt better when he talked.

"I'll bet it's hot," said Tom, "if we're getting closer to the Sun."

"Well, who's right?" asked Bonnie.

"They are both right," said Zip-Zip. "We are less than eighty million miles from the Sun. At this distance ZIP the side of the saucer the Sun is shining on would be hotter than boiling water ZIP if it weren't for the electronic temperature control system. But the side turned away ZIP from the Sun would be colder than you can imagine. Probably four hundred degrees ZIP below zero. Almost as cold as anything can get."

"Freeze on one side and cook on the other!" said Tom.

"Could that happen to us?" asked Bonnie, worried.

Zip-Zip replied with a quick no, explaining that a small portion of the heat created by the atomic generator was used both to heat and refrigerate the hull, and to keep the inside of the saucer at an even temperature. They really were quite safe.

Bonnie drew her hand across her mouth. "I'm glad," she yawned.

"Oh, I forgot you might be getting tired," said Zip-Zip. "You may lie down in a bunk if you like."

"Look here," Bonnie whispered. "Sparky's sleeping already."

Tom sniffed. "I wondered why he was so quiet."

"Don't wake him," said Randy. "He'll want to eat."

"That is another thing I forgot," muttered Zip-Zip. He turned on the ceiling light and felt under the seat. When he withdrew his hand, he was holding what appeared to be two metal sandals. "Magnetic shoes," he grunted as he pulled them over his other shoes. "They stick to the deck, the floor—allow you to walk ZIP while in free flight." Then he went to the rear of the cabin and fished around in one of the lockers. He returned to the control seat carrying a plastic container. He opened it and held it out to Tom. "Randy reminded me of these," he said.

"I did?"

"Yes. Take a few. Don't jar the box or they'll all float into the air."

"Marbles!" exclaimed Tom.

Sparky woke up with the energy of a jack-in-the-box. "Are we on Venus?" he cried out.

"No." Zip-Zip laughed musically. "I'm serving lunch."

Randy's eyebrows raised. "This is food?" he said.

"Yes. It is the best thing for space travel. These ball-shaped capsules are filled with ZIP water. The outer shell is a concentrated food. You bite the shell for the water ZIP and then eat the shell." Zip-Zip popped a capsule into his mouth and ate it. "When you are in free flight—as we are now—water ZIP can't be poured, because like everything else it has no weight. Gravity

rides inside the ZIP saucer only when the rockets are working."

"Traveling in space," said Randy with a shake of his head, "sure is complicated."

"More complicated than you imagine," said Zip-Zip. "For instance, the Bandulex breather ZIP runs constantly, yet you seldom think about it."

"What a funny name," remarked Bonnie. "Ban-du-lex breather."

"Bandulex is the name of the man who invented the ZIP breather."

"What's it do besides breathe?" asked Sparky.

Zip-Zip tried to keep a straight face. "The breather, Sparky, makes it possible for *us* to breathe."

"I thought so," said Randy, "but I didn't say it."

"Oh, listen to him," groaned Tom. "You're as bad as Bonnie—making believe you know stuff."

"Who's makin' believe? I bet the breather makes oxygen."

"That's right, Randy," said Zip-Zip.

"Seel!" said Randy, pushing his face in Tom's.

"And," continued Zip-Zip, "the breather also removes troublesome carbon dioxide from the ZIP air and keeps the air moving, which is very important. If the air ZIP were not kept moving during free flight, the carbon dioxide you exhale would ZIP gather in an invisible

cloud around your head and you'd drown in it the same as in water."

Now it was Tom's turn to snap at Randy. "See, yourself! You didn't know that!"

The hours slipped by and the four Riddles became used to the life aboard a flying saucer. Since time was not divided into night and day, but was just one long night, they slept when they were tired and ate when Zip-Zip handed around his food-water capsules. When they were not eating or sleeping, they either talked about the job of finding Zip-Zip's father or made a game of floating things in the air of their artificial little world. At the mid-point of their journey they hit eleven million miles per hour, but after that Zip-Zip gradually decelerated. During deceleration they felt just as heavy as when they were accelerating because the rockets were operating.

Following one of his short naps on the control seat, Zip-Zip called out, "Look, everyone. Look at Venus now."

Randy climbed out of a lower bunk and clattered across the deck in his magnetic shoes. He saw it before he reached the control seat—a lemon-yellow disk about the size of a full moon. This was Venus! Not a dead world like the Moon, but a world holding strange people, strange animals, and, best of all, strange adventures.

With the Riddles once more in their seats, Zip-Zip

continued deceleration, blasting batteries of lateral rockets ringing the forward part of the saucer. He said that they would be flying in Venus' lower atmosphere in less than two hours. In that time they had to reduce their velocity from two million to less than ten thousand miles per hour. If they didn't, the saucer would burn up like a meteor because of the friction caused by the atmosphere, and not even the electronic temperature control system would be able to save them.

Randy noticed that the shining disk of Venus was growing larger. If he watched it closely, he could actually see it growing. For the first time since the saucer had left the region of the Moon, he had a visual sense of movement.

"My flight schedule is working out perfectly," Zip-Zip declared after a long silence. "We shall intercept Venus with only the ZIP slightest correction of our course—138 million miles from our starting point." He turned to Randy. "Just think ZIP in a few minutes we'll be seeing a new planet, a new horizon."

"Jeepers! I can hardly——" Randy's voice trailed off. He looked at the boy with no ears as if he didn't recognize him. What was the matter with Zip-Zip, he thought. Why did he say they'd be seeing Venus in a few minutes when they were looking right at it? Didn't make sense. "Do you know what you just said, Zip-Zip?" asked Randy.

Zip-Zip hesitated, then answered slowly, "I think so. Why?"

Randy explained, and his explanation brought a smile to Zip-Zip's lips.

"I didn't mean to confuse you. We see Venus and yet we don't see it." Zip-Zip motioned casually. "Take another look ZIP at *Venus*."

Randy took another look, squinting because of the brightness. Why couldn't he see Venus? There it was. It was even growing larger. Just like a big ball of cotton, and kind of yellow. Suddenly an idea struck him. "Oh, I get it. Yeah! That's not the ground I see. That's all clouds."

"Right," said Zip-Zip. "Venus is entirely covered by clouds. They never go away, so we really ZIP can't see the planet itself."

"What'll they think of next?" said Sparky.

Randy wanted to know why Venus had more clouds than the Earth did.

Zip-Zip admitted that he didn't know. He did know, however, that Venus was the only planet close to the Sun with so many clouds.

Randy raised his eyes in time to see the fuzzy outer edge of Venus meet both sides of the magnivisor window. The whole universe seemed wrapped in dazzling clouds.

Zip-Zip soon changed this picture. Quickly he shut off the lateral rockets and fought against the gravity of the hidden planet with the ring of rockets on the underside of the saucer. As the saucer nosed up, the Riddles

saw the clouds sweep under them and spread out in a wide ocean of pale yellow billows that shone in the sunlight.

"Look!" cried Tom. "Green sky!"

"Venus has a sky because it has an atmosphere," said Zip-Zip. "Its gravity also gives it an 'up' and 'down.' ZIP That is why I changed the plane of the saucer. We are now in a position to land."

"Hey!" exclaimed Sparky. "What happened?"

Without warning the cabin had been plunged into near darkness.

"Don't be frightened," said Zip-Zip cheerfully. "We're passing through the cloud layer, that's all. A few more ZIP miles and we shall see the surface of Venus. Hold your breath!"

Time seemed to stand still. The children strained their eyes to see through the vapor streaming past the magnifying window. When would the clouds break? What would they see that first glance?

"I can't hold my breath any more!" puffed Sparky.

"Oh, brother!" said Tom as he stared straight ahead.

"We shoulda left him at home. He's——"

"It's getting brighter!" broke in Bonnie.

"The clouds are thinning," said Zip-Zip tensely.

Randy was so eager he was in a kind of trance.

"Here she comes," said Tom.

"I see land!" cried Sparky.

Venus suddenly revealed its true face. The children

had a glimpse of wild country drenched in hazy yellow light; but only a glimpse. A wall of colored stone cut off the view, and before Zip-Zip could move a hand, an explosion seemed to rock the saucer and the children were bounced around like rag dolls. The saucer had grazed a mountain and taken a sideways course. Like an airplane out of control, it wobbled toward the ground, gathering speed.

Randy was the first to recover from the shock. He shook Zip-Zip. "Wake up! We're falling!"

The boy from Mars straightened his antennas, looked at the instrument panel. "No wonder!" he cried. "Power's almost off!" He started to reach for the red lever. There was a rapid series of sharp cracking noises, followed by another jolt that shook the saucer from top to bottom and knocked the wind out of everyone. The cabin went dark and all was quiet.

Finally from out of the darkness a tiny voice said, "What happened?"

"We—we have landed on Venus," came Zip-Zip's reply.

The ceiling light blazed on. The children looked at one another. They were tilted forward in the control seat, the deck at an angle. A green curtain appeared to have been drawn over the magnivisor window.

"Boy, and how we landed on Venus," said Tom, rubbing his chest where the flight belt gripped him.

"I'm sorry," sighed Zip-Zip. "I've made a mess of things."

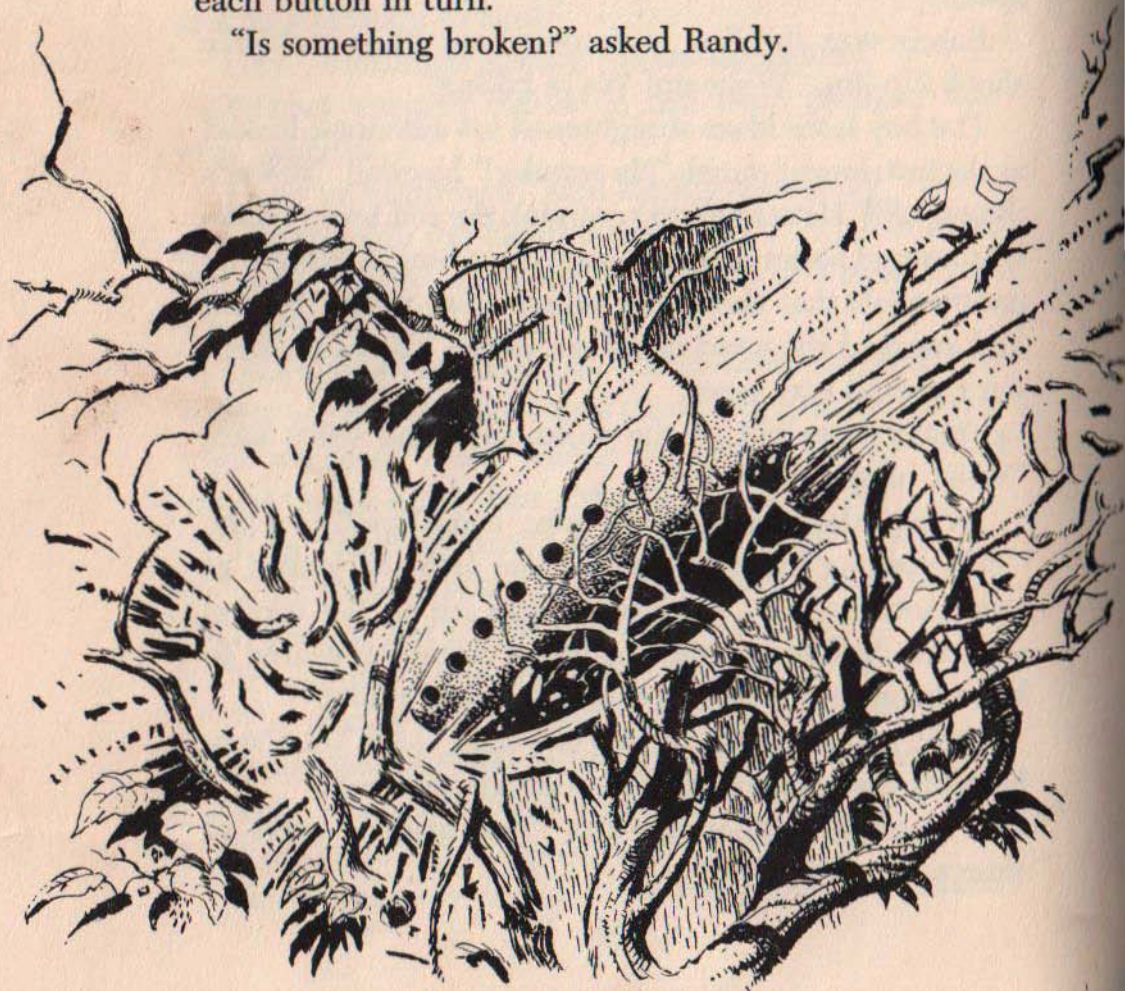
"Nobody coulda done better," said Randy loyally.

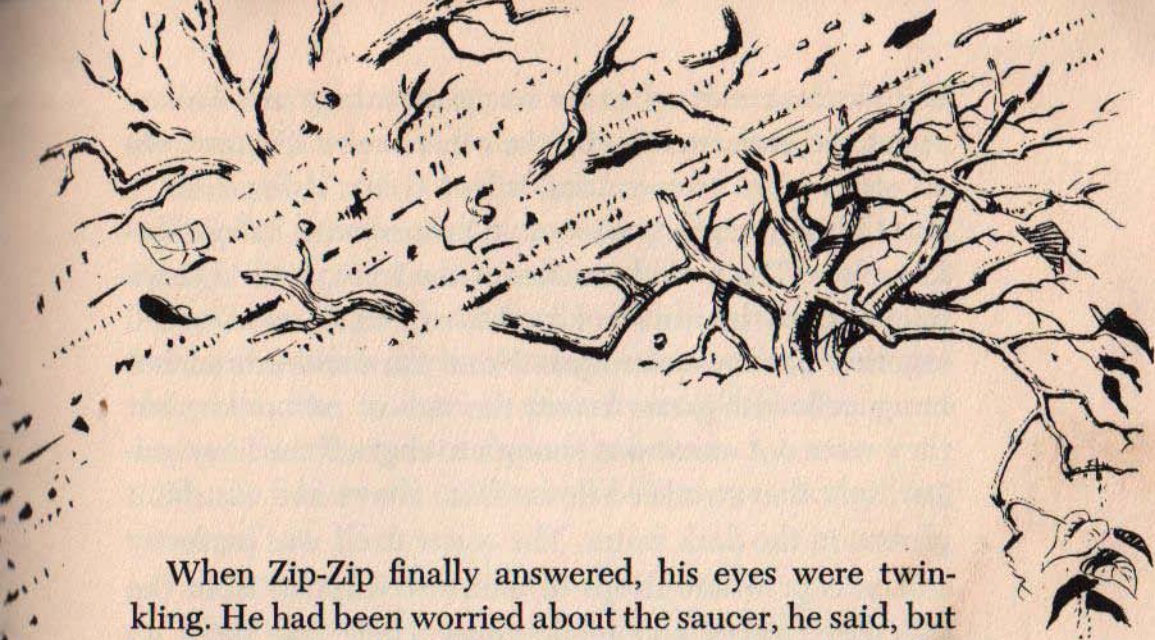
"Well, let's get untied," said Sparky. "I wanna see what's outside."

Bonnie pulled on Sparky's arm. "You wait till Zip-Zip tells you what to do."

Zip-Zip made no coment, for he was concerned with the instrument panel, reading the dials and pressing each button in turn.

"Is something broken?" asked Randy.





When Zip-Zip finally answered, his eyes were twinkling. He had been worried about the saucer, he said, but damage was slight. Just one battery of lateral rockets was out of commission, and the saucer would handle well enough without it. As soon as he knew what take-off conditions were outside, they would head for the desert to try to sight the wreckage of his father's spaceship.

"Maybe we're in the desert," said Bonnie.

The boy from Mars shook his head, but didn't explain. "Come with me. We'll take a close look at Venus. I've already opened the hatch with the ZIP automatic control, and the air in the air lock is safe to breathe. We won't need oxygen."

Half of the slanting top of the saucer was all but level, because the saucer was tilted. One by one the children climbed out of the hatch onto this surface. Randy

was the last; and when he straightened up and looked about, he understood why the others were so quiet. On all sides were tremendous, silent trees, rising from a sheet of murky green water and draped with hairy rope-like vines. The main branches of the trees, several times thicker than the trunks of most Earth trees, were locked together like muscular arms. From the smaller branches hung yellowish-green leaves the size of umbrellas; but they were not numerous enough to shut off the hazy yellow light that streamed down from above and cast faint gleams in the dark water. The water itself was perfectly still, except where drops of moisture dripped from the oversized leaves and made rings. Here and there an island of black mud and tall grass stuck out of the water with just a few feet between it and the lower branches. It was on the edge of one of these islands that the flying saucer now rested.

"Jeepers!" said Randy, and his voice echoed over the water.

Bonnie recovered some of her confidence. "Did you ever see such trees?" she whispered.

"No," answered Sparky with his usual volume. "I think it's hot."

"How about that echo?" said Tom, grinning. Then he called out a loud hello.

"I shouldn't do that if I were you," Zip-Zip said.

"Why?" asked Tom.

"We don't want to attract attention. Venusians might be near. ZIP I think the uncivilized Venusians live here."

"Where? How? It's all water."

"Zip-Zip knows what he's talking about, Tom," said Randy. "We'd better do as he says."

Zip-Zip's warning made the Riddles thoughtful. If Venusians were somehow living in this swamp, what did they look like, and were they friendly? Everyone examined the strange scene a second time.

Randy whispered in Tom's ear, "Do you see anything moving?"

"Not even a leaf," said Tom. "Do you?"

"Look up there," broke in Zip-Zip. The Riddles looked in the direction he was pointing, afraid of what they might see. "Those broken branches show where the saucer came through the ZIP trees. It's good we didn't hit one of the big branches."

"You're not kidding," said Randy.

Sparky shuffled toward the rim of the saucer, but Bonnie stopped him before he had gone far.

"I just wanted to see how we're floating," he explained. Then almost shouting, he said, "Zip-Zip, you shoulda brought swimmin' suits, not spacesuits!"

Tom and Randy both clamped their hands over his mouth.

"Quiet, for Pete's sake!" breathed Randy.

"I think we'd better get out of here," said Tom.

Zip-Zip agreed. "I've seen all I need to see. The mag-

nivisor section of the saucer is ZIP covered by water, but——”

A grass rope dropped over Bonnie's head, over her arms, and she was dragged screaming into the air. More amazed than frightened, the others watched Bonnie go kicking out over the water.

“Zip-Zip!” appealed Randy. He swung around just in time to see Zip-Zip's feet rise past his face. He tilted back his head. Something stung his cheek. Before he could raise a hand to the hurt, his arms were pinned to his sides in a grip of steel. A cry that sounded as if it came from Sparky rang in his ears, and he felt his feet leave the saucer. Water, trees, and saucer whirled before his eyes, so that he closed them. Gasping for breath, he felt something smooth and wet brush his face. Then strong hands clutched his arms, and his thrashing feet found a solid footing.

Fearfully he opened his eyes. A cry escaped his lips. He was standing on a broad tree limb. Two men had hold of him. Another man and two women stood watching him. Never had he seen such queer people, even in a book. Like him, each of them had a slim muscular body, including two arms and two legs, two hands and two feet, and one head; but there the similarity ended. Their skin was a ghostly green and as smooth as plastic. Their eyes, about half as large as Zip-Zip's, were a peculiar pale green, and they seemed to see nothing. They had broad flat noses, small mouths, pointed chins, and very



small ears that lay close to the sides of their oblong heads. Strangest of all, they had not a single hair anywhere on their bodies. Their heads were as smooth and hairless as melons. The only clothes they wore were short skirts made of what appeared to be snakeskin.

Randy was scared. He tore his eyes from the strange-looking people and struggled to free himself. Where were the others? Where was Zip-Zip? Frantically Randy called to Zip-Zip for help. Instantly long smooth fingers closed over his mouth and silenced him. He thought he heard Zip-Zip's voice, but he couldn't be sure, for all of a sudden the great trees seemed to be filled with noisy, croaking birds. The Venusians were talking to each other!

"Untie me!" said Randy, half choking. For his trouble he was bound tighter, thrown over the shoulder of one of his captors, and carried, head down, through the trees. The sure-footed Venusian ran along the tree limbs as if they were sidewalks. Randy pinched his eyes closed, constantly expecting to fall headfirst into the dark water of the swamp. But as the Venusian continued on, climbing from one branch to another, going higher into the huge trees without slipping once, Randy realized he was not going to fall. A new fear flashed through his mind: where was he being taken?

The answer came with startling swiftness. The Venusian bore him into a "clearing" in the treetops and dropped him. He saw that he was sitting on a platform

made of branches and matting, fifty to sixty feet across. The Venusian made the same croaking sounds Randy had heard before, and more of the greenish people, mostly women and children, appeared from small woven huts built like so many bird's nests on different levels above and around the broad platform. Causing a great commotion with their strange speech, the Venusians flocked around him. He had hardly time to wonder what was in store for him when the crowd parted and Bonnie, Sparky, Tom, and Zip-Zip were dumped beside him like sacks of potatoes. Though they were bound and helpless as he was, he was overjoyed to see them.

"What can we do?" were Randy's first words.

Zip-Zip answered without taking his eyes off the Venusians. "We must let these people know we are their friends. Just how, I don't know."

"Friends!" said Sparky. "They don't look like friends."

Bonnie put her face on her knees and cried.

"We've got to get back to the saucer," said Tom, twisting around to see Randy and Zip-Zip. "If we had your heat projector, Zip-Zip, we'd show 'em a thing or two."

"No, Tom, we don't want to hurt them, as we do not want to be hurt ourselves. We have broken ZIP into their world and they have a right to be suspicious. I only hope they are not ZIP driven by fear to harm us."

Without warning Bonnie screamed. One of the Venusians had touched her hair.

"Don't show you are frightened," said Zip-Zip. He

knew it was a great deal to ask, and so he added, "Try not to, Bonnie."

Another Venusian leaned over and touched Tom's hair. Tom gritted his teeth, but didn't draw back.

"Say—" began Zip-Zip, "I think I understand! They are touching your hair because they are attracted to it. ZIP They probably have never seen hair before."

"Huh, what's the good of knowing they like our hair?"

"It helps us to understand them, Randy. It may save our ZIP lives."

Now a Venusian child bravely touched Randy's hair and smiled.

"That's a girl," said Tom. "I think she likes you."

"Well, I don't like her," asserted Randy. "She looks like an owl."

"I guess," said Bonnie, sniffing, "we look funny to them."

Over the chattering of the Venusians a distant drum was heard. Even at its very first notes the Venusians left their captives and climbed into their huts above the platform. When the drumming stopped, Zip-Zip and the Riddles were completely alone. A heavy stillness descended over the swamp, a stillness intensified by the dangling vines and leaves. Randy opened his mouth to speak, and a piercing shriek seemed to come from it. The children started in surprise.

"You didn't do that?" said Sparky to Randy.

Randy shook his head as the shriek was repeated.

"There!" said Tom, pointing overhead. "That's what is doing it."

Suspended above the center of the platform was a cage made of slim branches. In it was a large red bird with a yellow beak and green eyes.

"What an ugly bird," said Bonnie. "It's as big as I am."

"I wonder why they have it up there," said Tom.

"Well, I don't give a darn," said Randy, fighting the grass rope holding him. "Now is our chance to break loose. If one of us gets free, he can untie the others."

Several minutes of struggle with the binding ropes convinced the children they were well tied. Tired from their exertion, they rested and talked about their captors, the Venusians.



"What are they doing now?" asked Randy of no one in particular.

"Sleeping, I guess," answered Tom. "This yellow light makes me sleepy."

"Sleeping in the daytime?"

"I believe Tom is right," said Zip-Zip. "Martian scientists say the days here on Venus are as long ZIP as thirty Martian days, or Earth days, for that matter—your Earth rotates once ZIP on its axis in about the same time Mars does."

"Well, how long is daytime here?"

"Fifteen Earth days, Randy. There are fifteen Earth days of sunlight and fifteen Earth days ZIP of darkness in one Venusian day. And since a Venusian year is 225 Earth days long ZIP it would be about seven days long."

"Jeepers," said Randy, "a year only seven days long."

"Why," said Tom, "if you got a week's vacation from school here, it would take up the whole year! No school!"

"Oh, stop it!" cried Bonnie. "Here we are, tied up, not knowing what's to become of us, and all you do is talk silly!"

Tom looked serious. "Bonnie's right."

"Look!" said Randy. "I can walk!" He had pushed himself to his feet and was hopping about on his tightly bound legs.

"You can't go far that way," said Zip-Zip. "It would be hard enough to go through the trees ZIP with your arms and legs free."

"Yeah," said Sparky, "sit down. You're rockin' the whole place."

"Ah, dry up!" snapped Randy, and he sat down angrily.

Zip-Zip wriggled in front of the Riddles. "If—if they untie us, I believe I can escape and find my way back to the saucer. ZIP Then I can rescue the rest of you."

The Riddles showed little enthusiasm.

"Anyway, we're not sure these people intend to harm us. Remember, they are ZIP interested in your hair, and my antennas probably."

Randy tried his best to understand Zip-Zip's hopefulness. He said: "Are these the same people who might be holding your father?"

Zip-Zip said they were not the same people. If any Venusians had captured his father, they would be the civilized Venusians who lived under the desert. The mountain the saucer had hit was one of a chain of mountains that separated the desert from the swamp.

"Then maybe we're not far from your father," said Randy.

Zip-Zip nodded.

"Hey, I've been thinking," said Sparky.

"Good for you," said Tom.

Sparky didn't pay any attention to the interruption. "Maybe the Venusians like our hair so much that they'll scalp us."

Bonnie caught her breath. Uneasy glances were exchanged. Finally Zip-Zip said he didn't believe the Venusians were that savage. And Tom observed that he hadn't seen them carrying knives or axes.

"Knives!" exclaimed Randy. "Why didn't I think of that before? My knife!"

"Yeah, your pocketknife!" said Tom. "Can you reach in your pocket?"

"Oh, try, Randy," said Bonnie.

Eagerly Randy leaned forward on his knees and twisted his hand under the tight rope, working his fingers toward the right-hand pocket in his blue jeans. Soon they were clutching the edge of the pocket. He wiggled his pants down an inch, and his whole hand slipped into the pocket.

"What's the matter?" asked Tom.

Randy's face had fallen. "It's gone!" he moaned. "It must have dropped out of my pocket on the way here."

Tom shrugged hopelessly.

"We might as well get some sleep ourselves," said Zip-Zip. "If we are rested, we can think better."

The Riddle children agreed. Stretching out on the matting, they relaxed as much as their bonds would let them.

In the stillness that followed, Sparky said, "I have my six-shooter under my belt, but I can't touch it."

"Go to sleep," said Randy wearily, and he closed his eyes. Sparky's previous words kept running through his

mind right up to the edge of sleep: *They'll scalp us . . . they'll scalp us. . . .*

The Venusians shook the children awake. It was still daytime.

"Oh, it's true!" wailed Bonnie. "I hoped these terrible people would be gone when I woke up."

Zip-Zip turned to Randy and said, "It is time that I made them understand that we're friendly." He struggled to his feet and spoke to the Venusians in his own language and in English. When he finished, the Venusians talked among themselves. "I don't believe ZIP they understood me," he said over his shoulder. "Quickly, all of you, smile and look as friendly as you can."

The Riddles managed to smile as if they were having their picture taken.

Then an amazing thing happened.

The greenish mouths of the Venusians curved in smiles that showed their white teeth! One of them came forward and began untying Zip-Zip.

"It worked!" said Randy, smiling now because he felt like it. Presently he and Zip-Zip and Bonnie were gratefully stretching their arms and legs.

"Hey, what about us?" asked Sparky. He and Tom were still tied up.

Zip-Zip made a sign to the Venusians and pointed at Tom and Sparky. Instead of freeing them, the Venusians

took Zip-Zip, and Bonnie and Randy to the center of the platform.

Zip-Zip said for the others to hear, "I don't like this."

One of the Venusians signaled to another of his hairless race on the edge of the platform, who unfastened a rope from around a branch. Randy followed the rope with his eyes and saw that it crossed a heavy branch overhead, and was attached to the cage holding the red bird. The cage was being lowered!

"You don't think the bird is hungry?" said Bonnie uneasily.

The cage came to rest on the platform before the children. Two Venusians leaped at the cage and flung open a door in its side. With a loud shriek the cruel-looking bird flew into the air and disappeared. Just as swiftly the Venusians pushed Bonnie, Randy, and Zip-Zip into the cage, fastened the door, and hoisted them high over the platform. They had taken the place of the red bird—but they did not know why.

A little later Tom and Sparky were released and forced to tear marsh grass into strips for ropemaking!

"These Venusians are as friendly as rattlesnakes," Tom whispered to Sparky as they sat working with two of the greenish people.

"Maybe we can sneak away."

"What good would that do? We can't run the saucer—even if we could find it. No—we have to get Zip-Zip out of that cage."

A Venusian pushed Tom and motioned for him to keep working.

Planning to climb up the rope that held the cage, Zip-Zip tried to force open the cage door. However, the primitive but clever fastening could not be touched from the inside of the cage; and the wood bars were too close together to allow him to squeeze through.

Bonnie and Randy sank down on the bottom of the cage, sad and silent. Zip-Zip remained standing by the bars, blaming himself for not having taken a weapon with him when he had left the saucer.

When it came time for the Venusians to eat, they handed Tom and Sparky a white meat on the order of fish, a basket of shredded leaves, and some red fruit the size of grapefruit. The meat was raw, and Tom and Sparky could not bear to eat it. The leaves were not any better, but the boys were able to eat the fruit, which had a pleasant, sweet taste. To the prisoners in the cage the Venusians gave only the red fruit, returning the cage at once to its lofty location.

Time dragged by. Tom and Sparky tore marsh grass into strips until their fingers ached. The cage hung silently over their heads, a grim reminder of their hopeless plight. Then once more, with the long Venusian day showing no sign of ending, a drum sounded in the distance. And once more the strange tree-dwelling people

climbed into their huts to sleep; but not before they had tied Tom and Sparky securely.

When all was quiet, Tom called in a husky voice, "Zip-Zip, are you guys O.K.?"

"Yes," came the answer from the cage.

"Can't you get out of that thing?"

"No. It's quite strong."

Tom shook his head and glanced at Sparky. "They have us right where they want us—these stupid Venusians!"

Tom didn't know how long he had been dozing with his head on his knees, but suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder. He sat up and looked into the pale green eyes of a Venusian child. She might have been the same girl who had touched Randy's hair, yet he could not be sure—all of the Venusians looked so much alike. As if cautioning him to be quiet, she brushed his mouth with her smooth greenish fingers, and from behind her back she brought forth a short wooden spear. Almost at the same instant that Tom tensed himself for a struggle, he remembered how helpless he was, and he closed his eyes. What was the use? He braced himself for the thrust of the spear. What was she waiting for? He opened his eyes. The girl was cutting the grass rope that bound him!

After she had freed Sparky in the same manner, she gave Tom the spear, pointed at the cage, and motioned as if to say "Go away."



Tom stared at the spear in a daze. By the time he thought of thanking the strange girl, she was already climbing into one of the huts above the platform.

"Well, don't just stand there," said Sparky.

"Heck, no!" said Tom. "Come on!" He and Sparky hurried across the platform to the branch where the rope anchored the cage. He handed the spear to Sparky and pulled on the taut rope. It was looped around the branch and knotted.

"Step on it," coached Sparky.

"I am! Stop your hissing."

"Hissing? I'm not hiss—" Sparky screeched like an owl.

Tom faced him angrily. "Do you want to wake up everybody?"

"Look!" said Sparky. "There's the hisser!"

Tom looked and unconsciously stepped back.

Rippling along the broad branch that supported the cage was a monstrous creature with a head like a legendary dragon! Along its seemingly endless, black and green ribbed body were countless leg-like grippers that moved in waves like the legs on a thousand-legger. Its yellow eyes were fixed on the cage.

Tom broke away from the monster's spell. "Sparky, they don't even see it!" he said hoarsely.

"I know it! I know it!"

Now Tom did not care how much noise he made. He called out a warning to the others. Zip-Zip answered, almost calmly. What did Tom mean? He didn't see an animal. From the cage the monster was still hidden by the branch.

As Tom and Sparky watched, a scream came from the cage. Clutching at air, pale and wild-eyed, Tom looked about for some way of turning back the monster. Sparky pushed the spear at him. He grabbed it, took one frantic glance overhead, and hacked through the rope holding up the cage.

The cage crashed to the platform and broke open like an eggshell, spilling its prisoners. Zip-Zip leaped to his feet and helped Bonnie and Randy to the edge of the platform, bravely ignoring the angry hissings of the fear-

ful animal, which as the cage fell had drawn back its head. For the first time, Randy saw what danger he had been in, saw, indeed, that danger still surrounded him.

The Venusians were pouring out of their huts, waving their arms and chanting, "Slee-ga! Slee-ga!" over and over again.

Zip-Zip noticed that the Venusians knew the monster and, for the moment, were more interested in it than in their prisoners.

"Quickly!" he said to the Riddles, "go to that broad branch over there. That is the one that brought us ZIP here. Stay close to the edge of the platform."

Before they were halfway to their goal, the monster's head came hissing down at them. Now the Venusians saw that the children were attempting to escape, and they sent up a cry.

Zip-Zip came to a dead stop. He looked at the monster and at the Venusians. "Give me that spear, Tom," he ordered.

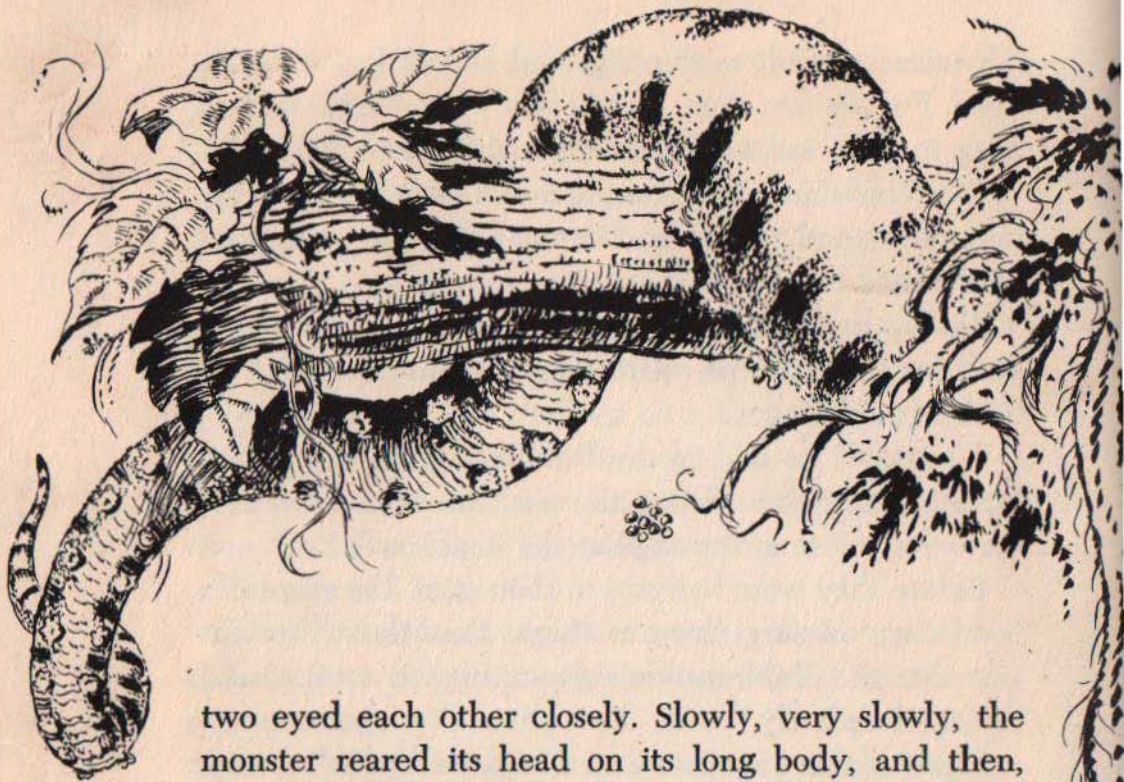
"Here it is, but you can't fight with just a spear!"

"Get on that branch as I told you!" snapped Zip-Zip.

The Riddles backed away, fearfully expectant. It was a strange sight: the small boy advancing toward the monster with only a short wooden spear for protection. When the Venusians saw this, they grew silent and did not move.

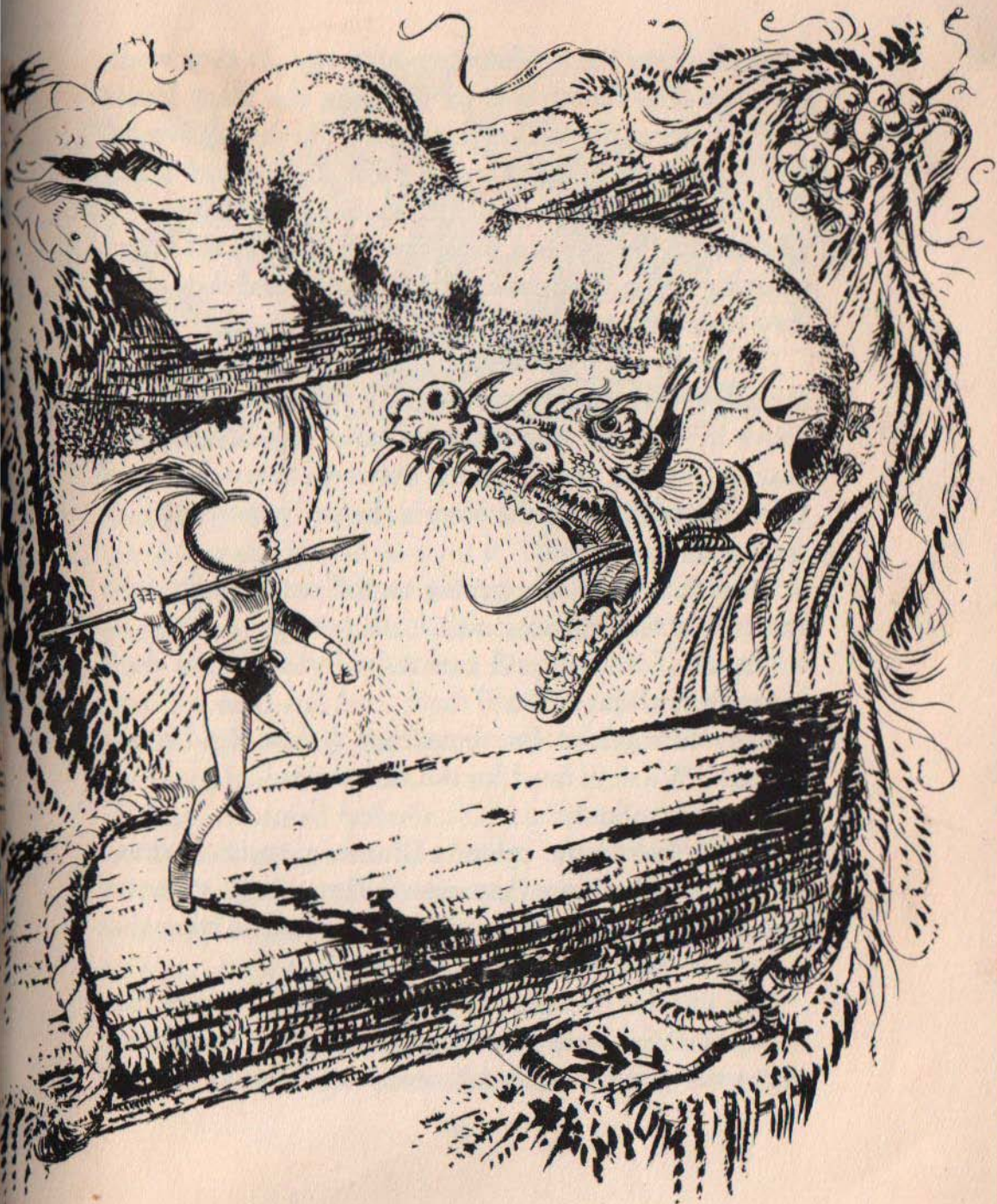
"I can't look," groaned Bonnie, but she did.

The monster swung within a few yards of Zip-Zip. The



two eyed each other closely. Slowly, very slowly, the monster reared its head on its long body, and then, with remarkable swiftness for its size, struck at Zip-Zip! Like a shadow, Zip-Zip darted to one side and lunged with the spear. The monster hissed and thrashed the air. Zip-Zip ran to the Riddles huddled on the broad branch. Turning, he saw the monster's huge body, yard upon yard of it, slide from the overhead limb and plunge straight through the platform, carrying platform and Venusians with it.

Above the cries of the Venusians who still clung to their huts, Zip-Zip shouted for the Riddles to follow him. Half walking, half shuffling along, the children moved



single file over the perilous tree-highway. As they went, they steadied themselves by grasping the giant leaves and the vines that trailed down into the steamy swamp far below. Several times one of them slipped and nearly fell, but Zip-Zip kept urging them on. And fortunate it was that he did; for in a short time they heard the angry croaking of the Venusians in the distance, and they knew they were being pursued.

Gradually they worked themselves to a lower level in the great trees until they were walking on branches just above the swamp. Besides being safer, Zip-Zip reasoned that by putting fewer leaves between themselves and the swamp they would have a better opportunity of spying the saucer.

"The Venusians are gaining on us!" said Randy, who was last in the column.

"Zip-Zip," Bonnie said anxiously, "what do we do if we can't find the saucer?"

They hurried on for some time before Zip-Zip answered. "We shall head for the mountains."

"The mountains?"

Zip-Zip halted the column. "Put away your worries," he said happily. "I see the saucer!" Through the greenery he had caught sight of something silver, and he knew that it must be his spaceship.

The Riddles rejoiced loudly. They didn't seem to care now if the Venusians heard them or not; they would soon be in the good old saucer, ready to fight an army if



necessary. With a burst of speed they came directly over the saucer and smiled down at it. The smiles faded away. The saucer was still there all right, but lying on top of it was a sleepy-looking black lizard, fully twenty feet long! They could see where it had dragged itself across the island of mud and from there onto the partly submerged saucer. Apparently the lizard was taking what passed for a sun bath on Venus.

Tom exclaimed bitterly, "Oh, brother!"

"I'm not going near that thing," declared Bonnie.

"We'll have to take a chance," muttered Zip-Zip.

Randy was surprised. "You mean you're actually going to try to get into the saucer with that—that—"

"Lizard," offered Zip-Zip.

"—with that lizard right there?" finished Randy.

"No. I meant that we shall have to go into the moun-

tains. I don't believe the Venusians ZIP will follow us there. Their world is the trees."

"Do you know in which direction the mountains are?"

"Yes, Randy, yes. This way!"

Even as Zip-Zip spoke, the children heard the Venusians moving along the branches behind them, and they hurried on in a panic. Now it was only the poor eyesight of the faster tree people that could save the children. The limbs of the trees narrowed along the way, and they found it increasingly difficult to keep their footing. Then when they could go no farther, Zip-Zip made a discovery. The swamp had given way to solid ground. Grabbing the hairy vines, all five of the children slid to the ground and, with wings on their feet, ran through the remaining trees and into the open. A long rocky slope lay ahead, and they charged up the side of it, panting and stumbling.

Bonnie fell in a heap. "I can't go another step," she called out, "no matter what."

"Same here," gasped Randy.

The others dragged to a stop. All looked back to see if the Venusians were still following. A shower of spears clattered among the rocks, just short of them. The Venusians were standing silently on the edge of the trees. They did not venture into the open. At last they turned and melted into the trees.

The children managed a weak cheer. They were exhausted but pleased with themselves.

Tom leaned back and gazed up at the mountain. Its bare, rugged stone shot into the air for thousands of feet until, as a jagged peak, it touched the lemon-yellow clouds. "What a mountain!" he said.

"It is kind of pretty," Randy admitted, "with all that colored stone."

"It would be prettier," said Zip-Zip, "if we were looking at it from inside the saucer."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," said Tom.

Sparky had other ideas. "Do we hafta climb all the way to the top?" he asked.

"Do we have to climb the mountain?" Bonnie added.

Tom and Randy looked to Zip-Zip for an answer.

"It's really up to you," replied Zip-Zip. "We can't go back to the saucer now. We must wait until that ZIP lizard and the tree people have a chance to leave. But whenever we decide to go ZIP back to the saucer, it'll be dangerous."

"It sure will," Randy agreed.

"Well," said Tom, "let's sit down and rest and figure out what we're going to do."

"The stones are warm—and hard," said Bonnie, who had remained sitting. "Oh, I just wish I had never come to Venus!"

"Don't start that," said Randy sharply.

Tom nudged his sister. "Quit your complaining. You didn't get scalped, did you? Randy's girl friend saved us. Ha!"

"Cut it out," said Randy.

"Oh, all right," said Bonnie, smiling faintly. "I wish for a good bath instead. I feel simply terrible."

"If you wish for a bath," said Sparky, "you *must* be sick."

"O.K.! This isn't getting us anywhere," grumbled Tom, pounding a rock on another rock. "I'd like to know what we're going to do."

Zip-Zip stopped stroking his yellow plume, which had taken quite a beating during the race through the trees. "I think we might as well go over the mountain," he said. "We have the time, and ZIP from such a great height we might see my father's saucer."

"What if it gets dark when we're on the mountain?" asked Randy. "You said it would be dark for as long as fifteen of our days."

"What would we do *here* if night arrived? We couldn't reach the saucer ZIP in the dark, and I have a notion that the tree people can see in the dark."

"I'm hungry," declared Sparky.

This time no one made fun of Sparky for being hungry. He had reminded the others of something they had forgotten for the moment: *They had to eat no matter where they were.* After a quick conference the children decided to search for food immediately. Because there didn't appear to be any food on the mountain, they went back to the edge of the trees to try to find berries and roots. Fearing that the Venusians might return at any mo-

ment, the children proceeded as cautiously as animals approaching a water hole. Randy, while looking out for a surprise attack, noticed a tree bearing the same fruit the tree people had given them. As the strongest, Zip-Zip scrambled up a vine into the tree and threw down more of the red fruit than they could carry. With their cheeks bulging and their shirts stuffed with a reserve supply, they scurried back up the rocky slope.

Sparky wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I like these red things."

"You look it," was Bonnie's cool reply.

"Shall we keep right on going up the mountain?" asked Zip-Zip invitingly.

"Sure, I'm with you," said Tom. "I'd like to see what the rest of Venus looks like. How about it, you guys?"

The others agreed now, and with surprising eagerness. Finding food so easily had given the Riddles new confidence, and they were again ready to follow the boy from Mars.

The way upward became steeper. The jutting stone steps seemed to be made for a giant, certainly not for children. When crawling and pushing and pulling could not take them higher, they moved around the side of the mountain until they found a place where they could get a foothold. At times they stopped to rest, and then they looked back over the swamp at the great trees stretching out like a yellow-green carpet to the hazy horizon.

After one of their many detours around the mountain,

the children came upon what appeared to be an enormous slash in the rock.

"What luck!" said Zip-Zip. "We won't have to go higher. That pass beyond will take us ZIP to the other side of the mountain range."

Except for a hot, dry wind, travel through the pass was not difficult; and when they reached the far side of it, they saw that Zip-Zip's information about the geography of Venus was accurate. Where they had seen only trees from the other side of the mountain, here they saw only sand, the endless expanse of the great Venusian desert. With an almost constant wind moaning in their ears now, they viewed the bleak, new world far below. If they let their imaginations go, the yellow sand dunes became a stormy sea, the crests of the dunes lifted into the air like spray.

Randy raised his voice above the sound of the wind. "I'm glad I don't live on Venus."

"Give me good old Earth any time," called Tom.

"I'm ready to go back now," said Bonnie, squinting as she faced the wind.

"Wait a minute," said Zip-Zip, shielding his eyes. "Yes—I'm sure I'm right. Look out there. That isn't sand, that's a dome!"

The Riddles finally saw it, too—a flat dome too symmetrical and smooth to be sand.

"The other Venusians!" said Randy.

Zip-Zip nodded. "The civilized Venusians. That trans-

parent dome lets light into one of their ZIP underground cities."

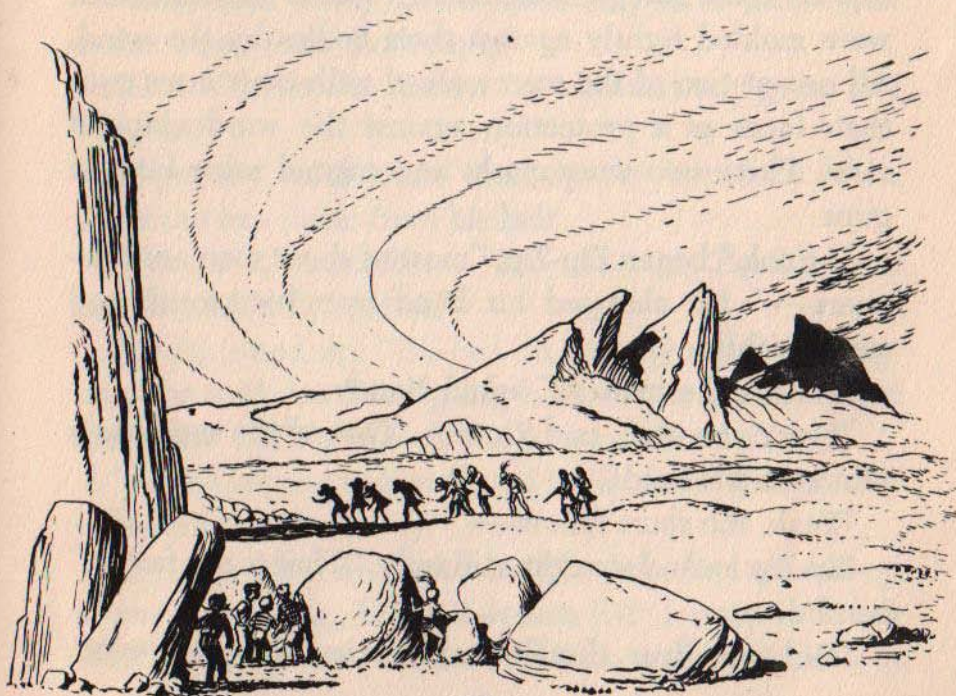
"Is that right?" said Tom. "A city under all that sand?"

"Yes. Follow me," Zip-Zip said, and he hurried down the mountain.

Near the foot of the mountain he stopped short, and the Riddles caught up to him. "Now what?" they asked.

"These rocks will protect us from the hot wind," he said. "I thought there might ZIP be an entrance to the underground city too small to see from——"

"Where did those ladies come from?" Sparky asked innocently.



"Get down behind the rocks!" ordered Zip-Zip.

All eyes centered on a strange procession coming over the desert toward the mountain.

"Those are *men* wearing tunics! They must have come out of that small dome. I was ZIP just going to tell you about it."

"Are they coming for us?" asked Bonnie.

"I don't know," replied Zip-Zip, holding down his plume of antennas so it would not show above the rocks, "but keep hidden."

As the procession drew nearer, the children counted ten men in all. Their white short-sleeved tunics, reaching to their knees and gathered at their waists by black belts, were molded tightly against their bodies by the wind. All except two of the men walked with their arms over their faces as a protection against the wind-whipped sand. These two wore masks and carried some kind of guns.

"I think," began Zip-Zip, "most of those men are prisoners—" He clamped his hand over his mouth and stared wildly.

"What's the matter?" asked Randy.

"Don't you see!" said Zip-Zip. "One of the men has a plume on his head!"

"Yeah, the short fellow—"

Zip-Zip looked straight at Randy. "That is my father," he said.

"Did you hear that?" Randy cried into the wind.

"We've found Zip-Zip's father!"

The Riddles all talked at once, excitement in their every word. Who would have imagined that they would discover Zip-Zip's father in this way?

"Where did they go?" broke in Zip-Zip. He had taken his eyes off the men for a second, and now they were gone.

"They walked right into the mountain," explained Tom.

Zip-Zip let his plume spring up. "Prisoners . . . walked into the mountain . . . humm. I believe ZIP I understand."

"Gee," said Tom, "if we could only have taken your father away from those men."

"How?" burst out Randy. "We haven't any guns, and they do."

"I got my six-shooter," said Sparky hopefully as he drew the cap pistol from his belt.

"Forget it," said Tom. "It's not real, Zip-Zip; you couldn't kill a fly with it."

Zip-Zip stood up. "We can do nothing without weapons," he said, "so I am going back to the saucer to get them. ZIP I'd like one of you to go with me—Tom."

"You're leaving us here!" said Bonnie as if she couldn't believe her ears.

"Yes. You have an important job to do. You must keep a constant watch. When I return ZIP I want to know whether my father is in the mountain or has returned to

the ZIP underground city. I leave the details up to you, Randy, but see that one of you ZIP is watching the desert from now on."

Randy felt like saluting Zip-Zip, but he didn't, and instead told him he would follow his orders. Then he added, "Where will you land?"

"I'm not bringing the saucer over the mountains," Zip-Zip answered quickly. "The Venusians here would detect it before we'd have an opportunity to rescue my father." Satisfied that he had made himself clear, he opened the front of his spacesuit and handed Randy his store of the red Venusian fruit. "Tom, we'll each take ZIP just one fruit with us to eat on the way. We must travel light and *fast*."

The trip back to the saucer was easier. Tom and Zip-Zip were only two, and they had learned a little about how to travel on the mountain. When they reached the swamp they began a sharp lookout for the tree people. Tired and hot, they pulled themselves onto a branch and retraced their steps over the tree-highway to the saucer.

The black lizard was gone, but the tree people were having a noisy party. They were sitting and standing all over the saucer, and the traffic in and out of the hatch made it look like a subway entrance.

"There's no telling what they've done inside," whispered Tom. "Maybe they've broken the controls."

"Or the generator," said Zip-Zip grimly. "If that has happened ZIP we shall never leave Venus."

Merely watching the Venusians was torture for the two boys.

"We have to get rid of them in some way," muttered Zip-Zip.

"How? They have their spears and we—we have our hands."

Zip-Zip gripped Tom's arm. "I have an idea that I think is worth trying. It's dangerous ZIP but I can see no other way of saving the saucer." In low tones he described his plan to Tom, and then the two of them moved to a branch over the far end of the island of mud and marsh grass that held the saucer above water. Very quietly they slid down a vine to the island and, finding that the mud would support them, they stole through the tall grass toward the saucer. Coming to the place where the black lizard had flattened the grass, they were forced to stop or show themselves. The tree people were still having a grand time.

Zip-Zip nodded to Tom, and they both cried out, imitating the harsh voices of the Venusians. "Slee-ga! Slee-ga! Slee-ga!" Like magic, the Venusians turned into a pack of frightened animals. They took up the fearful cry and scrambled up the vines into the trees as cleverly as monkeys. Those inside the saucer suddenly spilled out of the hatch, wearing covers they had taken from the bunks, and carrying other articles belonging to Zip-Zip.

The things they could not hold in their teeth as they climbed the vines, they threw into the water.

"My heat projector in the ZIP swamp!" said Zip-Zip sadly.

"Shush!"

"Oh, don't worry; they're gone."

"Well, the plan couldn't have worked better."

Zip-Zip chuckled in spite of himself. "They certainly cleared out in a hurry. ZIP But come on, we have work to do." He walked into the open. "Over here we can get up on the saucer—"

An explosive hiss whirled Zip-Zip around on his heels. There, crawling through the mud, the spear still sticking out of his side, was Slee-ga! Slee-ga *was* back!

"Tom!" cried Zip-Zip, holding out his hand.

Tom ran to Zip-Zip, and they both made a dive across the saucer and slipped through the hatch. Zip-Zip closed the hatch and locked it. "Blazing comets!" he said. "I never expected to see that thing again!"

Tom, pausing on the air-lock ladder below Zip-Zip, caught his breath. "No wonder," he gulped, "the Venusians beat it."

Inside the control cabin the floor was littered with the contents of the lockers. The overhead light and the magnivisor were operating just as they had left them.

"The atomic generator is working," said Zip-Zip. "At least ZIP it's energizing the electronic units."

"What do you mean?" asked Tom, following Zip-Zip to the instrument panel.

"Just a minute, Tom." Zip-Zip pressed a button and held his eyes on a lighted dial. "Power output normal! Tom, we're ZIP ready to go."

"But I thought you weren't flying the saucer to the desert."

"I'm not. We're going to leave it where we hunted for food. Then ZIP we won't have to come into this terrible swamp again."

A little later the silver saucer floated over the trees and landed at the base of the mountain. Since time was precious, Zip-Zip did not clean up the mess the tree people had made of the cabin. But an examination of the lockers and the things on the floor revealed some sad facts. Zip-Zip's deadly gamma gun, as well as his heat projector, had been carried away. The only weapons left were two peace sticks.

Tom eyed the harmless-looking metal rods Zip-Zip had called peace sticks. "What do they do?" he asked.

Zip-Zip was rushing about the cabin, and he talked excitedly. "Tom, put on this PG-neutralizer. I'm taking four more—for the others ZIP and my father—to return here. What is a peace stick?" he repeated, banging around the lockers. "A peace stick is a weapon used chiefly ZIP by Lafonee, Martian, police. It—it projects a ray that paralyzes a person, makes him stiff ZIP as a

statue for about ten minutes. You can see we shall have to act quickly when we rescue ZIP my father. Jupiter! I can find just one pocket rocket!"

On top of the saucer Tom and Zip-Zip stood ready to take to the air with their gravity neutralizers. On one side was the mountain, soaring into the yellow atmosphere, and on the other side were the great trees of the swamp. Everywhere was the stillness of an unexplored world.

Looking at the mountain, Tom said, "Doesn't seem right that it's so windy on the other side."

Zip-Zip agreed. "This pocket rocket will easily propel us to the desert. I hope it will be ZIP strong enough to bring back the six of us. You"— he pulled on Tom's neutralizer—"you have your belt fastened ZIP properly?"

Instead of replying, Tom stood staring at something over Zip-Zip's shoulder.

Zip-Zip turned and followed Tom's gaze to a green Venusian on the edge of the trees. "*Now, where did he come from?*" exclaimed Zip-Zip peevishly. "Oh, this spoils my plans! These tree people are as pesky ZIP as flies and as dangerous as dinosaurs!" After a moment's thought, he said in almost a whisper, "Tom, will you do me a big favor?"

"What?"

"Will you stay in the saucer until we come back?"

Tom frowned.

"I wouldn't ask you to do it," went on Zip-Zip, "if there was another way of protecting the ZIP saucer. The hatch, you see, cannot be locked from the outside, only the inside; and if the ZIP Venusians find the courage to come into the open, they would be free to enter the ZIP saucer again. They don't need a ladder to get up here; they have their ropes."

"But I'd rather be with you. You might need me."

"We need you here, Tom. If the Venusians should get in the saucer again, we ZIP might not be as lucky as the last time."

Tom's eyes roved from Zip-Zip to the Venusian still lingering under the trees. "All right," he said, "I'll do it."

Meantime, on the other side of the mountain, Randy and the others sat behind the rocks, keeping watch. Besides the wind-swept sand, there was nothing to see but the white dome, like a half-buried egg, which Zip-Zip had said was an entrance to the civilized Venusian's underground city. The large dome they had seen from high on the mountain was barely visible.

"I'm tired of watching," said Bonnie, whose turn it now was. "There's nothing to watch."

"Keep watching," drawled Randy. "You can't tell when Zip-Zip's father might come out of the mountain."

"I'm tired of sitting," said Sparky. "I think I'll climb——"

"Don't!" said Randy.

"Why not?"

"Just don't, that's all."

"Randy." It was Bonnie.

"What now?"

"I've been wondering why those tree people put us in that cage, but not Sparky and Tom—and now I think I know why."

"Why?" asked Sparky doubtfully.

"Because we have blond hair and you don't."

"My hair's just as good as yours," said Sparky.

"I didn't say it wasn't."

"Hey, look at the big bird," said Randy.

Sparky laughed. "That's no bird. It's Zip-Zip!"

He landed beside them and explained why Tom was not with him. "I can talk to Tom any time I want to," he concluded.

"How?" asked Randy.

"By the radiophone built into my spacesuit. Tom has the cosmic-phone ZIP turned on in the saucer. Listen." The boy from Mars bent his head and said, "Zip-Zip calling. Can you hear me, Tom?"

"I can hear you!" came Tom's voice right out of Zip-Zip's chest, or so it seemed.

"Goll-ee!" exclaimed Bonnie. "Can we talk to him?"

Zip-Zip replied that there really wasn't time; and after telling Tom he would contact him later, he asked Randy

for a report. When he learned that his father had not appeared again, he was very pleased. He said that he thought his father was being forced to work in a mine, a mine that had its entrance where the prisoners had disappeared into the mountain. With the two peace sticks he had brought with him, they would "freeze" the guards and then take his father to the saucer. He gave one of the peace sticks to Randy and told him how to use it. Then he led the Riddles down the rocky slope. A smooth white door in the side of the mountain came into view.

"These rocks will hide us," said Zip-Zip. "From here we can strike at the guards. I only hope that my father ZIP comes out of that door before the long Venusian night begins."

Zip-Zip, however, had not foreseen that there might be more than one entrance to the mountain. So when three Venusians, under cover of the whistling wind, crept up behind the children, they were taken completely by surprise. The Venusians grabbed the peace sticks from Randy and Zip-Zip, and searched all of them for other weapons. Zip-Zip lost his gravity neutralizers and pocket rocket, and Sparky was relieved of his cap pistol. Only Zip-Zip's radiophone escaped detection, because it was part of his spacesuit.

Discouraged and a little bit frightened, the children were taken across the desert to the white dome. As they came within a dozen feet of it, they no longer felt the



hot wind; though now a steady pressure pushed against their bodies and made them feel as if they were walking through invisible water. This strange sensation, Zip-Zip said, was caused by a low-voltage force screen, which kept the sand from covering the dome. Suddenly a door appeared in the side of the dome. They passed through it, and the strange effect of the force screen disappeared. Light shone through the circular floor of the dome. One of the Venusians stepped on a small raised disk in the center of the floor, and the floor began sinking. They were lowered into a region of brilliant light, brighter than the Venusian daylight. The floor of the dome was in reality the floor of a peculiar kind of elevator that was carrying them down through a large tube that seemed to be made of glass or clear plastic. The children were too amazed to speak as they passed level after level, like the floors in a skyscraper, where people were busy at desks and machines. No sound reached them inside the tube, and everything they saw "looked" quiet. Except for the blue floors, almost everything else was white. Even the tall slender Venusians were themselves very white, from their hair to their feet, which were enclosed in transparent sandals. All the men wore the short white tunics, while the women wore longer ones, also of white. It was a white world, as white as the tree people's world was green.

Finally the elevator came to a halt in the middle of a

long corridor. A section of the transparent tube slid to one side, and the Venusian guards marched the children out of the elevator and along the corridor, which was nearly deserted.

"Where are they taking us?" whispered Bonnie.

Zip-Zip shook his head worriedly. "I should have known better. If only I'd used the saucer."

Hearing the others talking, Sparky expressed himself. "I want my gun back," he said, pulling on the tunic of the Venusian holding his arm. "Give me my gun."

"He can't understand you," said Zip-Zip, glancing up at the tall guard's stern face.

"Boy, we're in trouble," groaned Randy. "We can't even tell them why we're here."

They had passed several doors along the corridor, and now they stopped at one decorated with a blue circle inside a blue square. One of the Venusians spoke in a strange rhythmic language, and, as if in answer to a command, the door slid noiselessly into the wall, and they entered an airy-looking room, a room that had the very feeling of the outdoors. The far side of the room was completely open, leading to what appeared to be a balcony, beyond which was a vast area of hazy light. Outlined against the brightness was the figure of a man seated at a desk. The man carried on a conversation with one of the guards. To the children the words meant nothing, and with every passing second Sparky was growing increasingly restless.



"Why do you have to steal?" he called out at last. Frowning, Randy shushed Sparky.

"Well, they took my gun."

"Do all of you speak English?"

The children looked at each other in surprise. The Venusian behind the desk spoke English! When they answered him, the guards released them and left the room.

"Come closer," invited the Venusian behind the desk.

The children edged toward him. They saw a man whose pale face was covered with wrinkles. He had white hair like the rest of his race, but it was long, and hung around his face and down his neck. His eyes were like holes in a mask, and his nose was pointed, as straight as his hair.

"He's an old guy," said Sparky in a voice meant only for Randy to hear, but a trifle too loud.

"I am very old," said the Venusian, half smiling. "That is why I am called Vi-alta, the old one." His voice was soft and kindly. "I believe you are young. You are not fully grown, are you?"

Zip-Zip said that they were not fully grown.

The Venusian nodded. "You with the antennas are from Lafonee, and the rest of you are from our neighboring planet Earth. Am I right?"

"Yes, sir. But how—?"

The Venusian would not be interrupted. After he had the children tell him their names, he said, "Will one of

you explain how you came to Am-mu, or as you of Earth say, Venus?"

Randy nudged Zip-Zip. "Go ahead," he murmured.

Zip-Zip hesitated as if he didn't trust the Venusian called Vi-alta. Choosing his words carefully, he said that he and the Riddle children were searching for his father, who had crashed in a spaceship on the Venusian desert.

"Lapo, Lapodoxtromeldee is your father!" exclaimed Vi-alta.

"Yes," replied Zip-Zip, scowling; *"and you have him working as a slave!"*

"Ah, then you have seen him. It is too bad. With the psychotron he taught me his language and English, and I taught him Am-mu. We learned much from each other until the other governors interfered."

"What do you mean?" asked Zip-Zip.

"I am only one of Am-mu's present leaders," said Vi-alta. "As Governor of the First City of the Seven Cities of Am-mu, I regulate life in the First City, but I cannot make decisions which affect our entire civilization. When your father was found on our planet, he was looked upon by most Venusians as an invader. His fate, therefore, was a matter for the governors of all seven cities of Am-mu to decide. Believe me, my boy, I tried my best to keep your father from being put to work with our criminals in the thorium mines, but the other governors demanded that he be treated as an invader."

By this time the children were hanging on Vi-alta's desk. They did not see anything about him to be afraid of.

"But my father is not a criminal," Zip-Zip protested earnestly. "He ZIP wouldn't hurt anybody."

"I know that," replied Vi-alta. "However, you must try to understand my people. They have lived so long beneath the surface of their planet that they have become suspicious of everyone and everything that disturbs their quiet and rather selfish lives." He stood up, and he stood very straight for an old man. "It was not always so—we Venusians were not always suspicious. Before our land was turned into a desert, before the sun was forever hidden by clouds, we studied the sky at night and wondered if your planets were populated. We lived in great cities in the open air, in the sunlight. Our scientific progress had given us time to enjoy ourselves and to perfect our society. And then it happened—in the midst of our greatest happiness."

What had happened, the children asked.

"The weather began to change. Terrible rain and wind storms beat upon the land, bringing hardship and destruction. At first we were hopeful that the storms would cease, but when they grew stronger and more destructive, we knew we would have to change our way of life if we were to survive. We decided to move our cities underground." Smiling, Vi-alta motioned to the children to follow him. He took them through the open

side of the large room to a railing. "Look," he said.

What the children saw gave them a thrill they would never forget. They looked out into an enormous oval enclosure, like a canyon; only its walls, instead of being of rough stone, were lined with continuous white and blue balconies, one over the other, rising to a transparent roof-like dome, the same dome the children had seen from the mountain pass. Below, on the floor of the man-made canyon, was a living landscape: fields of grain, neat rows of short green plants, and orchards, all crisscrossed by bands of silvery water. It was a fairyland cut off from the stormy and lifeless desert outside the dome.

Until now the Riddles had been unusually good listeners, but they soon showed the old governor of Ammu's First City how strong the curiosity of Earthchildren could be; and it sounded like this.

How high are we? Ten levels above the base level. How many levels are there? Twenty-seven. How far under the desert is that field down there? About 325 feet. Why is everything white in your city? Surfaces are white to conserve electrical energy. A white surface, in a manner of speaking, reflects light better than a colored surface. By making our chambers chiefly white, we can light our city with a minimum of electricity. How long did it take to build this whole place? Hundreds of years—we are still building it. Jeepers! Do a lot of people live here? About a million. Where are the kids? He means children.

Oh, they are in a separate section of the city. They live and go to school together until they are old enough to join a Survival Squad. Do you have dogs? I'm not certain I understand you, but we don't eat meat. You don't eat dogs, you pet 'em! No, we don't have dogs.

An angry voice broke up the question-and-answer game. Zip-Zip had been standing by silently, his face like a thundercloud. At last he had released his pent-up feelings with a single outburst: "Are you going to free my father?"

Vi-alta started to speak, then turned and walked back to his desk, closely followed by Zip-Zip and the Riddles. As Vi-alta seated himself, Zip-Zip said, "Well, are you?"

"I'd like to, my boy," replied the governor with a sigh, "but I can't. In the eyes of my people *you* are invaders."

"Then we ZIP are prisoners, too!" said Zip-Zip.

"Yes," was Vi-alta's answer. "But you will not have to work in the thorium mines until you are older. In the meantime you will be educated, and——"

"We won't do it!" cried Randy.

All the children were upset. The Riddles insisted that they had to go home to Earth—their mother and father were there, and their friends, and their own school, which now seemed strangely attractive.

"You don't even have dogs here," complained Sparky.

Bonnie was on the verge of tears. "You've just got to listen to us, Mr. Vi-alta!"

"May I at least talk to my father?" put in Zip-Zip.

"Indeed you may," said Vi-alta. "I have already sent for him."

Randy wondered how Zip-Zip's father could help them. He hated the idea of staying on Venus as much as the others, but it was silly the way Bonnie and Sparky were arguing with the governor. Talking wouldn't help; you had to fight and run. The door was still open. Why didn't Zip-Zip see that? Huh, how could he see it? He was out on the balcony again—*talking to himself!*

For the time being, Zip-Zip's behavior was to remain a mystery. Footsteps sounded in the corridor, and two men entered the room. One was a Venusian; the other man had to be Zip-Zip's father. He and his son were very much alike: the large eyes, the fair skin, the same yellow plume on top of the head. There was only one thing more noticeable than his plume, and that was his sadness. It showed in his face, in the stoop of his short powerful body.

"Lapo, I have a surprise for you," said Vi-alta.

Just then Zip-Zip returned from the balcony, and his father saw him. The Martian scientist seemed to fall back from an invisible blow.

"Ope! Ope!" he cried.

Zip-Zip ran to his father's outstretched arms and hugged him. After months of searching, the boy from Mars had found his father.

"What are they saying?" Sparky asked Bonnie.

"I don't know their language—but they're happy."

Zip-Zip drew his father over to the Riddle children, and in English introduced him to them. Smiling broadly, Zip-Zip's father said he was glad to meet his son's friends, and thanked them for helping "Ope."

"Ope?" said Randy, puzzled. "Oh, you mean Zip-Zip."

Zip-Zip explained to his father why the Riddles had renamed him. His father laughed, and said to the children, "I have the same trouble with your language, but you may call me Lapo, which ZIP is short for Lapodox-tromeldee," then to Zip-Zip, "Ope, does the Supreme Council know I am on Am-mu, on Venus?"

Zip-Zip nodded. "They think you may be held prisoner. A cosmic bulletin said so."

"That is very bad."

"Why, Father? Don't you want to go ZIP home?"

"Of course, Ope. But don't you see, if the Supreme Council thinks I am a prisoner, they have ZIP probably sent out a fleet of military spaceships. When those spaceships arrive here ZIP there will be grave trouble, because the Venusians do not believe that we ZIP mean no harm."

"Gosh, a fleet of flying saucers," said Randy to himself. Suddenly he remembered Tom. Tom was still in the saucer on the other side of the mountains! He had to be rescued, too. Hey, the radio, the radio in Zip-Zip's spacesuit! Would it still work? Randy had to find out.

Zip-Zip was standing beside his father, who was now

appealing to the Venusian governor to allow the Riddles, his son, and himself to leave Venus in his son's spaceship. Coming up behind Zip-Zip, Randy whispered, "What about Tom? Can you talk to him?"

"I did—on the balcony. If Vi-alta does not let us go, I shall tell him about Tom ZIP and give up the saucer."

Randy and Zip-Zip became aware of what Lapo was saying: "So you see, Vi-alta, my good friend, I can turn back the armed spaceships if I can tell their ZIP commander by cosmic-phone that I am safe and on my way home."

Vi-alta's wrinkled face looked more than ever like a prune. He said: "I repeat, Lapo, it is not within my power to free you. Such an important decision rests in the hands of all the governors of my planet. I shall call an emergency meeting of the governors, and you will have the opportunity to tell them what you have told me."

"How long will that take?"

"Half a day."

"Fifteen of our days!" exclaimed Zip-Zip

"Then it will be too late," said Lapo grimly. "Oh, Vi-alta, do you want to see your lovely white cities laid in ruin? ZIP If you do not free me and the children, that is what will surely happen. My people possess terrible weapons ZIP that can blast through your solar domes and destroy your cities. You must avoid this danger ZIP for your people's sake. Release us now, while there is yet time!"

It was a hard decision for Vi-alta to make, for anyone to make. He rose from his desk, and for some time stood looking through the open side of the room. Slowly he again faced Lapo. "How can I free you without appearing to be a traitor in the eyes of my people?"

Lapo smiled. "Do you have a weapon for personal protection?"

"A short-range ray gun in my desk."

"I have a plan," said Lapo, and he asked Vi-alta to dismiss the guard who stood by the door. The guard could not understand English, but he could *see*.

"Now," said Lapo after the guard had gone, "I am sure you can lead us to the surface ZIP without anyone stopping you."

"Yes."

"Excellent. Then you can say I stole your ray gun and forced you to help us escape ZIP and I shall carry away your weapon as proof of it." Lapo noticed that something still bothered Vi-alta. "Don't worry, my friend, I shall not trick you, and you may even drain the power ZIP from the ray gun so that it will be useless."

"It shall be as you say," said Vi-alta.

Randy, with the others, followed the straight-backed Vi-alta along the white corridor. Their echoing footsteps sounded like drumbeats in his fearful mind. However, after several Venusians passed them without so much

as a second look, he felt easier. The Venusians, Randy concluded, were a peculiar people.

Soon the little group arrived at the tube-shaped elevator shaft. Vi-alta summoned the platform and they rode past the busy levels of the Venusian city to the surface.

In the dome at the surface, Lapo turned to Vi-alta. "Will you go with us as far as the mountains? It will make your explanation to your people ZIP more believable."

"Yes," answered Vi-alta, "as far as the mountains."

They left the dome and started across the swirling yellow sand. At Lapo's suggestion the children linked hands in order to keep together. They had not gone far in this manner when Lapo called a halt and pointed in the direction of the mountains. A line of men was coming toward them. It was another procession of workers and guards from the thorium mines.

"What can we do?" cried Randy. "There's no place to hide."

"One place!" corrected Lapo. "If we can get behind the dome before they see us, we'll be safe. Hurry!"

They swung about to make a fast retreat, and were just in time to see two armed Venusians stepping out of the dome.

"Your luck is bad," said Vi-alta, his arm raised against the wind and sand. "They are not looking for you, but if they see you——"

"We're trapped!" bawled Sparky.

"Look, they see us!" said Bonnie. "They're coming!"

At the same moment one of the Venusians guarding the mine workers pointed at the little band, calling the attention of a companion to their presence.

"We have failed," groaned Lapo. "We cannot fight the Venusians, or the open desert."

"Wait!" cried Zip-Zip over the howl of the wind. "We have one chance left, one chance to get away from Venus. Tom is still in the saucer. If he ZIP can fly it over the mountains——"

"He can't fly the saucer," objected Randy.

"I think he can if I give him instructions by radio."

"Then do it at once, Opel!" said Zip-Zip's father excitedly. "I'll aim the ray gun at you, Vi-alta, to hold off your people ZIP and I do not believe they will attempt to use their weapons if we stand close to you."

"Tom! Tom! Zip-Zip calling! Can you hear me?"

Randy pressed close to Zip-Zip, straining to hear his brother's reply.

"Tom! Can you——?"

"I hear you," came an anxious voice from the receiver in Zip-Zip's spacesuit. "Are you all O.K.? Boy, I've been worrying about you since——"

"Listen, Tom, listen very carefully! We're in great danger, but you can save us. ZIP You must fly the saucer over the mountains——"

"What!" barked Tom over the radio.

"Yes, Tom! I'll give you step-by-step instructions. You can do it, Tom."

Zip-Zip looked worried. Tom was not convinced and was making excuses. Hearing Tom, Randy fairly shouted that he had to "run the saucer" and that he shouldn't be "so stubborn."

"Talk faster, Ope!" ordered Lapo. "The Venusians are closing in on us—can't tell what risks they'll take ZIP for Vi-alta."

"Tom," barked Zip-Zip, "press down on the four blue buttons. See that no green buttons are below the level of the ZIP panel like the blue ones. If they are, press them and they will pop up. Now you are ZIP ready to take off. All right so far?"

"Y-yeah."

"Slowly push forward the red lever, *slowly*, Tom."

The radio was silent for a while, then Zip-Zip and Randy heard three breathless words, "I'm taking off!" followed by a frightened "What'll I do now?"

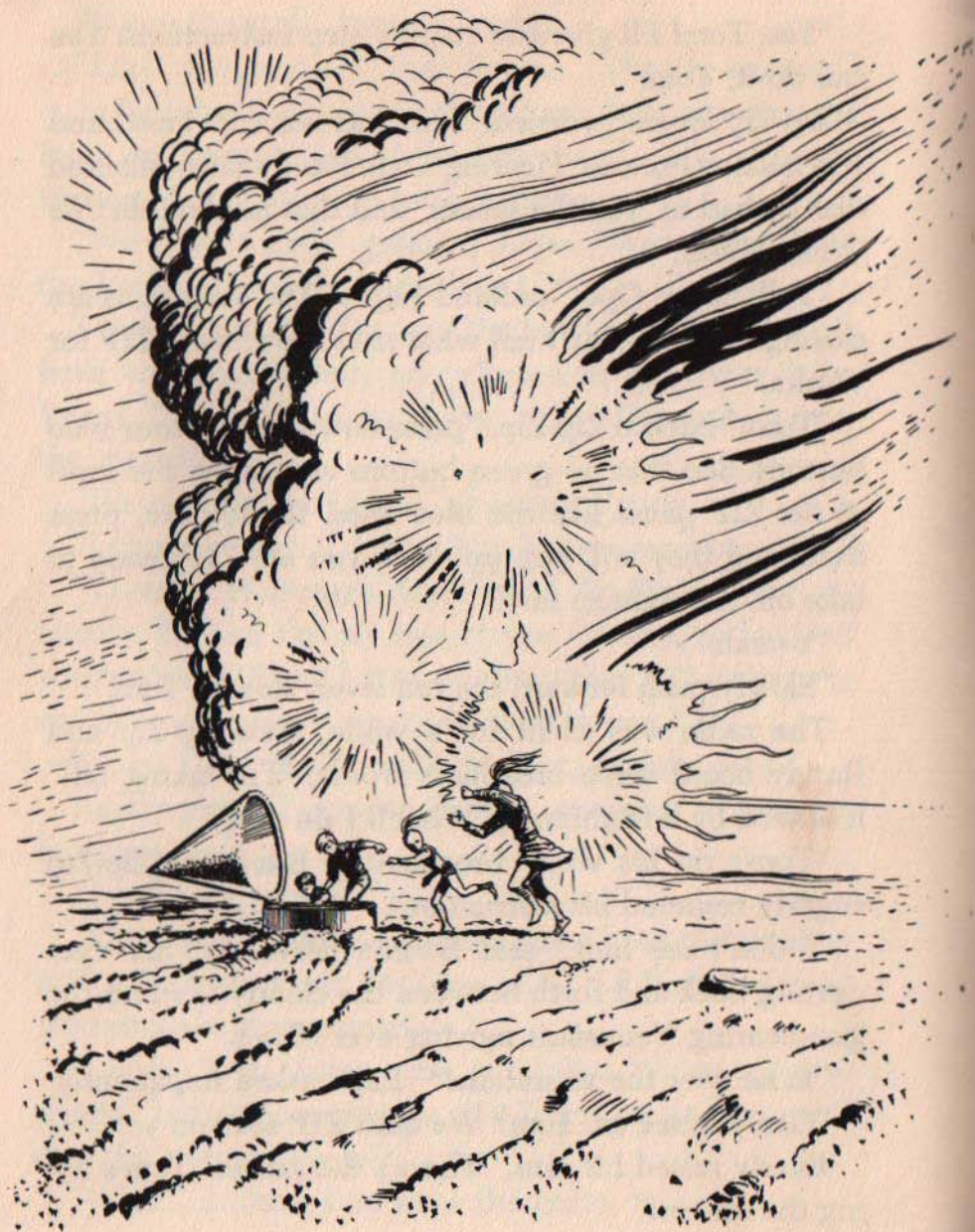
"Tom's on his way!" broadcasted Randy as Zip-Zip eagerly resumed his instructions.

"I don't see him," said Bonnie nervously, her eyes darting back and forth between the cloudy sky and the gun-bearing Venusians moving ever closer.

"Is he over the mountains?" Lapo asked impatiently.

"Can you see us, Tom? We can't ZIP see you yet."

Randy raised his arm. "There's the saucer! Tom's flying the saucer!"



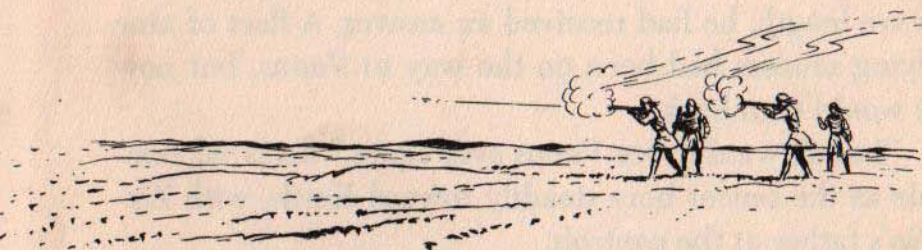
Now began the hardest part of the job for both Tom and Zip-Zip: landing the saucer close enough to the escaping prisoners so they could board it.

"Cut out green button three," said Zip-Zip, "and slowly pull back on the red lever—that's it—you're ZIP coming in fine—a little more power—steady. Now, the E-beams—*pull* the red and white lever ZIP on the left side of the panel, count to three, and release it."

"Gotcha!" was the amazing reply.

Seconds later the saucer struck the desert, churning up a blinding cloud of sand, and wringing from Zip-Zip an order to pull back on the red lever.

"The saucer's gone!" exclaimed Randy as the wind carried off the sand.



"No," said Zip-Zip, "there's the hatch!"

The children and Lapo ran to it, with Zip-Zip shouting to Tom by radio to open the hatch, to pull the black lever. Vi-alta just looked on, motionless. The Venusian guards, seeing that their leader was no longer threatened,

raised their guns. Balls of exploding green flame burst in the air over the opening hatch. The children went through the hatch like hounded rabbits. Lapo bravely shielded them with his body, and as a blast of green flame blackened his tunic, he seemed to fall into the saucer. "Hit space, Opel!" he cried.

Once inside the saucer, Zip-Zip had gone to the controls, and when he had heard his father's frantic appeal he had sent the saucer rocketing skyward. Lapo—who had been shaken up by the Venusian fireball, but not hurt—had praised Tom for his skill and courage. As far as everyone was concerned, Tom was a hero. After the saucer was beyond the disturbing atmosphere of Venus, Lapo had sent a message over the cosmic-phone, telling his people that he was safe and was returning to Mars by way of Earth. Three minutes after using a second wave length, he had received an answer. A fleet of nine flying saucers had been on the way to Venus, but now it would turn back.

"I don't want to see Venus ever again," declared Bonnie as the saucer bore steadily toward Earth, with Zip-Zip's father at the controls.

"Ah, I thought it was fun," said Sparky from a bunk. He was strapped down there because the control seat held only five.

"You shouldn't have made such a long flight," said Lapo, "but I must admit I'm very thankful you did. ZIP

You saved my life, and perhaps prevented the Venusians from causing the destruction ZIP of their cities." With a smile in his voice, he added, "I'd like to take you Earth-children to Lafonee to show you off to the ZIP Supreme Council."

"Gee," said Tom, "that sounds swell."

"I want to go home," moaned Bonnie.

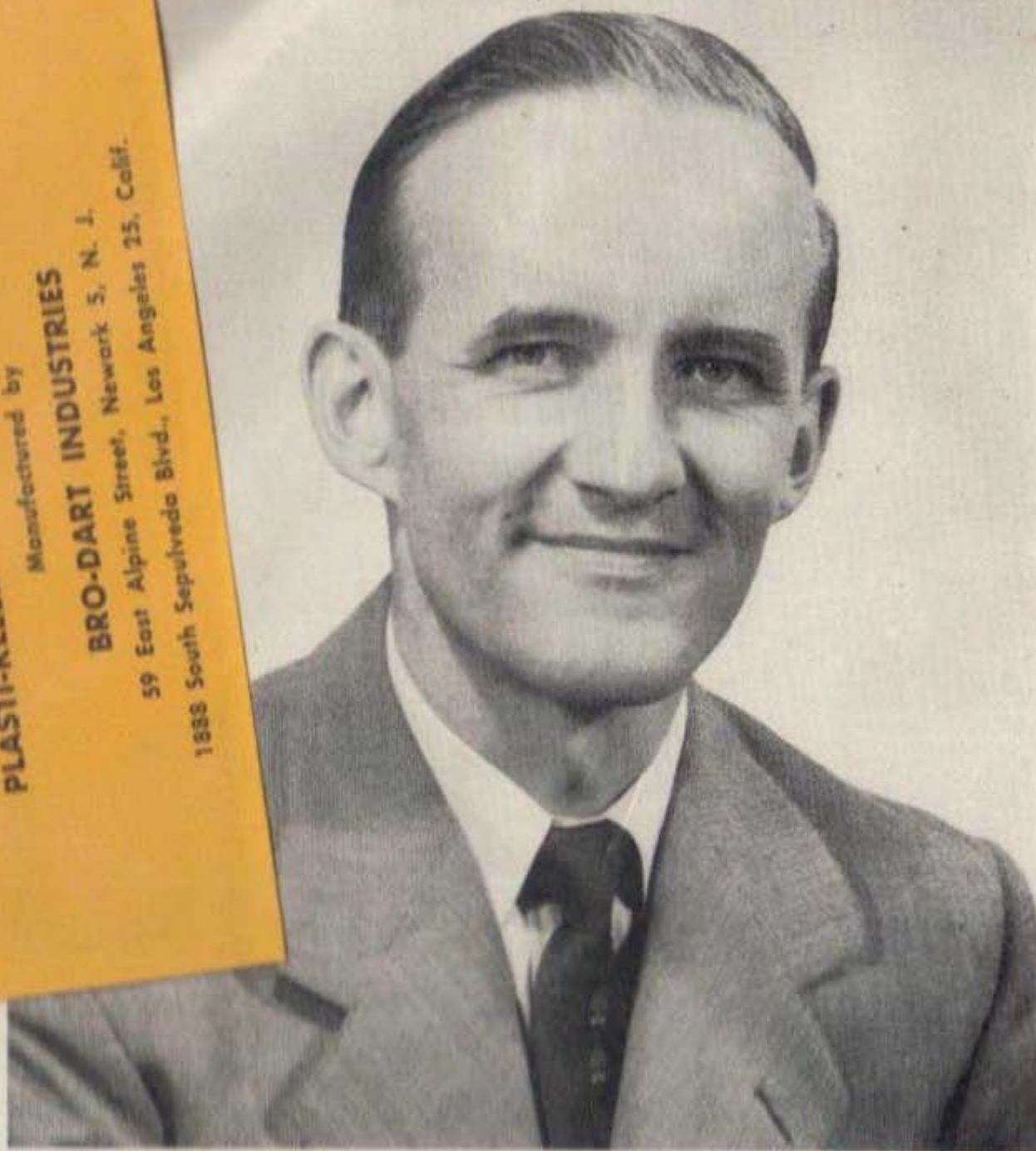
Randy was undecided. He kept thinking how much fun it would be to tell his father about Venus.

"Well, you could come to Mars another time," suggested Zip-Zip.

All four Riddles quickly approved Zip-Zip's idea. They would leave the trip to Mars for another time.

In the dark of space Earth still looked like a star.

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Says Mr. Schealer: "In the enjoyment of story telling, nothing can compare to the personal experience of reading, especially in our early years. It is my desire to give children the same pleasure I derived from my favorite authors of childhood, from cozy worlds 'realer than real.' "