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the HIDDEN PLANET

SCIENCE-FICTION ADVENTURES ON VENUS

by CHAD OLIVER • LEIGH BRACKETT
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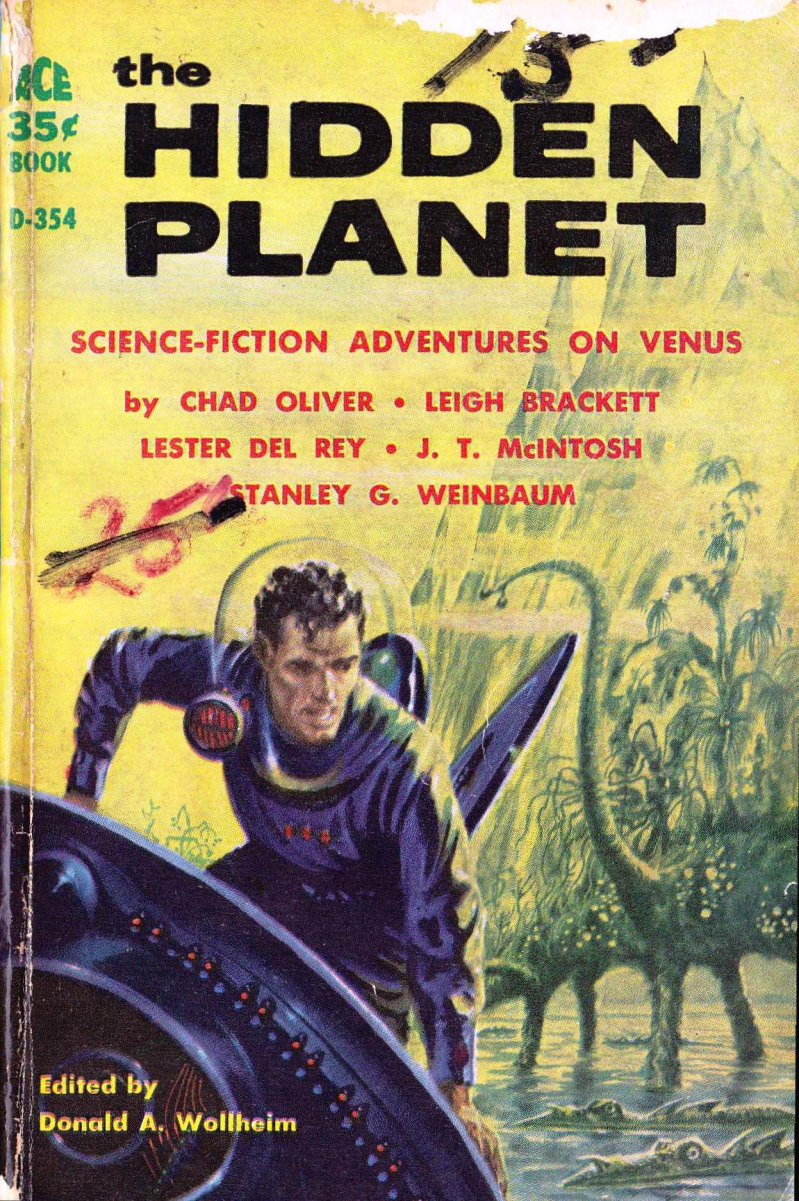

Edited by
Donald A. Wollheim

FIRST ON VENUS!

The world of Venus may be THE HIDDEN PLANET to astronomers but it's no secret to the vivid imaginations of good science-fiction writers! Instead, it's the locale of as exciting and adventure-packed a group of stories as have ever been gathered in one book.

You'll read the short novel of the man who made Venus the breeding ground of his experiments with people, until the product proved too hot for Earth to handle. There's the story of the adventurer who probed too deeply beneath the depths of Venus's mighty ocean. There are the explorers who met the philosophical plants and the jungle travelers who found that what Venus had to offer made Darkest Africa seem pale.

There's lots of exciting adventure on *The Hidden Planet,* such as only Chad Oliver, Leigh Brackett, Lester Del Rey, and the others can write.

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, who edited THE HIDDEN PLANET, has the distinction of having conceived and edited the very first science-fiction anthology ever published (1943). An authority on science-fiction for over a quarter century, he has written and sold stories to many periodicals, he has edited magazines of fantasy, and is the author of several published novels.

A native New Yorker, he and his wife and daughter share their home with one of the world's most extensive collections of fantasy literature.

Previous science-fiction and fantasy anthologies edited by Donald A. Wollheim for *Ace Books* include THE END OF THE WORLD (S-183), THE EARTH IN PERIL (D-205), MEN ON THE MOON (D-277), and THE MACABRE READER (D-353).

THE HIDDEN PLANET

Science-fiction Adventures on Venus

Edited by

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

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INTRODUCTION

EVERYONE IS familiar with the Evening Star, whose brilliant, steady rays dominate for an hour or two the evening sky just after sunset. Those who rise at dawn will also know the Morning Star which, at other times of the year, heralds the rising of the sun. Modern men know that these are one and the same vision, the planet Venus, most beautiful and brilliant of celestial objects, by virtue of being the closest planetary neighbor to our own Earth.

For thousands of years men have marveled at its glow and wondered at its mystery. Yet it is to be given to us, to those fortunate to be alive in 1959 and the next decade, to learn some of the answers. For it has already been announced as government policy that rocket probes will begin their efforts to cross the thirty million miles of space that separates the two worlds at their nearest approach, and inform their human senders of what may lie beneath the veil of the Hidden Planet.

What we know of Venus is little yet tantalizing. We know it to be by weight and size a near twin of the Earth: 7,700 miles in diameter to our 7,900. We know that on Venus a person of 100 pounds would weigh 85.

We know it has an atmosphere and a thick one. Closer to the sun than Earth, still its temperature on some parts of its surface should not be prohibitive to life. And yet—no one can say what that surface is like. For Venus is covered eternally by a thick blanket of unyielding clouds. The very length of its day is unknown—opinions of astronomers vary from an estimate of 22 hours to one of 46 days! The nature of its surface, whether desert, ocean, or morass is totally unknown. Even the constituents of its atmosphere are still subject to debate.

These are some of the things that only a prober rocket can answer. That and the question of whether there is oxygen in its air and water on its surface, without which life on Venus would be highly unlikely. But meantime, while we are waiting for the probes to begin their hazardous flame-driven journeys, we can project some of the possible secrets of the Hidden Planet against the screen of the imagination. In the five adventures on Venus included in this book there are certain to be some points that will prove accurately prophetic. So read *The Hidden Planet* not only for the thrill of good science-fiction but also for a "sneak preview" of things to come.

—*Donald A. Wollheim*

FIELD EXPEDIENT

by CHAD OLIVER

I.

THE COLD WIND SWEPT IN from the gray Pacific, drenching Los Angeles under sheets of driving rain. Keith Ortega, pushing his way through the uneasy puddles of Wilshire Walk, began to regret leaving his copter at the Center. He was dry enough in his rain-bender, but the air coming in from underneath the force lines was tasting decidedly stale.

The broad walkway was deserted around him, although he could see a few lights spilling out wetly from store windows. A violet government airsign hung in the rain, glowing gently just above his head: DON'T ROCK THE BOAT.

He turned left at the empty Santa Monica cross and two blocks later he reached the Vandervort Tower. A flashing orange neon sign above the ornate street doorway said: WE WANT YOUR BABY.

Keith Ortega stepped through the door and hurriedly shut off his rain-bender. He took a deep breath of relatively fresh air and felt much better. There was no one in the street lobby; he had already guessed that business would be slow this afternoon. He went across to the elevator, his feet light and awkward without the rain-benders on his shoes, and went up to the tenth-floor interview room. Surprisingly, it was in use.

Ellen Linford, who looked like the epitome of American motherhood, had another young couple on the hook. She was bouncing a baby on her knee and smiling, and even Keith's knowledge that Ellen detested babies failed to spoil the

warmth of the scene. Ellen was a good actress. She had to be.

Keith assumed what he trusted was a kind and paternal expression and sat down next to Ellen. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Linford," he said. He beamed at the baby and chucked it under its chin. "What have we here? How are you, little fellow?"

"It's a girl," Ellen corrected him. She turned to the nervous couple before her. "Well, aren't we in luck! This is Mr. Ortega *personally.*"

Brother, thought Keith.

The couple brightened, confronted with Fame in the flesh.

"I'd like to have you meet Mr. and Mrs. Sturtevant," Ellen said. "They've decided to leave their little Hazel to the Foundation. Isn't that nice?"

"Wonderful," Keith Ortega agreed heartily. He shook hands with the parents. "You've made a very wise decision."

They hesitated. Then the woman blurted out the inevitable question. "I still don't understand all the conditions, sir," she said in a too-high voice. "Why couldn't we see Hazel just once in a while? I mean . . . we wouldn't want to rock the boat or anything . . . but just to make sure she's all right—"

"I've been trying to explain," Ellen began.

"Well now, Mrs. Sturtevant," Ortega cut in, "please let me assure you that we are in complete sympathy with your request. Your reaction is perfectly normal for an American mother, and we're glad that you are concerned about your child. Unfortunately, it just would not be wise for you to see Hazel again, even for a little while."

Mrs. Sturtevant looked at her husband for support, didn't get any, and faltered ahead on her own. "But *why?*"

Keith frowned and made precise pyramids with his hands. "Facts are facts, my dear," he said slowly. "If you wish to keep Hazel, that is certainly your privilege. You have come to the Foundation of your own free will, and you surely have

investigated us enough to learn that we are an absolutely reliable concern. We believe that children entrusted to our care are entitled to a life of their own, and we have found that repeated contacts with the original parents just make it tough on the child. Now then, you want Hazel to lead a full, normal, happy life, don't you?"

"Of course we do," the husband said. Plainly, *he* didn't care what happened to little Hazel.

Keith smiled. "Then you must trust us," he said. "You can't have it both ways. I give you my personal word that Hazel will be in good hands with the Foundation. If you have any doubts, I suggest that you go back home with your child and talk it over some more. The decision is yours to make."

The parents held a whispered consultation. Mrs. Sturtevant finally whispered, "We'll leave Hazel with you."

"Splendid!" Ortega said. He shook hands again. "You just sign the papers with Mrs. Linford, and that's all there is to it. I'll look in on Hazel from time to time myself, so please don't worry about her." He looked at his watch, although he knew perfectly well what time it was. "I'm afraid I must be going. Good luck to you!"

He hurried out of the interview room to the elevator, leaving Ellen to finish things up. He couldn't take the last farewells to the child; they gave him the creeps. If the parents loved their children so much, why did they give them to the Foundation?

The elevator whisked him up to the fifteenth floor.

Outside, the cold rain dropped from the sky and ran in rivers down the sides of the Vandervort Tower.

Keith Ortega checked in at his office, a pleasant sanctum lined with shelves of books and a clinging memory of blue tobacco smoke, and the first thing he saw was the red light blinking over the tri-di.

Someone had called. Since his private number was not

generally known, the caller had probably been either Carrie or Old Man Vandervort himself. He dropped into the comfortable chair behind his desk and punched the button.

It was Old Man Vandervort. His lined face filled the screen, the snow-white beard bobbing up and down to punctuate his sentences. "Hello, Ortega," he said. "Out again, I see. If you should by chance show up in your office today, I want you to come out and see me personally before you go home. Something important has come up. That's all." The screen faded.

"Damnation," Ortega said aloud. "The master's voice."

Well, there was no getting out of it. He would have to go hold hands with the old joker, even though he knew that the "something important" was probably nothing more than Vandervort's wanting someone to talk to. This made the second time this week, but then Vandervort was paying the bills.

He caught the elevator up to the main entrance at the thirtieth floor copter field and signed himself out in a Foundation copter. It was still raining hard enough to discourage traffic, but the wind conditions were not really prohibitive.

He lifted the copter up to the five-thousand-foot lane and gunned her north at a modest two hundred per. He kept slightly inland from the coastline, and set his pilot to hold him well below the overland freight routes. There was very little traffic, since the subs were holding back from the unloading chutes until the weather calmed down a bit.

In fifteen minutes, the copter veered off to the right and buzzed up Vandervort's Canyon. He was challenged four times by the Old Man's watchdog scanners, but managed to convince them that he was who he said he was. He made a wet, slippery landing on the patio field of the huge estate, activated his rain-bender, presented his credentials to a guard who should have known him by sight, and finally got inside the visitor's wing.

One of the butlers bowed, smiled, and said, "Right this way, Dr. Ortega. Mr. Vandervort is expecting you."

"So I heard," Ortega said.

He followed the anachronism through the familiar labyrinth of richly-carpeted hallways, his senses overwhelmed as usual by the sheer *richness* of the Old Man's castle. It wasn't really that the place was in bad taste, but simply that there was so confounded *much* of it.

The procession of two moved sedately through the visitors' wing and on into the private quarters, which were a trifle more elaborate, if possible. It marched up the marble stairs to the second floor, down the interminable gray passage, and finally came to a well-oiled halt before a fantastic mahogany door.

Congratulations, thought Ortega. *You have circled the globe on roller-skates.*

The butler knocked discreetly on the mahogany slab. A tiny green light blinked on in the center of the door.

"You may go in now, sir," said the butler, and bowed.

Ortega resisted the impulse to bow back and stepped through the opening door. He was just in time to catch a glimpse of an exceedingly sensuous young woman making her swishing exit by means of another door.

"Ah there, Ortega!" boomed Old Man Vandervort, straightening up in his chair. "What kept you?"

The room, like everything else in the mansion, was big. It had a wall-to-wall brown rug that must have cost a fortune, and it was literally stuffed with tables, chairs, desks, fireplaces, books, paintings, tapes, flowers, gew-gaws, drapes, and nameless shapes and sounds. As always, it was much too hot, like a greenhouse on a humid day.

James Murray Vandervort was a small man, but he looked like what he was: the richest human being on Earth. He was dressed in a dark-green lounging robe. His face was red

from too much brandy and his trim white beard was slightly askew. He was one hundred and five years old and he had a bad heart.

Ortega said, "I was delayed by a typhoon. Sorry."

Vandervort laughed rather gaspingly and his face got still redder. "Well, well," he said, "never mind about that. Have a brandy." His voice was surprisingly loud, as though he were constantly shouting over great distances.

Ortega accepted the brandy, personally poured by the Old Man, and wiped his already moist forehead. He figured that the room temperature must be close to ninety, and he also figured that he was in for at least an hour of it.

The Old Man began, as was his custom, by energetically beating around some bushes. "How's business?" he asked. "How many have we got for this load?"

Ortega sank into a huge, soft chair that reduced his six feet of height to approximately pygmy stature. "It's been a little slow today, Van. But we've got sixty-five so far. All healthy and yelling their heads off."

"Um-m-m. And the breakdown?"

"Thirty-four set for the Foundation. The rest are already on the ship."

"Good. Splendid. Any problems?"

"None to speak of. I'm still worried about parking that ship out in Arizona. If the government should stumble onto that crate—"

Vandervort laughed his alarming laugh and clapped his thin hands together. "The *government!* How many times must I tell you, Keith—*I'll* handle the government. Or anybody else, for that matter. More brandy?"

Ortega could have struggled along without the brandy in the jungle heat, but he accepted another glass. It was part of the ritual. You simply had to wait the Old Man out. If he had something important to say, he would say it eventually.

If not—well, Van was powerful enough to indulge in his whims.

"I'm a big man, Keith," Vandervort said, his pale blue eyes darting around the room.

"I'm aware of that."

"I can buy and sell the government, and make money on the deal. I've got the best experts in the world faking those records at the Foundation. Half the babies stay here on Earth, and that's enough to cover our tracks. I'm not worried about the government."

"So you keep saying. But *I'm* worried, just the same."

Vandervort talked for twenty minutes on how unworried he was by the world government. He pointed out again and again how careful they had been, how many senators he owned, and how what they were doing was not illegal—only extralegal. Finally, after Keith Ortega estimated that he had dropped about five pounds sitting in the sweat bath with the Old Man, he edged in again toward the subject.

"How about our colonies?" Vandervort demanded sipping his brandy. "How about the robots?"

Keith shrugged. "O.K. as far as I know," he said. "You know as much about it as I do. It's still too early to get definite results. Culture A is only six years old, after all, and that's the oldest one we've got."

Vandervort drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. "In other words," he said, "you don't know."

Keith raised his eyebrows. "Van, we're getting reports every week, and we've got twenty men and women up there—"

"But *you* don't know. And you're the one who *has* to know." The Old Man got to his feet with an effort and paced the floor. The slippers on his feet *pad-padded* as he walked. His eyes began to gleam with the strange fanaticism that Keith had never understood. He stopped and

jabbed a finger at Ortega. "Can't you see that, Keith? Can't you?"

Keith knew what Vandervort was talking about. He felt a vague unease stirring within him. "Spell it out, Van," he said.

Vandervort walked over and stood right in front of him, breathing hard. A too-prominent vein pulsed in his neck. The heat was stifling. "All right, Keith, I'll be more explicit. We've been working together for ten years, ever since I yanked you off your soap-box and put you back on the job. It was understood when you set up the colonies that you were to go out there yourself and supervise the project. I think it's time you went, and I think you ought to stay at least a year. How about it?"

"There's no need—"

"I think there *is* a need. Nothing must go wrong out there, do you hear? Nothing! You've master-minded enough from this end. I think you and Caroline should go out with the next shipload—and I'd hate to make that an order, Keith."

Keith smiled. "Sit down, Van. You'll pop an artery. And don't threaten me, please. I'm not your slave."

The Old Man frowned, considered, and sat down again. A faintly baffled expression crossed his face. "I should think you would *want* to go, Keith."

"I'll think it over."

"All right. Sorry. It's just . . . well, never mind. You can go, Keith."

"Thanks I'll call you."

He left the room, anxious to get out of the heat, and saw the quite amazing girl come back in before he got out the door. The butler was waiting for him, and escorted him back to the patio field.

It was night, and still raining. He lifted the copter out of the canyon and flew southeast toward his home on the desert. Far below him, almost hidden in a mask of rain, the

light of Los Angeles glittered like multi-colored diamonds embedded in black sand.

A government airsign loomed up like a pale violet ghost ahead of him: DON'T ROCK THE BOAT. Keith flew through it and it reformed itself behind him, patiently.

Carrie would be waiting.

Keith looked up, into the darkness and the rain. Venus was invisible, and a long, long way from home.

II.

THEY HAD REAL STEAK FOR supper that night, which was excellent, and when they were done they retired to the annex. They hardly ever sat in the glass-and-steel living room, unless they were entertaining guests, since both of them found it impossible to relax there. The annex was primarily a cozy room stuffed off in a wing—an artless conglomeration of books, tapes, half-finished paintings, old-fashioned furniture, and one small bar.

Mostly, they lived in the annex.

Carrie slipped a battered smock over her head and began to poke at her current artistic effort, an oil painting of a cactus in the desert sun. The subject, Keith thought, was none too original. He sprawled on a couch and pretended to read, watching his wife.

She was a tiny blonde, barely five foot two, with a doll-like face that invariably earned her the designation of "cute," an adjective she cordially detested. Ortega had married her twenty years ago, when she was twenty-five, and they were still comfortably in love with each other. They had had a good life together, and Keith found it hard to put his finger on just what had been lacking in it.

Perhaps he was at fault. He was a big man, and she had tended to walk in his shadow, both mentally and physically.

Twenty years ago, he had been a leading socioculturist for the world federation, but he had become bored with the exactness and easy predictions and trivial problems. He had quit his job and gone around the world in an astonishing sailboat, looking for something he couldn't find. Carrie had adjusted without complaint. He had formulated his Dark Age thesis that had given him fame of a sort, and had lectured and written about his culture until he discovered that no one was taking him very seriously. He had drifted into an easy sarcasm that reflected an inner unease that he could not quite understand, and even the excitement of the Vandervort project had failed to satisfy him. He was not, he knew, the easiest man in the universe to live with.

It would have been inaccurate to call Carrie depressed, but on the other hand he would have hesitated to say that she was happy. *Restless.* That was the word. She shifted from painting to writing, cheerfully admitting that she wasn't much good at either, and from night-life in Los Angeles to long morning horseback rides across the desert. She seldom complained, and she never interfered. She seemed, somehow, to be waiting, always waiting, without knowing just what it was that she waited for.

They had both wanted children, but the children hadn't come. They had toyed with the idea of adoption, but had never taken any concrete steps in that direction.

"I saw Van today, Carrie," he said finally, lowering his book.

"Oh?" She added a dab of yellow to the brown of the sand. "Is he still alive?"

"He'll go on forever. I wish I knew what he was after."

Carrie squinted at the painting. "Well, we don't know, and that's that."

"It's a funny deal, Carrie. I've set this whole thing up with his money and his determination. I've spent ten years of my life on it, and I *still* don't know why he's doing it."

"You could always quit, Keith. We could haul the old sailboat out again."

"No, baby. I can't quit this time." He hesitated. "Carrie, Van wants us to go to Venus for a year to get the feel of what's going on there."

Carrie put down her brush and turned around, eyebrows arched. "You mean, in *person*?"

"In person. To Venus."

"What else happened today—war with Sweden?"

"This is on the level, sugar. He wants us to go."

Carrie came over and perched on the edge of the couch, almost birdlike in her smallness. She kissed him, pleasantly. She lit a cigarette and looked around her at the books and paintings and friendly walls. "When do we leave, hon?"

"Do you *want* to go? You know what Venus would be like. It's a long way from everybody and everything—"

"I think it might do us good, Keith," she said slowly. She ran her slim fingers through her pale blond hair. "I'd like to go."

"You'd have to go to school for a while, baby."

"I'm willing." Her blue eyes suddenly glowed with an unexpected, surprised hope. "Keith, you know what you were always saying about this Dark Age of ours? Well, I've often thought . . . I mean—"

He looked at his wife and smiled. "You've thought that *we're* caught in our culture, too," he said. "We're stale. I've thought the same thing. But somehow we just drift on—it isn't easy to break away."

"We *can*, Keith. I know we can."

She wanted this. She wanted it desperately. Keith himself wasn't sure, but he kept his indecision well disguised. He kissed his wife.

"We'll see, baby," he said. "We'll see."

The next few months went by in a hurry.

Carrie was busy being indoctrinated into the Halaja culture pattern, but Keith Ortega had too much time on his hands. After he had thought himself into the same hole about one hundred times too often, he went back to see Vandervort.

The Old Man, looking like a flushed, bearded gnome preserved for eternity in a stifling burial vault, seemed glad to see him, but slightly apprehensive. He was worried again, fretting over details. "To what do I owe this honor of this voluntary visit, Keith?" he boomed in his too-loud voice, pouring out a glass of exquisite but unwelcome brandy. "You haven't changed your mind?"

"No, Van. We're still going."

"Good. Splendid!" The pale blue eyes in the red face darted nervously around the enormous room, lighting here on a vase, there on an ancient statuette, somewhere else on a rosy fireplace. Despite the terrific heat, his skin was dry and Keith knew that it was cool to the touch. The loud voice tried to fill up the room. "Well? Anything wrong?"

That was unusual directness for Vandervort, who was usually more subtle than he appeared. Keith took advantage of it. "Nothing's wrong, Van, except with me."

"Oh?" The Old Man hauled himself to his feet, heedless of his doctor's instructions, popped a pill into his mouth, and washed it down with brandy. He *pad-padded* across the rich brown rug. The vein pulsed in his neck, feeding his brain with blood. "Well, well? Scared? Worried?"

Keith took out his pipe, filled it, and lit it. The blue smoke curled up through the damp heat and filmed across the ceiling. "I'm worried about *you*," he said.

"Ah," said Vandervort, sinking into his chair again and pouring more brandy. "You fear I may die and leave you in an . . . um-m-m . . . uncomfortable position? Is that it?"

"No. It's your motive I'm worried about, Van."

Vandervort narrowed his eyes to slits "That doesn't concern you, Keith."

"I think I'm entitled to know."

The Old Man seemed to shrink in his chair, looking smaller than ever. His white beard quivered slightly. Almost, he looked—what was the word? Afraid? What could James Murray Vandervort be afraid of? "Your salary has been good," he said, his voice not quite so loud as before.

"I had money before I knew you. The money is secondary."

The pale blue eyes opened. "Why did *you* take the job, Keith?"

Keith Ortega hesitated. Well, why had he? Or did he know, really? "The ideas were mine," he said, feeling for words. "I thought it would be interesting. I guess I was bored." He smiled. "Maybe I *wanted* to rock the boat a little." The words did not satisfy him.

"Good. Splendid. Has it over occurred to you that maybe I just might want to see what would happen? Maybe *I'm* bored. Give a man a few billion dollars and he's still a man, Keith."

"I'm not questioning your humanity." Keith puffed slowly on his pipe. "But I can't buy that story about your just being curious. I've watched you too closely, Van. This is more important to you than life itself. Why, Van, *why?*"

Vandervort looked away, into the filled emptiness of the great room, and said nothing.

Keith Ortega watched him closely. The Old Man was one hundred and five years old. Like Keith, he had no children. He had poured a billion dollars into the secret Venus project, and he had turned into a fanatic. What was he after on Venus?

Keith knew the old boy fairly well. He was certainly not just a humanitarian idealist; he cared very little about the human animal one way or the other. He wasn't after com-

mercial gain—after so many years, business bored him, and at best he regarded it as a means to an end. He was most emphatically not a dreamer.

"Maybe," Keith said finally, to break the long silence, "you want to kick man upstairs to the stars. Maybe you believe in destiny."

The Old Man laughed his booming laugh, his red face flushing with the strain. "Maybe I do, Keith," he chuckled. "Maybe I do."

There was more talk, but it was singularly unproductive. Early in the morning, without finding what he had come for, Keith said good night and left. The Old Man stayed in his chair in the too-hot room, smiling a little, his eyes nervously peering into the shadows, sipping his brandy.

Keith lifted his copter and flew toward home, with the lights of Los Angeles below him and a full moon above him. The night wind, deflected by the vents, was fresh and cold in his face. High over his head, the freight lanes were shadowed with ships.

The violet sign floated in the air: DON'T ROCK THE BOAT.

All the way home he thought of Old Man Vandervort, sitting alone in his castle, and the simple question whispered through his mind:

Why?

Some questions, fortunately, were easier to answer.

Keith Ortega had answered some of them to his own satisfaction a long time ago. He had written a book, with the somewhat melodramatic title of *The New Age of Darkness,* and the book in a sense had led Vandervort to the idea of the Venus project. The book had been widely read, and was generally regarded as possibly correct and certainly amusing.

No one took the book very seriously—which tended to confirm its thesis.

No one but Vandervort.

It was about the planet Earth.

What was the book about?

The story of Earth was a familiar one. After a million years or so of bashing in each other's brains with bigger and better weapons, the human animal had finally achieved a fairly uniform, stable, planet-wide civilization. He had done it out of sheer necessity, just a cat's whisker this side of nuclear extinction, but he had done it.

By the year 2050, the dream of One World was no longer a dream.

The human animal was living on it.

In his understandable haste, however, he had overlooked a few basic points.

One civilization had taken over from many diverse civilizations. Given the facts of history, it could not have been otherwise. An essentially Western culture, due to a running headstart in technology, had spread itself thickly around the globe. It had taken root and prospered wherever it had touched. It had swallowed and digested every other way of life on the planet Earth.

There was One World, and there was peace.

A standardized, uniform, flourishing, world-wide civilization.

The human animal began to breathe more easily.

There was a joker in the deck, even though his laugh was a long time in coming. One World meant one culture pattern. There had been no orchestration of differences, but simply an almost complete *obliteration* of differences. When man was in a hurry, he took the quickest available shortcuts.

It was a good culture pattern, by and large, and the human animal was better off than he had ever been before. It was a lifeway of plenty, a culture of unlimited technological resources, a philosophy founded on the dignity of man.

Earth became a paradise—literally, there was a paradise on Earth. The jungles and the deserts and the arctic wastes, when they were needed, were converted into rich, green land. The power of the sun was harnessed, and harnessed cheaply. Vandervort Enterprises made a thousand fortunes from solar power, but they delivered the goods.

The culture flowered.

The worlds of the solar system were briefly explored, written up, and ignored. Both Mars and Venus, contrary to early semi-scientific guesses, were found to be habitable. Habitable, but not very palatable. Mars was an almost waterless desert, and Venus a strange jungle world that never saw the sun. With the untapped resources of Earth ready and waiting in the back yard, the other planets were not worth colonizing.

One thing about Paradise: nobody wanted to leave it.

The human animal stayed home in droves.

He had a good thing on Earth. It was up to him to appreciate it, to protect it, to cherish it. The new golden rule was: DON'T ROCK THE BOAT.

The uniform culture pattern, the framework for human existence, filled out. Every culture has a potential beyond which it cannot go. Every culture has a stopping point. It can achieve its values, attain its goals, follow every path that is open to it. When that happens, whether in Greece or Rome or Stone-Age Australia, the culture exhausts itself and begins merely to repeat what it has already done. Throughout history when a civilization reached its climax and leveled off, there was a new, fresh, vital culture somewhere else to take up the slack and go off in a new direction, jolting the old civilization out of its rut.

This time there *were* no rival cultures.

There was nothing to take over.

By the year 2100, the civilization of Earth had shot its ammunition. It was a perfect, static, frozen Western cul-

ture. It began to repeat itself over and over, endlessly. It went nowhere, and took its own sweet time doing it.

It was not decadent. It did not retrogress. It did not really deteriorate. It simply jogged along its well-worn circular cinder track, not working up a sweat, mildly pleased with itself.

Most people did not know what had happened, of course. How could they? Did the citizens of the Dark Ages know that the ages were dark? More significantly, did they give a damn?

People were as happy as they had ever been, after a fashion. They were well-fed. They were comfortable. There was no atomic horror staring them in the face. Kids still fell in love, and spring still came around every year.

Go up to the man in the copter. Tell him that his culture has run out of gas.

So what? DON'T ROCK THE BOAT.

Still, there were signs. Ignorance always carries a price tag.

The loss of cultural vitality made itself manifest—very slowly, the birth rate began to fall. The number of suicides, even in paradise, began to go up. People killed themselves for reasons that bordered on the whimsical. Parents who had children often did not want them. The number of illegitimate children, despite the lowered birthrate, went up.

The culture was *aimless.*

The word wasn't decay.

It was boredom.

These were the facts, as Keith Ortega had worked them out. These were the facts that Vandervort had to deal with. These were the facts that added up to Venus.

At five o'clock in the morning on the first day of September in the year 2150, Keith Ortega and his wife boarded the

Foundation ship hidden under an unreclaimed area of the Arizona desert.

In addition to Keith and Carrie, the ship carried two pilots, a navigator, a doctor, fifty babies, twenty-five special humanoid robots, computers, and supplies.

Keith and Carrie sat in their cabin. There was nothing to see—no windows, no viewscreens, no control panels, no flashing lights. There was nothing to do. Neither of them had ever taken off on a spaceship before. They waited.

A low whine whistled through the ship, and steadied into a low, powerful throbbing. The beat of the air-conditioner picked up. An electronic relay *thunked* heavily into position.

"Come on, come on," Keith whispered.

The lights dimmed. A muffled, coughing roar cut loose from somewhere far away. There was a quick giddiness, a sudden second when the heart skipped a beat. Then the lights brightened again, the sound steadied, and the ship's gentle gravity field took hold.

The ship went up.

Up, up through the pale sunlight of early morning. Up through the still, soundless sea that never knew morning or night, laughter or tears.

Earth was gone.

Keith smiled at his wife and wondered how long it would be before either of them saw a blue sky again.

III.

VENUS.

Keith had a mental picture of it, and had even seen photographs and scientific reports brought back by the early expeditions. He thought he knew what he was getting into.

The reality, of course, was different.

When they stepped down from the ship at the receiving

station, twenty-five million miles from Earth, his first surprised impression was one of *sameness.*

Even scientific accounts tended to emphasize the unusual and the unique. Reading old accounts of the Sahara or the Amazon Basin, it was possible to forget that those places were on the same Earth with Los Angeles or London or New Delhi—possible even to get the impression that the inhabitants weren't really human beings at all.

More than anything else, the receiving station area of Venus looked like an obscure corner of Earth on a mildly unusual day. It was very cloudy, which was to be expected, and the air was like thick gray fog. It was warm and damp, and the atmosphere tasted artificially sweet and heady. Gray-green vegetation circled the station like a choking wall, and the hush in the air was a thick and heavy oil.

But the really *alien* aspects of Venus—the diffuse colonies of oxygen-breathing organisms that webbed the higher clouds, the strange temperature currents that precipitated the water vapor before it could rise to the four-mile carbon dioxide bands—were invisible.

While the doctor and the perfectly humanoid robots unloaded the babies, Keith and Carrie started across to the dome-shaped station house. Mark Kamoto spotted them before they had taken ten steps. He ran up to them, waving and hollering.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Welcome to the Underwater Kingdom!"

Four hours and two pots of coffee later, they were still talking full blast, in that inevitable outburst of verbiage which occurs whenever long-separated friends are reunited.

Keith grinned at Mark, who looked thinner and tougher than when he had left Earth three years before. "We'd like to get out and look at it," he said finally.

"We've got some work to do first," Mark said, "so I think we'd better wait until tomorrow. That'll be about eleven Earth-days yet."

"Don't play pioneer and greenhorn with us, old boy," Keith said. "We know how long the night is."

"That's what you think," Mark told him. "You know it on a clock; wait till you Live it!"

By the time the night had come and gone and the gray light of day had rolled around again, Keith was ready to admit that Mark had been right. The ten Earth-days of the Venusian night had been busy and full, and spiced with the exoticism of the truly *new*.

Still, they were long, long days.

It rained a good fifty per cent of the time—a hard, steady, monotonous rain that drummed into the jungle with unholy steadiness. The clouds glowed with a pale phosphorescence. To a man born and raised on Earth, the effect was disconcerting. It was as if you somehow slept through every day, and whenever you woke up it was always a cloudlighted midnight, and whenever you went to bed it was midnight still.

With Mark piloting the copter, they took off into the morning fog and soon left the station clearing far behind them. Four babies, comprising the quota for Halaja, shared the back of the cabin.

One of them, a solemn-eyed child with long curls and a pug nose, would be Keith's son until he returned to Earth.

"Look at the birds," Carrie said.

There were thousands of them, as large as hawks and brilliantly colored. They swarmed above the gray-green jungles in plumed squadrons, slanting down occasionally to snare tiny lizard-like reptiles that lived on the broad leaves at the top of the forest. More than anything else, they resembled the aquatic birds over the seas of Earth, diving after fish.

The copter flew due west, in a lane between the swollen mountains of the clouds and the rolling roof of the jungle. Once they passed an open plain, crisscrossed with

small streams and dotted with grazing animals. There were many swamps and bogs, but few hills.

"Hang on," Mark said.

Venus promptly exhibited her favorite stunt: raining. It got just a trifle darker, and then the sponges of gray clouds began to drip. The copter cut wetly through the downpour, wobbling slightly when it ran into semi-rivers in the sky. There were no high winds, however. There was no lightning and no thunder.

In eight hours they reached Halaja.

From the air, half hidden through a drizzle of rain, the village of Halaja looked like a faded photograph of an ancient frontier fort on Earth. It had no wall around it, but the wooden houses were built in a square around a central plaza, and were interconnected by covered plank passageways. In the center of the plaza was a circular pool, and around the pool was a ring of firepits for cooking. For perhaps two miles in three directions around the village the jungle had been cut back and the land was planted with Sirau-fruit. To the west, there was an open field, and beyond that was the Smoke River, its slow blue water winding lazily through the dense gray-green of the jungle. Several moving figures were visible in the plaza, looking like tiny black ants from the copter's altitude.

Halaja. A place where people lived.

Keith took Carrie's hand.

Mark set the copter down in the damp athletic field to the west of the village.

Side by side, the three of them walked across the field and along a wet path through a patch of Sirau-fruit. Keith carried a baby uncomfortably in his arms while Mark, as an old hand, hauled two of them. Carrie took the small gentleman with the pug nose. The spray of thin raindrops in the air cooled their faces and dripped down the backs of their necks.

"Hey!" came a shout from the village. "Company!"

A cluster of adults came running out to greet them. They were simply dressed in shirts and shorts, with their feet bare. Most of the kids were too young to walk, but two of them toddled out as far as the gate and stared wide-eyed at the procession.

"Looks like old-home week," Keith grinned.

"You won't get many visitors in Halaja," Mark said.

The villagers swarmed around them, all talking at once. They pounded Keith on the back and gravely shook Carrie's hand. The babies were taken away from them, much to Keith's relief, and there was much clucking and laughing and general baby-talk.

Bill and Ruth Knudsen were the only human couple in the village, but if Keith had not known them previously he could never have picked them out. The robot humanoids were virtually perfect imitations.

"Keith!" boomed Bill Knudsen, a big blond in need of a shave. "It's good to see you!"

Ruth, beaming from ear to ear, said: "So glad you decided to come. We've fixed up a room we know you'll like." The delight in her eyes spoke eloquently of her loneliness for another human woman.

They all surged into the village with a whoop and a holler.

Six hours later, Mark took the copter and left.

Their life in Halaja had begun.

It was surprisingly easy to adjust to the life of the village. Different as it was from the life they had known on Earth, they had been trained in its ways and fitted smoothly into its routine. The Sirau-fruit did not require an inordinate amount of time, and the free hours were filled with games and rituals and the telling of sacred stories—most of which Keith had written himself.

Ceremonialism, in a very real sense, was Halaja's business.

Carrie had named their adopted son Bobby. After two Earth-months in the village, Bobby was almost a year old and growing rapidly. He was probably no more admirable than other small children in Halaja, but Keith and Carrie thought that he was.

One night Keith took the boy to the pool in the center of the plaza. He sat down on a wooden bench and balanced Bobby on his knee.

It had been raining for six Earth-days, but now it had stopped. A cool, sweet breeze blew in from the dripping jungles. The night-glow from the massed clouds in the sky was like soft moonlight, coating the land with warm silver. The perfumes from jungle flowers eddied like streams in the air. Yellow firelight spilled out from across the plaza, and the houses of the village were black shadows under the pale mountains of the clouds.

"Bobby," he said to his son, "we call this pool the Home of the Spirit. Perhaps there are those who would say that no spirit exists, but we know better."

The boy gurgled gleefully, paying no attention.

Keith filled his pipe with one hand and lit it with his lighter. "It won't be many years, Bobby, before you will be meeting other men and women before this pool—mariners from Acosta by the northern sea, industrialists from Wlan, Mepas, and Carin, great hunters from Peuklor, people from far Equete, where space flight is already a dream. You will be dancing with them, and singing with them, and sharing ideas with them. You will be one of the participants from the first generation of men to live on Venus. You will meet the others who are growing up on this world, meet them in peace because that will be your way of life, and together . . . what's that, Bobby?"

Bobby burped genially.

Keith laughed. "You won't understand what I'm saying,

son. Not yet. But one day you will understand. One day—"

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Getting pretty melodramatic for an old man, aren't you?" asked Carrie, kissing his ear and sitting down at his side.

"Well, I sure wasn't bowling Bobby over with my profundity," Keith admitted. "He's bored."

"Give him a few years, darling."

Keith looked at his wife in the cloudlight. Her blue eyes were brighter than they had ever been on Earth. Sitting there by him, so small in the night, she was filled with a relaxed happiness that made him feel good just to be around her.

"In a few years Bobby will have a robot for an old man," he said.

"I know."

The cool breeze that had swept in after the rains faded to a sluggish warmth. A horde of hungry insects flew into the plaza, intent upon demonstrating the digestibility of human blood. All the people had been injected to keep the pests off, but they were a humming nuisance just the same.

The three of them walked away from the pool under the glowing clouds and went inside.

Eight Earth-months had passed.

Outside, in the plaza surrounding the Home of the Spirit, the drums throbbed rhythmically and a ritual chant filled the air. The robot humanoids were conducting another in the round of sacred ceremonies, while the children of the village crowded around the pool raptly, absorbing the words and music and sentiments that were fast becoming their own.

Inside, in the pleasant center room of their wooden house, Keith and Carrie sat on a barkcloth mat and listened. Across from them were Ruth and Bill Knudsen.

"One thing about being human," Bill said, "you can let the robots do all the work, at least until the kids grow up

enough to wonder why we're not out there yelling and stomping with the rest."

"What made you come out here, anyway?" asked Keith.

Bill shrugged. "Ruth tricked me into it."

His wife, a rather plain woman with a deep strength that made her attractive, nodded. "Too many pretty gals back home. I figured Bill was safer here."

Bill and Ruth seldom talked seriously about themselves. Keith wondered whether it was a symptom of the age they lived in, or if men had always been reticent about the things that really counted.

"It's been wonderful having you and Carrie with us," Ruth said. "We'll miss you when you go."

"You may not feel that way four months from now."

"I think we all need a little ceremonial drink," Bill boomed. "This joint is getting maudlin."

Keith turned to Carrie. "What say, high priestess?"

"As long as it's purely ceremonial," Carrie said, "it would seem to be our duty."

"By a strange coincidence," Bill informed them, "I happen to have some good stuff concealed in my quarters."

"Go, boy," Keith said.

Bill ducked through the connecting tunnel, his bare feet thumping on the boards, and returned with a fifth of bourbon. Carrie produced four clay drinking utensils and a pot of water.

They drank up, gratefully. Much as they all loved Halaja and what it stood for, it was still not their village. They were all playing parts, and once in a while it felt good to get away.

From the plaza came the thudding of the drums and the undulating chants of the robot elders of Halaja. The children were very quiet.

"What we need are a few ceremonial toasts," Bill said.

"Check," said Keith.

They drank one to Old Man Vandervort.

They drank one to Earth.

They drank a few more on general principles.

By the time the fifth was gone, they were all feeling pretty good.

"I guess," Carrie said finally, "that this is as good a time as any to spring the glad tidings."

"Um-m-m," said Keith. "Spring away."

Carrie brushed a strand of her blond hair out of her eyes. "To be unutterably crude," she said, "I'm pregnant."

Keith found himself on his feet. Suddenly aware that his mouth was open, he closed it and sat down again.

Bill and Ruth laughed their congratulations.

Carrie looked thoroughly pleased with herself.

"We'll have to hurry up and get out of here," Keith said. "Get back to Earth, hospitals—" He stopped, catching the expression on his wife's face.

"Easy does it," Carrie said. "No hot water needed yet."

"Sorry," Keith subsided.

"Darling," she said slowly, "do we have to go back? Do you really want your child to be born on Earth?"

The drums stopped and the singing died to a lonely humming in the plaza by the Home of the Spirit.

Keith smiled. "It's up to you, Carrie," he said. "Its up to you."

IV.

THEY STAYED WHERE THEY WERE.

One year later, after their son had been born and named in the naming ceremony of Halaja, Keith got a message from the Old Man. Mark flew it out to him, and it read:

MY DEAR KEITH: IT PAINS ME TO STATE THAT I AM UNHAPPY ABOUT YOUR REPORTS ON OUR PROJECT. I HAVE FOUND THEM SKIMPY AND UNINFOR-

MATIVE. PLEASE MAKE THEM MUCH MORE DETAILED IN THE FUTURE. IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT I KNOW EVERYTHING THAT TRANSPIRES IN OUR COLONIES. REPEAT: IMPERATIVE. HOW IS THE CEREMONIAL FRAMEWORK SHAPING UP? ARE THE INDUSTRIES OF WLEN AND MEPAS AND CARIN PROPERLY INTEGRATED WITH THE SPECULATIONS OF THE EQUETE SPACE PHILOSOPHERS? HOW ABOUT THE INDIVIDUALISTIC ATTITUDES OF THE PUEKLOR HUNTERS? I MUST KNOW EVERYTHING. HOW MUCH LONGER WILL YOU STAY? HOW ARE THE ROBOTS WORKING OUT? WHEN WILL THE FIRST DEATHS OCCUR? SOME SLIGHT AGITATION HERE. RUMOR THAT ONE OF OUR SHIPS REPORTED IN TAKE-OFF. RUMOR OF INVESTIGATION. BUT I CAN HANDLE GOVERNMENT. FOUNDATION STILL GOING SMOOTHLY AND MORE CHILDREN ON THE WAY. MUST KNOW COMPLETE RESULTS OF ALL NEW DEVELOPMENTS. UNDERSTAND YOU NOW HAVE SON. PLEASE MAKE ALL REPORTS MORE THOROUGH IN FUTURE. (SIGNED) JAMES MURRAY VANDERVORT.

The message worried Keith, and he did not show it to Carrie. The rather crotchety demands for fuller information were typical enough for Van, but the hints of possible suspicions on the part of the government were disquieting.

Despite the Old Man's power and influence, he did not run Earth. Undynamic as the world government might be, it still could not be ignored.

Peace on Earth had been won at the price of conformity. The era of plenty was founded on a stable system where people thought alike, believed alike, talked alike. The dream of mankind through centuries of war and hate and fear had been achieved. Man had what he had always wanted, and he was in no hurry to change. His motto was simple:

DON'T ROCK THE BOAT.

Well, the Venus colonies were rocking the boat.

They were blowing up a storm.

It was true that they were not exactly illegal; there were no laws against fresh cultures on Venus. No one had ever thought about them—there quite, literally were no legal precedents.

They were *outside* the law.

But if they were discovered the game was up. Their entire effectiveness depended upon secrecy. The colonies had to have time to grow up and develop and charge their lifeways with life and vigor. They had to contact Earth—not the other way around.

Once, to Keith, it had all been an unusually interesting scientific experiment; nothing more than that. He had not, of course, been worried about the outcome. There was absolutely no danger that the new culures might flower only to bring war back to a peaceful Earth. The colonies were planned so that war was impossible.

The early socioculturists had made a science out of the primitive social disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and economics. The Venus colonies were products of that science.

One thing about a science: it works.

If an engineer knows his business, his bridge does not fall down.

If a socioculturist knows *his* business, his culture does what he wants it to.

Keith, in a way, had been building a bridge. True, it was a bridge on the grand scale, but still it was a bridge. He had not been too emotionally involved in it.

That was before he had come to Venus.

That was before he had lived in Halaja.

That was before he had known that his own son would have to walk across the bridge he was building.

He did not want anything to happen to that bridge.

And, holding the message in his hand, the old question nagged at his mind. He could see the Old Man as he had last seen him—a flushed, bearded gnome, *pad-padding* across the rug in his stifling, incredible room, the fanatical blue eyes that peered into the dark and shadowed corners—

This was the Old Man's bridge, too.

He was the one who had insisted that it be built, knowing he could not live to see it, or benefit by it.

Keith's question came back, insistently:

Why?

The years drifted by, and for Keith and Carrie they were supremely happy years.

They raised their two sons—Bobby, the adopted one, and Keith, their own child. They watched them grow, strong and straight, and they never regretted depriving them of Earth. Each child loves the culture into which he is born, and for Keith and Bobby Halaja was home.

The days were long and filled with work and laughter. The Sirau-fruit flowered in the cleared jungle fields and the great hawklike birds splashed vivid colors across the rolling gray clouds of the sky. In the field by the slow blue water of the Smoke River games were played with the fierce intensity of a World Series on Earth—and, in fact, one of the games played was baseball. It was strange to hear the clean crack of a bat singing through the humid Venusian air—

There were expeditions through the jungles, encounters with strange animals, the perfumed smell of tropical flowers.

And always, endlessly, the rituals and ceremonies that were to be Halaja's contribution to the emerging pattern of life on Venus.

There were the great torrential rains that swept through the log houses of the village—rain that drummed on the plank passageways and churned the water in the little cir-

cular pool in the center of the plaza. At night, the clouds glowed with the soft silver of an ageless enchantment, and Keith and Carrie knew what it was to fall in love again.

The children grew until they were no longer children.

The robot humanoids began to fade into the background, as they aged before the children's eyes. The first of them was scheduled to die in less than a year.

Earth seemed very far away.

And then, fourteen years after he had first seen the village of Halaja, Keith heard the sound he had been dreading.

There was a sudden jagged scream that split the clouds above his head, a sharp roar that clattered through the gray rain of a long, lazy afternoon. Keith could not see the thing, but he knew what it was.

A spaceship.

And not a Foundation ship, either.

The world government still had a few spacecraft on operational status—a few lonely skeletons left from the half-forgotten fleet that had long ago explored the solar system and pronounced it useless.

A few ships used for infrequent investigations, a few ships to back up the slogan:

DON'T ROCK THE BOAT.

Keith Ortega stood in the rain and swore.

"Carriel You look after things—tell Bill I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Be careful, Keith." She stood in the doorway of their home, small and fragile in her shirt and shorts.

Little Keith—who was not so little any more—and Bobby listened curiously to the echoes of the decelerating ship and wondered what their father was worried about.

"What's up, Dad?" asked Keith.

"Can we go with you? We can help," Bobby assured him.

Keith looked at them with what he hoped was a stern expression. "You're not children now," he said. "You're young

men, and you have responsibilities. Have you forgotten about the ceremonies tonight?"

"Sorry, Dad. We just thought—"

"I'll attend to this. It's nothing important."

"Well, gee, what was that funny noise?"

"That's what I want to find out," Keith said. "Some sort of storm up above the clouds, I think."

"O.K., Dad."

He left them in the rain and sprinted out of the village and along the pathway that led to the Smoke River. He swam the river, which was hardly wetter than the pelting rain in the air, and hurried along a concealed path through the jungle. By the time he reached his hidden emergency copter he was breathing hard.

If those kids ever *saw* that spaceship, there would be hell to pay.

He took the copter up into the sea of gray rain, gunned it to full power, and headed for the dome-shaped station house far to the east. Undoubtedly, they had tracked a Foundation ship from Earth. Since those ships were carefully shielded from the native colonies, they always landed at the station clearing, where Keith himself had landed fourteen years before.

Keith stared into the rain and clenched his fists.

If that ship was a government ship—and it had to be—then there was going to be trouble.

He could not bear the thought of failure now.

Somehow, that ship had to be *stopped.*

In eight hours, he landed at the station clearing.

The rain had stopped and he saw the ship as soon as he came over the dripping wall of the gray-green jungle. It was a big one, and it had the blue symbol of the world government on its nose. He set the copter down next to it, his heart thumping like a hammer in his chest.

The ship loomed silently over his head, its very hugeness impressing upon him the absurdity of his own plans. What could he do—attack the thing with a club and a handful of rocks?

It was still daylight, but he saw a gleam of yellow light inside the dome of the station house. He didn't know what he was going to do, but he *did* know that he was going to do something.

He walked across the field, acutely aware of the vast ship beyond him. Could that ship be destroyed? Would he do it if he could? And if he did, wouldn't that just confirm the suspicions on Earth—wouldn't they send more ships, more men?

He shook his head. He wasn't thinking straight.

The cold knot in his stomach drew tighter.

There were no windows in the round station house, so there was no way for him to sneak a look inside. He simply walked up to the door, knocked, and went in.

A large central room, stacked with supplies. A door to his right, where babies were received. Two humanoid robots conversing in low tones against one wall. A bright yellow light in the ceiling.

Toward the back, another door, partly open.

Voices.

Keith picked his way through the piles of supplies and knocked on the half-open door.

"Who is it?" Mark's voice.

"Keith."

"Come on in!"

He went inside. There, at the table where he and Carrie and Mark had shared their coffee so many years ago, there was more coffee.

And a man in a uniform.

"Keith, this is Captain Nostrand—Space Security. Captain, this is Keith Ortega."

They shook hands.

"I've heard of you, sir," Captain Nostrand said. "I never expected to meet you under these . . . unusual . . . circumstances."

Keith sized up the captain. After the mental image he had built up in his mind of a veritable ogre sent out from Earth to crush his dream, Captain Nostrand was a pleasant surprise. He was middle-aged, relaxed, with graying hair. He had quiet brown eyes and an easy smile.

He *looked* like a nice guy—if that helped any.

"Mark, what's the deal?"

Mark Kamoto shrugged and poured Keith a cup of coffee. "I guess you've about figured it," he said.

"I heard the ship. I knew it wasn't one of ours."

Captain Nostrand sat down and crossed his long legs. "The government has been getting reports off and on of unexplained spaceship take-offs," he said. "They finally decided to find out what was going on. They tracked one ship here, and sent me up to have a look-see. Simple enough."

"How many men are with you?"

Nostrand smiled quizzically. "You planning on starting a fracas, Dr. Ortega? I'm unarmed, of course."

Keith felt the hot blood in his cheeks. "Sorry," he said. "I'm upset—to put it mildly. Look, what are you going to do?"

Nostrand sipped his coffee. "What do you think?"

"You can't go back and tell them, captain. This is too big. You don't understand. You can't tell them."

"Want to bet?"

"Easy, now," Mark said. "Drink your coffee, Keith. It won't do any good to go off half-cocked."

Keith downed his coffee at one searing gulp.

"You're mighty nervous," Captain Nostrand grinned. "What have you got out in that jungle anyhow? A swamp full of monsters?"

Keith managed to laugh, not too successfully. "Hasn't Mark told you?"

"I haven't said anything," Mark cut in. "But the captain has sharp eyes."

"Has he got a cigarette?"

"Sure," said Nostrand. He fished out a pack and handed one to Keith. The smoke tasted good.

"Look, Captain Nostrand. I'm sorry I came busting in here like a fugitive from a nightmare. It's just that this thing is terribly important—more important than you can imagine. One word from you now will destroy two decades of work. You and your crew have got to be made to see—"

"The crew's robot," Nostrand said. "I'm the only one you've got to deal with."

"Then look—"

"You listen to me a minute," Captain Nostrand said slowly. "I wasn't sent out here to pass judgment on whatever it is you're doing. That's not my job. I was just sent out to see *if* you're doing anything up here. You are, that's clear. I'll go back and tell them there's an unreported settlement here, and that's the end of it as far as I'm concerned. Nothing personal, understand?"

Keith slammed his fist down on the table. "It *is* personal!" he said, amazed at his own vehemence. If he had needed any proof that the Keith Ortega who had come out here from Earth fourteen years ago was dead, he had it now.

Outside, the rain started up again, swishing down the sides of the station dome.

Desperately, Keith leaned across the table, staring at the man in the old uniform of Space Security. There was one chance, a long one—

"Nostrand," he said carefully, "how many men besides yourself are still in the space service?"

The captain poured himself another cup of coffee. "You already know that, Dr. Ortega."

"A hundred? Two hundred?"

"A hundred and twenty."

"Mostly maintenance men?"

"Yes."

The rain came down harder, rushing like a river over the slick bulge of the station house.

"What made you stay in the space service, captain? What made you stay when space was dead?"

Captain Nostrand shrugged, but his brown eyes narrowed.

"How many flights have you made, captain? How many in the last thirty years?"

"Four," he said slowly. "Three were runs to Luna."

"What made you stick it out, captain?"

Nostrand stood up. "That's none of your business."

Keith faced him. "It *is* my business. I know you, Nostrand. I know why you went out into space when other men stayed at home."

Captain Nostrand shrugged again.

"Captain, listen. I'm asking you to wait one Earth-month before you go back. Let me show you what we're doing here—all of it, every bit of it. If you still think it's your duty to tell them after that, O.K. If you don't, then you can report that the rocket they tracked was just a private ship out on a lark—some crazy back-to-the-good-old-days enthusiast. Vandervort can fix it up—yes, I'll tell you all about him, too. Captain, you've *got* to stay now—it's your duty to find out everything they want to know. Radio back and tell them it will take you a little time to investigate. Will you do that, Nostrand?"

"What's in it for you?"

Keith kept his voice even. "If you understand what Venus means, you'll never tell them. You know and I know that Earth may never go back into space on her own—it's too

late. I can't put this into words, captain. But I know what made you go into space even when space was almost forgotten. I know. Have *you* forgotten?"

"I haven't forgotten."

"O.K. I'm asking for a month."

Captain Nostrand sat down and sipped his coffee. He listened to the rain roaring down outside. He looked at Mark Kamoto, who remained silent.

"You make a mean speech, friend," Nostrand said finally, "I can see your month. It had better be good."

Keith was exhausted but confident.

"Pal," he said, "you ain't seen nothin' yet."

Beyond the station house, the warm rain fell into the thick jungles and the long gray afternoon began to fade into evening.

V.

AT THE NORTHERNMOST EXTREMITY of the one inhabited continent of Venus, a brown peninsula thrust out into the swells of a vast gray-green sea.

In the copter that hovered just under the cloud masses that roofed the world, too far away to be seen with the naked eye, Ralph Nostrand brought his viewer into focus and looked into it intently.

"So that's Acosta," he said.

"Yes," Keith said. "Watch off the coast there—see those ships coming in? They're whalers."

"Whalers?"

"Not really whales, of course. They're true fish, not mammals. But they're plenty big enough—and they hunt them with hand harpoons."

"Funny looking place."

The viewer showed a small settlement of perhaps one

hundred gabled stone houses, placed on a shelf of rock overlooking the tossing sea. Most of the men and boys were out in the boats, but the women of the town were clearly visible in the streets.

"There," Keith said. "The near boat crew is beaching one."

In the viewer, the men and boys leaped out of their sturdy canoes into shallow water. They all grabbed a line from the near ship and ran with it up onto the beach. They formed a row and heaved.

An enormous black shadow-shape slid out of the sea and was hauled up on the rocks, its great tail still bobbing in the gray-green water. It rolled over, white belly upwards, and the men began to dance around it, chanting.

"*Whew,*" said Nostrand. "That's quite a baby."

"Acosta is a pretty rugged place," Keith said. "It's a colony of maritime adventurers, as I told you. It's a people who will have a long tradition behind them of dangerous voyages."

Ralph Nostrand eyed him. "Shrewd."

"I know my racket."

The captain returned to his viewer and watched for a long time. Finally he nodded. "Next," he said.

Mark took the copter up higher to hit a favorable wind belt, and they flew through the warm clouds above the jungles, moving inland. In four hours, they went down again.

The first of the Three Cities was spread out on the viewer.

"Wlan?" asked Nostrand.

"That's right."

Wlan was a far cry from the seaside settlement of Acosta. This was a genuine small city, with a population of perhaps five thousand people. It was neatly arranged into squares, with snug modern houses, and it was dominated by two large buildings that could only be factories.

"The Three Cities are our industrialists," Keith said. "Of course, they're not turning much out yet, and the economy

is highly artificial at present, but they've got the basic techniques down pat. We've set up an embryonic technological culture, and the kids have been brought up to appreciate what that means. We've given them enough leads so that they'll have aircraft within a century."

Nostrand nodded. "One thing I've been meaning to ask you, Keith."

"Shoot."

"Is it really fair to bring these kids up here and determine their lives for them? It seems—sort of wrong, somehow."

The copter veered toward the southeast, rising again into the clouds.

"I know what you mean," Keith said. "It seems to deny them their free will. That's not true, though—you know that yourself, if you'll just stop a bit and think. After all, a child is *always* born into a culture he has not built himself; that's a characteristic of human beings. In that sense, a kid's future is always determined for him. What he does with the materials of his culture, though, is up to him. So long as he has the stuff, he'll make out O.K. anywhere. Don't forget that to the kid this *is* his culture; it's home. He's never known anything else, and he'd fight to stay there. And don't forget, too, that those kids were abandoned by their own parents on Earth. This beats a Foundation orphanage, believe me."

"I surrender," Nostrand grinned.

"Excuse the sermon, Ralph. It's hell to really have faith in something again. We're not used to it, back on Earth."

The copter paused briefly at Mepas and Carin, the other two nearby industrial towns, and then flew southwest across the continent. They set the copter on automatic, caught what sleep they could, and in sixteen hours were high above the skin tents of Pueklor. The gray sky and the massed oceans of the clouds had not changed—and there were still eight

Earth-days left before the coming of the pale Venusian night.

"Looks like an Indian tribe," commented Nostrand, looking closely into the viewer. "I remember seeing some old photographs somewhere."

Keith nodded. "They're modeled on the ancient Plains Indians of North America," he said. "You'll notice how different the country is here—tall grass instead of jungle. Pueklor has a basically hunting culture; they go after an animal not too unlike the old bison, but much slower. They hunt 'em on foot."

Far below, the skin tents of Pueklor stood in a large ring in the grassy fields of the southwestern plains. Curls of smoke drifted up into the still air and a group of children were running races along the banks of a sluggish river.

"You'll catch it more clearly when you see some of them in Halaja," Keith said. "Pueklor is an extremely proud culture—filled with the joy of living, if I can put it that way. They'll lend a very real *esprit de corps* to the continental culture that will be here a century from now."

The copter swung eastward through thick sheets of rain, and by the time they reached Equete in the southeastern hills the three men were bone tired. Nevertheless, the sight of Equete nestled in a rocky valley picked them up.

Equete was a series of low, rounded rock structures that harmonized beautifully with the rugged grandeur of its surroundings. It blended browns and pinks and greens into a pleasing pattern that accentuated the banded colors of the land.

"That's your baby, Ralph."

Nostrand looked down at its image in the viewer and tried to see in Equete what he was supposed to see.

"Not much visible from here," he said.

Keith smiled wearily. "The business of Equete is ethics—ethics and elaborate social complexities. In addition, this is

where the basic research is being done that will one day lead to the independent development of space flight on Venus. See that tall, domed structure over there? We've given them enough hints so that they'll develop a cloud-piercing telescope before too many years have gone by. Philosophically, we've already provided them with a logical picture of the universe—and their ethics *demand* space flight as the first great step in the fulfillment of man's destiny."

"Sounds good," Ralph said.

"It *is* good," Mark corrected.

"It's all so complicated," Ralph Nostrand said tiredly. "I try to see it the way you do—but it isn't easy. All these new cultures, growing up independently of Earth, groping toward space travel in a hundred years or so. Don't forget what Earth is like these days—what if these people come swooping down and smash it to pieces?"

"When you see the ceremony at Halaja," Keith said, "you won't worry about that."

Captain Nostrand was unconvinced, but he held his tongue. The copter lifted again into the clouds and flew northward, back to the hidden receiving station where the great Space Security ship still waited in the late morning fog.

Keith closed his burning eyes and tried to relax. He knew that Nostrand was an unusual man—he had to be or he would never have gone into space in this century of stability and easy living. But could he see Venus as they saw Venus? Could he see Venus as the cradle of a new and vigorous culture that would jolt Earth from the rut into which it had fallen?

If the Coming Together at Halaja failed to move him, they were through.

And this was the first of the vast ceremonies to be conducted almost entirely by the children who were now young

men and women. The old robot humanoids would stay strictly in the background. Surely their teaching had been effective; it *had* to be.

But when Keith dozed off into a troubled sleep, his dreams were as gray and cheerless as the wet clouds above his head.

It was the time of the Coming Together at Halaja.

Five Earth-days were left out of the month that Keith had asked for.

With his wife and Captain Nostrand he stood in the doorway of his log home and waited for the ceremony to begin.

It was night, and the soft silver cloudlight glinted in the Home of the Spirit and touched the central plaza of Halaja with pale and enchanted fingers. Great orange fires blazed inside the ring of the wooden houses and passageways, throwing black, twisted shadows on the walls.

Drums beat with a slow rhythm and the mixed voices of low, insistent chants drifted up to the roof of the world and lost themselves in the glowing mists of night.

For many days and many nights the people had come across the swamps and jungles of the great continent to Halaja. They had come as they had always come, as their fathers had come, and as their fathers' fathers before them.

Or so they believed—for had not their own fathers told them so, throughout the whole of their lives?

From far Acosta by the northern sea they had come, and from the three cities of Wlan, Mepas, and Carin. They had walked from the swaying fields of Pueklor and from the rocky hills of Equete.

It was the time of the Coming Together.

Not all came, of course. These were only selected delegates who made the jungle trek and who would then return to their people as they had always done.

The orange fires crackled and the drums throbbed.

A new chant began.

"Oh friends from far and near, we come together as we have always come—"

And the answering chants came back, from the men and women of Acosta and the Three Cities and Pueklor and Equete:

"Always come, always come . . ."

"We come together, all different, all the same, in peace for all men are brothers—"

"All men are brothers, all are brothers . . ."

Side by side they sat—rough seamen and happy industrialists, proud hunters and serious philosophers from far Equete.

The drums beat faster.

The orange fires painted shadow-dances along the walls.

It was the time of the Coming Together.

Keith felt his heart beating with fierce pride in his chest, and he held his wife close by his side. Here in the night under an alien sky that glowed with the light of a million moons—here, at last, was a dream that could not die.

Ralph Nostrand was silent, watching.

The old people—it was hard to think of them as robots, for they had been fathers and mothers and friends—stayed in the rear circles, in the shadows, watching the children they had led through life.

It was impossible to believe that they were not proud.

For many long hours the ceremony went on through the long, long night. There was feasting and singing—and a little gay romancing among the young men and women from faraway lands, for these people were not saints.

Fifty hours after the Coming Together had begun, the old, old chant was started by the pool that was the Home of the Spirit. The words were mysterious and strange, but did

not the gods say that one day they would be filled with meaning?

Keith saw his two sons singing by the pool.

He felt his wife proud and happy by his side.

"Beyond the clouds that roof our world, beyond the rains that cool our skies—"

"Beyond the clouds, beyond the rain . . ."

"Beyond our skies lie other skies—"

"Other skies, other skies . . ."

"Beyond the great sea where floats our world, beyond our sea floats another shore—"

"Another shore, another shore . . ."

"And there in the great beyond the green Earth waits for us, waits for the coming of our silver arrows—"

"Silver arrows into beyond, beyond . . ."

"The green Earth waits in the great beyond, and there our far brothers dance under a clean blue sky—"

"Silver arrows into beyond, beyond . . ."

"Oh, our brothers of Earth are waiting for us in the great beyond—"

"Waiting, waiting for the Coming Together!"

"Beyond the clouds that roof our world, beyond the rains that cool our skies—"

"Waiting, waiting for the Coming Together!"

The drums stopped and there was a silver silence.

A light rain fell from the glowing clouds and sprinkled the plaza with cool, sweet water.

Keith could not speak. He held his wife's hand and shared her deep understanding. No matter what happened, he was glad that they had come to Venus, glad even if they failed, for it was better to fail than never to have tried at all.

He turned slowly and looked at Captain Nostrand.

Nostrand stood very straight, the firelight touching the old shadows on his face.

His eyes saw far beyond the village of Halaja.

He smiled and held out his hand to Keith. He nodded firmly.

Around the plaza the drums rolled and the singing began again.

VI.

FIVE YEARS AFTER Ralph Nostrand had left for Earth, the village of Halaja still lay peacefully by the slow blue water of the Smoke River.

Half the old robots had died and been buried, and Bill and Ruth Knudsen had gone home to a small farm in Michigan.

It was time for the Venus colonies to strike off on their own. It was time for the men and women who had guided the new world to return to the old world.

"I wish we could stay, Keith," Carrie said.

"Me, too. But this isn't our world, and we're not needed any more."

"I never thought that it would be harder to leave than it was to come."

"I never thought we'd be here nineteen years, either."

"I'm glad we won't have to say good-by to our boys."

"It'll be rough enough as it is, Carrie. We'll just bring our old reasonable facsimiles in and let 'em die. I hate to do that to the boys, but they mustn't suspect anything."

They walked down the jungle pathway toward Halaja, arm in arm, already trying to remember the world they had to leave. Fortunately, the two robots that had originally been designed to replace them when they went back to Earth were still waiting at the station clearing.

Robots had infinite patience.

They would go to Halaja when Keith and Carrie slipped away, and there they would sicken and die. They would be

buried with the rest in the clearing by the Smoke River, where one day their sons, too, would lie—

"I still wish we could stay, Keith."

He kissed her and ruffled her blond hair. "It's our turn now, baby. We mustn't rock the boat."

Still, they postponed it as long as they could.

They found excuses to stay in Halaja with their sons.

It took the message from Nostrand to make them leave. It came one night and Mark flew it out in the last station copter. It read:

KEITH: OLD MAN VANDERVORT VERY ILL AND NOT EXPECTED TO LIVE. HE WANTS TO SEE YOU IF YOU CAN COME IN TIME. SHIP ON WAY TO YOU NOW. ALL O.K. AT THIS END. WHAT'RE YOU DOING UP THERE—GOING NATIVE? (SIGNED) RALPH.

"Well," Carrie said, "he couldn't live forever."

"He took a stab at it, though," Keith said.

"We'll have to go."

"Yes. We'll have to go."

They left the village that had been their home one night in the rain, while their sons slept. The two robot humanoids who were their identical twins climbed into the bed that was still warm from their bodies.

Keith and Carrie walked together through the plaza of Halaja, past the Home of the Spirit, and out the gate. The rain was cold in their faces. They walked along the pathway through the Sirau-fruit to the damp athletic field to the west of the village.

They did not look back.

The copter lifted them into the silver clouds for the last time and carried them east to the station clearing. They said good-by to Mark Kamoto, who would follow them a year later on the voyage of no return.

The ship that had carried them from Earth nineteen years ago waited now in the rain to carry them back again.

They looked one last time at the gray-green wall of the jungle and the yellow light spilling out from the domed station house. They looked one last time at the banks of luminous clouds that flowed like a sea of moons through the sky.

They looked one last time westward into the night, toward the sleeping village of Halaja.

They boarded the ship.

Ahead of them was Earth, and a dying man. Ahead of them, lost now in the immensities that swam between the worlds, was an old, old man with a white beard and nervous blue eyes that darted through the shadows of a too-hot room.

Ahead of them was James Murray Vandervort and a final question.

Why?

The land was crisp and hot and clean under the Arizona sun. The air was charged with a fresh golden tang that made you want to stand in the wonderful sand and fill your lungs over and over again.

The sky was blue and cloudless. The greens of the desert plants were as bright and vivid as if they had been newly painted.

Like flowers, Keith and Carrie lifted their faces to the wind and sought the sun.

It was good to be back.

There was no time to go home, and so a Foundation copter lifted them up into the desert air and carried them westward toward Los Angeles. They found themselves flinching involuntarily at the freight liners that roared through the air lanes and the flutter of copters that filled the sky like butterflies. Los Angeles was so vast and white and gleaming that they could hardly take it in. Far below them, dots on the calm blue Pacific, the surfaced subs bobbed like schools of porpoise.

The copter swung north along the coastline and then veered off to the right up to Vandervort's Canyon. They landed on the patio field of the huge estate and an old butler took them in tow.

They walked through the richly-carpeted hallways and up the marble stairs to the second floor. They walked down the long gray passage and knocked on the mahogany door.

A tiny green light blinked on in the center of the door.

Keith and Carrie entered the huge room, and it was almost like stepping from Earth to Venus. The hot, humid air boiled out into the hallway like an overflowing lake.

The room had not changed. The wall-to-wall brown rug was still there, and the tables and chairs and desks and fireplaces and flowers and books and drapes—

But the Old Man had changed.

Nineteen years had taken their toll.

Vandervort was one hundred and twenty-four years old.

Even the geriatrics specialists could not save him now.

The Old Man still sat in his huge, soft chair. He seemed very tiny now, and lost. His white beard was a dirty gray and his red face was blotched with unhealthy pink. His blue eyes were dull and glazed.

Ralph Nostrand stood by his side, his face lighting with a smile of welcome.

They shook hands.

"Who is it?" choked the Old Man. "Who-s there? Is somebody there?"

Keith leaned down toward him. "Van," he said. "Van, it's Keith Ortega."

James Murray Vandervort stiffened as though an electric shock had shot through his thin, dry body. "Keith!" he wheezed. He tried to get up, but could not move. "Is it really you—after all these years?"

"Yes, Van."

The dead blue eyes swam into focus. The Old Man

breathed fast and shallow. "I have to know, Keith," he said. His voice was weak, a shadow of the boom that had once filled the chamber and chased the darkness away. "It's been so hard. *I have to know.*"

Keith waited him out, feeling a vast pity for the wreck of a human being that was dying in the big soft chair. Pity—and something more than that.

"I had to hear you say it, say it with your own voice," Vandervort said, talking very fast. His voice was such a whisper that Keith could hardly hear him. "Is everything all right? Is it working, Keith? Is it working?"

Keith made himself speak slowly and clearly. "You don't need to worry, Van. It's all right. Everything is all right. All the colonies are working just as we planned. Nothing can go wrong now. The new culture of Venus will come through space to Earth within a century. The new culture pattern will hit the Earth like a shot in the arm. We'll go on to the stars one day, Van. Everything is all right."

"I gave them the stars," the Old Man said, his voice very tired. "I gave them the stars, didn't I?"

"Yes," Keith said.

The Old Man sank back into his chair in sudden, exhausted relaxation. The old, dead eyes closed.

There was a long, hushed silence.

"Is he all right?" Ralph asked.

"I think so."

The Old Man began to talk again, his voice far away and lonely. "I've covered my tracks," he whispered, "but not too well. When the new world comes out of space, the people of Earth will check back . . . check back—"

The voice trailed away.

"Yes, Van?" Keith urged.

The Old Man sighed. "The people will check back. They'll find my name, find the records. They'll know I did it. They'll know. they'll know—"

Again, the thin voice faded.

The Old Man began to cry, softly. Keith leaned closer to hear him. Suddenly the Old Man tried to straighten in his chair and the faded blue eyes opened.

"Keith, Keith," he whispered desperately, "will they remember me after I'm gone? I gave them the stars. Keith, will they remember my name? *Will they remember my name?*"

The deep shadows of the vast, crammed room rustled around the walls, sliding in toward the firelight. Keith and Carrie and Ralph stood in the unnatural heat and stared at the tiny, dying man in the huge, swallowing chair.

"They'll remember you, Van," Keith said. "They'll remember you long after the rest of us are a million years forgotten."

James Murray Vandervort smiled. The blue eyes closed again. "Remember me," he mumbled. "Remember my name. Remember my name—"

A doctor came in from the back door.

"You'd better go now," he said. "Mr. Vandervort needs to rest."

They walked out of the chamber, down the hallway, down the marble stairs.

"All that," Ralph Nostrand said. "All that, just to keep a part of him alive."

"He had no son," Carrie said quietly.

They walked toward the copter in the patio. Keith was thinking of Halaja, and the dark log buildings in the gray-green jungles of another world.

All that because a rich old man was afraid of the eternal dark.

"All that," he said, "because he was just a man."

Very late that night the three of them walked singing past the bright lights of Wilshire Walk.

A man and his wife, who had carried out an Old Man's plan.

A captain in a forgotten service, who had falsified a report to make a dream come true.

The violet government airsign hung in the air: DON'T ROCK THE BOAT.

They walked through the sign.

They walked on, arm in arm, singing under the frost of stars. They walked on and all who saw them that night on Earth wondered at the smiles they smiled and the strange, strange song they sang—

A song that whispered beyond the clouds—

Beyond the rains that cool our skies.

Beyond . . . beyond . . .

VENUS MISSION

by J. T. McIntosh

The crippled ship screamed down toward Venus, upright, in a slow axial spin, riding silent jets. Grey cloud curved sleekly past the fins, streamed up in trembling ribbons along the shining sides. At the noseport, Warren Blackwell strained his eyes in an effort to pierce that boiling greyness, but he knew the Venusian atmosphere, knew he was wasting his time. He would see the ground when the ship was fifty feet above it, and that would be far too late.

The door of the control room clicked, and the girl who sat at the other end of the table from him at meal-times entered and came up to him.

"The captain sent me, in case I could help," she said.

"And to get you out of the way."

She grinned without humor. "No doubt."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Virginia Stuart. You might as well call me Virginia. There's not much time left for formality, is there. . . . You're Blackwell, aren't you—*the* Blackwell?"

"If you mean the one who won all the medals, yes. How many are there left?"

"Of the crew? The captain and his second officer. And the captain's weaving about a bit. It won't be long before the radiation gets him too."

Warren surveyed her and decided she could take the truth. "Go back and get one of them out," he told her. "It'll only need one to jam on all the power there is left when I ring for it. But there must be one. It isn't much of a chance, but it's the only one we've got."

"Check," she said. "Isn't the phone working?"

"No. Only the alarm."

She nodded, and left him. Warren strained again to pierce the grey cloud. He was a passenger on the *Merkland*, but he had been co-opted when the powerleak developed. He knew more than any of the crew about Venus. Not that that made much difference. All that he could do was stay where he was and sound the alarm when he saw the ground. Then, down below, whoever was left would touch off the braking jets, and with luck the ship would come down hard but in one piece. But it would need a lot of luck.

There wouldn't be much hope for any one who was below. Warren, right in the nose, probably stood the best chance, after the rest of the passengers, who were locked in a storeroom amidships. None of the other passengers would have been much help, and apparently the captain had picked out him and the girl as the only ones who might be useful in the emergency. He seemed a brave and able officer, that captain. He could have stayed in the nose himself, safe, if anyone was, and left the problem of the leaking radiation to someone else. But he knew that only he or some other member of his crew could handle the jets, and that it was vital that they should fire exactly when needed.

The girl came back, and Captain Morris was with her. "I make it twenty thousand feet up, Blackwell," said Morris. "Do you think that would be about right?"

Virginia hadn't exaggerated when she said the captain was weaving about a bit. He was in the last stages of plutonium poisoning. Warren thought, a trifle cynically, that the captain might as well go on being a hero now, for he was a dead man already. But Warren was used to death. The rows of ribbons somewhere in his luggage proclaimed that.

"I never flew much over Venus," he admitted. "Nobody does. I'd say we were well up yet, on a long slant. But don't quote me."

The captain sank heavily into one of the control seats. He

could never stop his shaking now, but he could limit it by trying to relax. "We can blast for five seconds, I make it," he said. "That means at our speed we should start a hundred and twenty feet up."

Warren shook his head. "You might see a hundred and twenty feet on the surface. But not straight down. It's thickest about sixty feet up."

"That's why I came to see you. We're in your hands, Blackwell. You know more about these currents than anyone else on board. You'll have to guess, that's all. The instruments aren't anywhere near that precise, and if you wait till you see solid ground it'll be too late. Someone has to guess. It might as well be you."

Warren nodded. Morris hoisted himself to his feet. He paused at the door. "Goodbye," he said.

Warren was left with the girl. "Now you've got a chance to win another medal," she said.

"I could live without it. When the Venusian war was over I thought I'd finished with danger."

"You're never finished with danger. It follows a brave man around."

"Maybe," murmured Warren, "but I'm not a brave man. Never was."

Her eyes widened, but she said nothing. She had never met Warren Blackwell before this trip. In fact, she hadn't officially met him *on* the trip, until she introduced herself a few minutes before. But like everyone else, she had read of him while the war was on. A man who treated his life as a millionaire might treat a dime he found in his shoe. It wasn't that he was lucky, or so clever that the dangers were always less real than they seemed. He had been wounded scores of times and captured twice. And no one else had escaped from the Greys even once. He would drop out of the news for a couple of months while he was recovering from injury. Then

he would be back with some new exploit that made it seem he was determined to get himself killed.

Was that it? she wondered, looking at him as he peered through the big quartz windows. Had he cared so little for life that his courage had really been resignation? She had read that he had come from an orphanage, even a hint that he had been in a reform school. But details like that weren't publicized about a hero.

It wasn't that, she decided. The man beside her was passionately fond of life. She could see it in the way his whole body concentrated on the job in hand. He wasn't trying to save her and the others. If that had been the case he would have been cold and steady. He was trying to save himself—and the rest of them as a sort of afterthought.

He shook himself suddenly and turned from the window. "It'll be a few minutes yet," he said, "and if I watch much longer I'll get jumpy and ring for the jets too soon. You wouldn't like to do a strip act to pass the time?"

"That's not at all funny," she said coolly. He watched her broodingly and saw she thought less of him than she had a moment before. It was that easy to lose admiration and respect.

She was a tough-looking girl, workmanlike rather than pretty. But she was sufficiently versatile to make herself attractive too, for no more reason, perhaps, than that of the man who doesn't intend to go out or see anyone, but still shaves and brushes his hair. She wore dark slacks and a heavy blue shirt, and though her outfit didn't suggest any particular beauty of figure, it didn't absolutely deny it. She had light brown hair and a strong, young face. The features were good, and if they were too full of character for beauty, they were just right for a certain subtle elegance. It was a pity to see a woman like that die. There weren't too many of them.

"What do you do?" he asked.

"I've done a lot of things. At the moment I'm on Government work."

"Which government?"

"UNO. There's nothing secret about it. I'm . . ."

She broke off as Warren turned back to the window. "I'm beginning to get a feeling about this," he murmured. "We should be somewhere over the Norman Forest. But we were slanting a long time. I think we almost hit an orbit. Maybe we overshot to the Norman Hills. In which case—" his voice sank to nothing—"I should sound the alarm *now!*"

Virginia wasn't prepared. Her eyes darted to Warren's hand, pressing hard down on the button, then flashed to the window, where there was a sudden break in the grey mist, a blinding flash, and a glimpse of a whirling black mass outside as the floor kicked up at her. She realized that by luck or divination Warren had picked on the right split-second.

The crash dazed her, but she never lost consciousness. Warren did. She saw him shoot forward toward the window and caught him by one ankle. She didn't stop him, but he crashed against the quartz with less force. Virginia heard a scream of metal on stone that mounted until her ears refused to take it, and told her nothing more.

Then gradually she realized that the ship was down, probably as safely as it could have been. She looked out, but there was nothing but grey mist and black soil. She had been on Venus before, but never out in the open, only in the domed cities. Nevertheless, she knew it was full day. There was about as much light as on a misty moonlit night on Earth, and visibility was about forty yards, which was as light as it ever was on Venus.

Warren was stirring. He wakened as she expected him to waken, quietly, doing nothing until he had had a look around.

"You stopped me crashing through the window," he said. "I'll do something for you sometime."

"You've done it. You got us down."

He rose unsteadily. "We'd better let the others out," he said.

By tacit agreement they looked for the captain first. But he, the second officer, and any other members of the crew who hadn't actually been dead before the landing were crushed in a flat envelope of steel which had once been the drive room. They couldn't get near them, which was perhaps just as well. They made their way to the store-room and unlocked the door.

It hadn't been a bad landing, in the circumstances. There had been fifteen people in the room, and seven of them were still alive, though two would never recover consciousness. As it happened, they would have been safer in the nose with Warren and Virginia, but no one could have known that.

Warren took stock of them, ignoring the moans and screams. He ignored the dead too. If they were dead, it didn't matter whether they were unmarked or a disgusting pulp. It was the living who mattered. Waters, the actor, was bleeding from mouth and ears in a way that showed he was still alive. His wife was breathing, which was rather horrible, for her neck was obviously broken.

The other five were almost unhurt. Fortunately the doctor, Williamson, was on his feet and looked sane and well. Standing beside him, apparently only dazed, was old Martin, who was ninety and had come through the crash as well as anyone. Three others were stirring on the floor, and Smith, with a broken wrist, seemed to be the most seriously injured, though it was the women who were doing most of the screaming and moaning.

Mrs. Martin could hardly be blamed, for like most of those in the room she had lost some of her clothes in a blast of air which must have swept the room, and was probably screaming more at finding herself half-naked in company at the age of seventy-five than anything else. But the Glamour Girl,

whose name Warren didn't know, was screaming only because she always screamed when anything happened. Warren had met girls like her before, and had not been impressed.

At the evidence of a blast of air Warren looked round quickly and sniffed. But the ship was airtight. There was no hiss of escaping air, and the pressure was high—too high, if anything. Perhaps there had been a rift which had immediately been sealed by the weight and momentum of the ship. There were cracks and holes in the inner walls, but they were not as strong as the hull.

"All right, doctor?" he asked. "You take over."

"Doesn't look as if there's much I can do," said Williamson wryly.

"Don't be modest," Warren said. The doctor stared blankly, and Virginia shot a quick glance at Warren. He had gone down in her estimation again, he decided.

Glamour was tugging at his lapel and screaming: "Get me out of here! Get me out!"

"Into the open?" he asked coolly. "You'd die in eight hours. But long before that the Greys would have got you."

She hadn't heard him. She was still screaming, "Get me out of here!" Her dress had a spectacular plunging neckline as if rent open by the blast, but it was natural. Her hair wasn't even disheveled. She was completely unmarked and very beautiful, which was a pity, Warren thought, for she didn't deserve to be. Better people had died in the crash.

Virginia pulled her gently away from him. "You said something about the Norman Hills. Do you know where we are?"

"It's only a guess," he admitted, "but I think I do. Almost exactly, if I'm anywhere near right at all."

"How's that?"

"We're lying up a bare slope, on soft soil. But we hit rock first, and if we came down roughly straight we just missed

the forest. That puts us somewhere on a narrow belt twenty to thirty miles from City Four—Cefor for short."

"And how are our chances?"

He looked round at the others, now silent and hanging on his words, even Glamour and Mrs. Martin, whose husband had wrapped her in his jacket. There was no point in letting it out slowly. Might as well get it over with.

"Our chances must be better now than they were when we were coming down," he said deliberately. "But you'd need a slide-rule and a lot of figures to prove it."

There was a moment's silence while they worked out his meaning. Then Glamour threw herself at him, screaming and scratching at his face, as though he personally were responsible for their plight.

Virginia seized his arm as he was fending Glamour off, none too gently, and pulled him away. "Let's go and check up," she said. He grinned. Her opinion of him might be dropping, and would probably drop more very soon, but after all he was the only one with whom she could talk seriously. The safety of them all depended on him and her.

She led him back to the observation room.

"It can't be as bad as you made out," she said.

"Why not?"

"Surely they must have seen us come down. There's bound to be a search. Or at worst, surely one of us can get through if it's only twenty miles."

"I'm not just deliberately being pessimistic," he said. "I want to live too. But let's take it from the beginning. The captain would corroborate if he were here. One, they couldn't see us in Cefor. We didn't come over it, we were pointing roughly toward it. And they couldn't see a flaming meteor at five miles, let alone us at twenty. Radar doesn't work in this soup any more than in water. And a seismograph wouldn't help because there are so many quakes on

Venus no one will be even interested in the shock we made on landing.

"Two, we were bound for New Paris in the other hemisphere of Venus, and when a search starts in about twenty-four hours from now they'll concentrate around there first. At a rough guess it will be six months before they find this ship. Remember, they've got to explore almost every inch of ground. A helicopter has to be within a stonesthrow before it can see us."

The girl stared. "But any time there's a forced landing the passengers are picked up before there's any real danger—even if the ship is breached and they have to breathe that poison outside. I always thought the only danger was getting down safely."

"Yes," said Warren gently, "usually. But usually the radio doesn't crack up first—before the ship. Ours did. So no one knows where we are."

"Oh. I see. But we can't wait six months. We'll all be dead in a week. They don't carry much in the way of stores on these ships."

He nodded. "That's about the size of it."

She shrugged. "Well, we just have to get on the way to Cefor, then."

"Not me. If I'm going to die, I'll die here."

She shot a puzzled glance at him. "I don't understand you. You used to be a hero. You've done harder things than this trek to Cefor. You got medals for it."

He smiled bleakly. "No, you don't understand. I told you I was no hero. Before the war I was nothing, nobody. I'd tried a few things and failed in them all. I tried crime two or three times, and failed in that too. When the war started I realized it was my last chance. In peace I had nothing to look forward to but starvation or jail. So I thought I'd buy me a job. I became a professional hero. I didn't give a damn if I died. But if I got through I was pretty sure of some sort

of job. Civilians aren't grateful for long, but a collection of every medal they mint ought to be a recommendation just after the war, I thought. And I was right. I had my choice of jobs. I joined an importing firm and I've done well.

"I was a hero once, but that was when I had to risk my life to buy a life worth living. I bought it and paid for it. But when you gamble like that, you do it only once. I'm not going to throw away all I worked for trying to get through to Cefor. Sure, I know the Greys. I beat them before. But that was then. Now I'd rather stay here and take my chance of being rescued than give them another crack at me."

She looked steadily at him for a long time. Then she shook her head. "Maybe I'm wrong to say it," she murmured, "but you weren't twisted before. You're only twisted now. You've gone soft."

"Sure I've gone soft. I risked my life time and again so that one day I'd have a chance to go soft."

"Well, if you won't go, I must."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Please yourself."

She made a gesture of disgust. "Heaven knows I never thought I'd appeal to chivalry. I never cried off or made excuses because I'm a woman. But—"

"It doesn't matter. The Greys will get whoever tries it."

"I thought the war was over."

"Sure it is. But out there you won't find the civilized Greys. The Greys who will get you never signed any treaty. They won't attack the cities, but they'll attack anything or anyone outside."

She turned to the closet that contained the oxygen suits. "I might as well go now."

Warren watched her as she shook out the plastic envelope, obviously unfamiliar to her, and tried to climb into it. Then he put his hand on her arm.

"I can't let you go without telling you exactly why you shouldn't," he said.

She shook his arm off and struggled with the suit.

"First of all, though it's only a detail," he remarked, "you don't wear heavy clothes under that. You'd sweat off pounds before you'd gone a hundred yards. Most of us used to wear nothing but the suit, but if you don't like that, wear something light and loose."

She began to take off the suit again.

"You'll have no difficulty in finding the city," he said. "It's right up the hill. Keep on the incline and you can't go wrong. If you have to make a detour, just get back on the slope as soon as you can."

He paused. "You'll have even less difficulty in finding the Greys."

She waited for him to go on, hating him but utterly dependent on his knowledge of Venus.

"No native Venusians have any sense of smell," he said. "So to replace scent in hunting they have a sense that feels thought."

He saw her start, and grinned. "They can locate anything that thinks. They're not telepaths. They don't know what you think, any more than dogs hearing voices know what's being said. They just know there's thinking going on in such-and-such a direction, and from the kind of thinking they know the kind of creature that's doing it. So it doesn't matter what you think about, they'll pick you up."

He smiled again, cruelly, she thought. "When they do find you, they won't kill you right away. They'll follow you and let you catch a glimpse of one of them now and then and harry you and frighten you half to death. But they'll let you get right to the gates of Cefor. Ever seen a cat torturing a mouse? The Greys are just like that. At the very last minute, when you think you're safe, they'll drag you off into the forest and torture you to death. Maybe they'll let you escape two or three times. But at last they'll tire."

She twisted from him angrily, certain she had heard all

that would be of any use to her. She left the room to go to her cabin and change her clothes. But as silently as a cat he had followed her.

"Listen carefully to what happens then," he said, "for it's very important."

She tried to pass him, but he leaned with one arm on either side of her, holding her against the wall.

"They won't let you die. They'll mutilate you with their knives so that you're bound to die, so that the best doctors on Earth, Venus and Mars couldn't save you, so that you're in agony but will still live quite a while. Then they'll take you to the nearest city—in this case, Cefor. They'll leave you there. It amuses them that we humans don't kill our own people, even when they want to die. You'll die in a hospital bed, heavily drugged but still not enough to stop all the pain."

He let her go, for she was listening again, in horrified fascination. "But that isn't important," he said casually. "What is important is that you can tell them about us. We'll all be grateful to you. We may erect a statue to you. You'll die, but in dying you can save us."

He turned and left her then. She stared after him in horror, her horror for the Greys a little less strong than her horror for him.

Warren was waiting at the airlock as she came back. He grinned at her. She was almost literally sick. The worst of it was that he was almost certainly right. She had to make the effort, as no one else would make it. He knew that. He could afford to let her do it. And he would be saved. She would tell them at Cefor about the ship. He wasn't alone. There were other lives to be saved.

Warren surveyed her and nodded. "You're all right," he said. "Can you use a gun?"

She nodded involuntarily. "Take another," he said. "They won't give you time to reload." He gave her a gun, which she

slipped in her belt. She had changed into lounging pajamas which were enveloping but so thin she shivered in the normal temperature of the ship. Over them the plastic suit covered her loosely, completely, held firmly by the belt that contained her weapons.

Unwillingly she addressed him. "Is there *no* way of screening thoughts from the Greys?"

"Only by thinking like a Grey yourself. Only about half a dozen people ever learned to do it—and they can't keep it up for long."

She fought a shrieking urge in her to beg him to go instead of her. She believed all he had said—she expected to die. But she also believed that if she stayed where she was she would die. No one else would go.

"Good luck," said Warren.

Blindly, insanely she struck at him. But he evaded her blow and helped her into the airlock.

When she went out, the heat met her as if an oven door had been swung open. The ship's hull was insulated against both cold and heat. Usually it was cold it kept out, but on Venus it was damp warmth. Virginia's suit was supposed to afford some sort of insulation, but before she was out of sight of the ship she was wet all over with sweat.

She took one last look at the ship as she climbed up the slope. It was only fifty yards away. She could still turn and go back. She was beginning to realize something that stemmed from what Warren had said. She could always find Cefor—but she couldn't find the ship again once she lost sight of it. Going downhill might land her anywhere along the perimeter once she had lost all sense of direction—which would be almost at once.

She tried to think calmly of Warren. He must have known from the first that if he wouldn't try to get through to Cefor, she would. She wasn't the sort to sit still and wait for death.

And the savage, inhuman customs of the Greys ensured

that only one had to go. Hate for Warren crawled in her stomach. The worst of it was, she believed he might have got through safe. She still believed in his competence. Somehow, if he had had to, he would have reached safety.

But he didn't have to risk it. There was someone to risk it for him. A girl, but that didn't matter to a man who had lost pride.

She walked on for what seemed hours, until she was as wet as if she had just stepped out of a hot bath. Her watch showed sixty-three minutes since she left the ship. She had been walking briskly. Over four miles. She had always been a good walker, and the slighter gravity helped.

Then she struck the forest, beginning again on the slope. Venusian trees were like those of Earth in that they consisted mainly of a thick trunk, but that was all the resemblance. You could push an arm through them, and they closed round it. But they weren't dangerous. A man could walk right through them, if he was strong.

Virginia began to hope, despite herself, that she wouldn't see any Greys. She fell into the rhythm of her stride, walking like an automaton. She was tough. She could do twenty miles without coming to the end of her strength. The only difficulty was the eternal slope. But even that she became accustomed to.

She had done ten miles, she reckoned, when ahead of her, right in her path, she saw a Grey. He was facing her, only twenty yards away. Her gun came up and she fired, but she was not surprised when he faded into the mist and disappeared, unharmed.

So it had started. There would be a lot of this, according to Warren. The Greys were humanoid, like half-finished men. They had no hair, but they had arms, legs, feet, a trunk and a head. Everything about them was rounded off—shoulders, thighs, feet. They were a uniform grey all over, and invisible on their own planet at anything more than twenty yards.

They could be in plain sight, and only had to turn or move back a step to disappear completely.

She began to plan. Perhaps she could beat them, on what Warren had told her. Nothing mattered, apparently, until she was almost at Cefor. She would have to save herself till then. Greys could run a little faster than most humans, but not much. And she used to be able to do the hundred yards in well under twelve seconds. Civilized Greys had civilized weapons, but these were probably unarmed except for knives. If she could pick her time right for a dash to the city, she might make it.

She began to reel a little and slowed her pace, knowing she was observed. Perhaps she might trick them into leaving the final attack till too late. She could rest a little now. It was only the last mile that mattered.

She staggered and fell. She rose slowly, in artistic fatigue. But she almost jerked into her sprint when she saw four Greys calmly watching her from only ten yards.

She shot rapidly, and one of them fell. The others didn't appear to care. But they disappeared, if only just beyond her range of vision.

She ran a little then, in terror that was only a little less real than she pretended. But the control she still had on herself enabled her to stumble on tiredly at hardly more than walking pace.

Her hopes were beginning to rise. Twelve miles; she was still fresh; and the Greys must think her almost out on her feet. They must let her see Cefor or their devilish torture wouldn't be complete. And if they let her get that far, she might be able to dash for the gates and then hold them off until men came out, attracted by her shots.

She pondered over firing early in the hope that she would give the alarm. But almost certainly that would precipitate the Greys' attack, and she wanted to trick them into leaving it until the last possible moment.

Suddenly something crashed between her legs, throwing her headlong. She wasn't hurt, but when she got up she limped. They were playing into her hands. Warren had done this, she thought. Twice he had escaped from the Greys. And perhaps he hadn't known as much as she did now.

They left her alone for quite a while. She saw nothing of them for so long that she almost began to hope that they had tired and left her alone. But she kept her slow pace. They might be trying to trick her into showing she was stronger than she pretended.

When she least expected it she was bowled over from behind and felt the touch of warm, moist skin. She gave herself up to terror and thought, *This is it.* But they only rolled her about gently, played with her, and tripped her again every time she rose. There seemed to be about a dozen of them. She was afraid to try to shoot them. Her guns were secure if she left them where they were, but if she drew one they might knock it from her hand.

At last they were gone. They had torn her suit, but only the pantaloon part. She was puzzled, then realized why. Without oxygen she would die in eight hours, and would be beyond recovery in six. They knew that, and they wanted her to live longer.

She cut her suit away at the waist, below her belt. It left her legs freer. Her thin slacks clung to her legs so that by now they almost seemed a part of her. She wondered what they would do if she threw away the rest of the suit. Would they put it back on her forcibly?

She knew she must have done nearly twenty miles, and wished Warren had overestimated the distance. He had said twenty to thirty miles, and she had been unable to prevent herself hoping it was the smaller limit. But there was no sign of Cefor yet.

Two of them would have had a much better chance, she thought angrily. They could have watched all around them

and kept the Greys more on the defensive. As it was, the Greys were so silent that a score of them could be walking only a few yards behind her. She resisted the temptation to look until she was set to do it quickly, ready to take a shot at anything she saw.

When she had swung round she wished she hadn't. At least a score of dark shapes faded rapidly into the fog. Now she would always know they were there behind her, within sight if she turned her head. It was enough to drive her mad.

The Greys could see only about thirty or forty yards—even less than she could. If the mist would only lift, she knew she could see them long before they could see her. But the mist never lifted. It was the atmosphere of the planet. There was a lot of oxygen in it, but there were other things in it too.

Suddenly she saw a faint glow ahead. She forced herself to be cold as ice. The bright lights of the domed city would carry a long way, even through the fog. It might be anything up to a mile distant yet, though probably not more than half a mile. This was the time Warren had warned her about. The time when she began to think she was through. She forced herself to stumble slowly on. She nursed a faint hope that as the Greys probably couldn't actually see the city yet, though they would know where it was, they might leave her alone for a while yet.

She went staggering on, thinking over and over again, *Not yet! Not yet!* as her body rebelled and tried to run toward the light.

Then she saw the Greys closing in. Instantly she was running, firing her gun as she went. She didn't care where the bullets went. But she realized in rending disappointment that the mist blanketed sound as well as sight, and she was still too far away for the sound to be heard in Cefor.

But she was holding her lead! She went wild with exultation and threw her empty gun away. Even its weight held her back, and as she raced toward the light she told herself

she had won. The Greys had underestimated her, as she had been inviting them to do for hours.

Suddenly she heard a scream behind her. A woman's scream. It was so unexpected that she checked her stride involuntarily. She took it up again at once. The scream was another of the Greys' tricks.

Then it came again, and there were words. It was no Grey she heard. Behind her, a human girl was screaming as she was dragged down. Again Virginia couldn't help checking her stride. But then, furious with herself, she renewed her efforts. It must be Yvonne Yonge who was screaming. Somehow, for some reason, the little glamour girl had set out after her. That was too bad. Virginia's duty to herself, to the rest of them, even to Yvonne, was to reach Cefor. She burst forward as if she had merely been trotting gently before.

But the Greys were at her heels. She never knew whether she would have escaped if Yvonne's scream hadn't checked her, or whether the Greys would have caught her anyway. Either way, they had her.

She fought as she had never known she could fight. As she had never known anyone could fight. If there had only been ten of them, even twenty, she might have broken free again and again, until at last she reached Cefor. But there were scores of them, perhaps hundreds. When she broke from one group she was in the middle of another.

She stopped fighting at last, thinking she had no strength left. But when they began to drag her away from the lights of Cefor she found a reserve of strength that she hadn't known about. It made no difference.

She didn't see Yvonne, if it had been Yvonne. She was dragged for what seemed miles. The Greys were very gentle with her. They took all she was able to give them rather than scratch her skin. Now they folded her up at the foot of a tree, holding her so that she went down easily, naturally. Then they tied vines about her neck.

For a moment Virginia had hoped, half feared that they were going to throttle her. But instead they wound the rope about her throat, holding her plastic suit tight against her skin. Then they cut the suit neatly below the rope, fastened the plastic edge firmly against her skin with an adhesive binding, and removed the rope.

Obviously they wanted her to go on breathing through the filter in her hood, but to have the rest of her accessible. They reached over her and she flinched, expecting them to strip her, but they only tied her hands and ankles and patted her all over, making sure she had no concealed weapons.

Then they left her. In a moment there wasn't a Grey in sight.

She was helpless even to damage herself. She could roll on her side and rub her plastic hood on the ground in an effort to tear it and let the poisonous air reach her lungs—but that would take hours, and she didn't think she would be left alone that long.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," said Warren.

Her head jerked up, but she couldn't see him. Then, fantastically, his head appeared from the tree beside her. He was standing within it.

"Warren Blackwell!" she gasped. "You here!"

"I've never been more than a hundred yards away since you left the ship," he said. "Sorry, Virginia, it was the only way it could be done. I've got the trick of thinking like a Grey. But it would never fool the Greys for hours at a time. They would sense the human thoughts—unless there was another human about, thinking like a human."

He grinned down at her. "I told you they couldn't read thoughts. That wasn't quite right. They can read emotions—like fear. And they would know if you expected to get through. They'd have wondered what you were counting on. Then they'd have found me."

"But . . ."

"They rely on this sense of theirs—just as dogs rely on scent rather than sight. They weren't likely to see me, and they didn't. And if that little fool Glamour hadn't interfered we'd both have got through. I meant to get just ahead of you. Then, when the Greys finally decided to take you, I'd have helped you to cut and shoot your way through.

"But Glamour spoiled it. God knows what she was trying to do. I told them all to stay where they were, that we'd get through. Maybe she thought it was easy and wanted some of the glory. Anyway, I didn't know about her until a few minutes ago. She was behind us both. And there were so many Greys between you and her, I had to hide."

"Well, don't waste time," said Virginia. "Cut me loose and we'll—"

"No can do. They'd pick you up again long before we got to Cefor—whether we looked for Glamour or left her here. And then they'd know about me. No, there's only one way. I'll have to wait until there's less of them between here and Cefor and then try to get through myself. I'll be back."

"Can you get through alone?"

"I think so. I'm safe so long as I'm near you. By the time they sense me it'll be too late. But listen, Virginia. If they sense us coming back—men from Cefor and me—they'll drag you and Glamour away and that'll be the end of you. You must keep them here."

"I?" She nodded at her bonds. "What do you expect me to do?"

"That's up to you." He paused; went on tensely. "They'll start torturing you soon. That will occupy them. They'll be too excited to know we're coming. Don't be noble. Let them start on that little fool. Don't try to escape. They might not bring you back here."

He grinned again. "I think I can start now. Good luck—again."

He faded away into the mist. Virginia stared after him,

though she could see nothing. If he had only told her. . . . But she realized he probably told the truth when he said he hadn't dared. Knowing he was about, she would have been sure she would get through safely—though she had hated him, she had never doubted his competence—and then the Greys would have caught them both.

There was sound again in the silence of the mist. They were bringing in Yvonne—Glamour, as Warren called her. She was shouting, kicking, clawing. And the Greys weren't handling her as gently as they had handled Virginia. Perhaps they had some respect for courage, Virginia thought. She had never been in a blue funk as Yvonne was. Maybe it was because of that that they had been gentle with her.

And perhaps—she couldn't help thinking of it—perhaps they would work on Yvonne first.

It seemed like a dream—not a nightmare yet, for the Greys looked ludicrous rather than dangerous. There were hundreds of them. They filled the clearing; though Yvonne was only twenty yards away, she might have been a million miles for all that was visible of her. Virginia was lifted to her feet by what seemed like a hundred hot, wet Greys, and as they led her, still bound, to where she had last seen Yvonne the whole thing seemed more a practical joke than any thing else.

Then abruptly it stopped being a practical joke.

They had cut Yvonne's suit like hers, leaving nothing but the hood over her head, fastened at the neck. Yvonne was wearing a blouse and shorts and looked like the heroine of a jungle picture. When she saw Virginia she tried to get up to go to her.

But the Greys stopped that by pinning her to the ground with two knives through her hands. Her shriek went through Virginia's head like a needle.

Four of the Greys held Virginia so that she had to watch what was going on. She shut her eyes, but when Yvonne screamed again they had to come open.

If the Greys had shouted and danced and beat drums it would have been less horrible. But the only sounds were those forced from Yvonne. There were plenty of those.

To keep her sanity Virginia concentrated desperately on Warren, making his way toward Cefor. He needed time. Suddenly, after a long spell of relaxation, she flung herself forward, tore free and pitched beside Yvonne, who was still, she realized, only mildly hurt beside what was to come.

"Warren's gone for help," she murmured. "Hold out a little and he'll be back."

As the Greys dragged Virginia to her feet again Yvonne screamed wildly: "Why do you leave her alone? Why do you only torture me? I can't take any more. She can take it. She's strong. Please leave me alone. Please . . . *aahhhh!*"

She shrieked again as a Grey bent over her with a knife. She wasn't screaming now for nothing . . .

It was almost an hour later that they brought Warren in. It had seemed like days to Virginia and probably untold centuries to Yvonne. When she saw him being forced into the clearing by a mass of struggling Greys, Virginia stared in horror. She had always believed he would get through. The question had merely been whether he would be in time. He wouldn't look at her. He stared impassively at Yvonne instead.

They hadn't touched Virginia yet, beyond holding her still —but it must be close to her time. If they weren't going to let Yvonne die, they couldn't do much more to her. There was very little blood. The Greys had a herb that seemed to close the skin, though it left an angry purple discoloration. Yvonne was almost all purple. For some time she had had no strength to scream. The Greys were losing interest in her. Further torture had no noticeable effect. She was conscious, but she didn't seem to feel fresh cuts.

They must have had some invisible means of communication among themselves. Suddenly, as if as a signal, they

turned to Virginia, and with a sick feeling at her stomach she knew her time had come.

"I always wondered," said Warren curiously, "what kind of figure you had."

But, not being human, the Greys didn't strip her. They merely stretched her on the ground and cut her bonds, waiting for her to make a dash for it. That was part of the fun.

Suddenly Warren tore himself free. But instead of running from the clearing he threw himself at Virginia. "Play up," he panted. "They won't know what to do. They'll wait to see what happens. It will amuse them to see us fighting."

"Then you *did* get through?"

"Sure I got through. I said I would, didn't I? But we have to give them something to think about. So that they won't sense the men closing in. Fight, damn you. We're not out of the wood yet. If we give them time to think . . ."

His breath left him in a gasp as Virginia's hard fist sank into his stomach.

While the Greys watched they fought for their lives. But not against each other, though that was part of it. They didn't care if they were hurt. If the fight was too tame to excite the Greys they would be hurt much more. It means nothing to the Greys that they were a man and a woman. The Greys were monogeneous and had never quite worked out the relationship of human men and women.

Virginia's hood was torn, and she wondered if the Greys would stop the fight. From then on she was breathing poison. But it didn't matter. She would either be safe in six hours or as near dead as made no difference. She tore off the hood altogether and threw it from her, jerking her hair back out of her eyes.

Warren was grunting with pain more than her blows deserved. It did occur to Virginia once as he struck at her with feral strength that perhaps he was hurting her more than he need; but then she realized that as the Greys sensed fear

they probably sensed pain, and that that was at the root of their inhuman sadism. After that she didn't pull her punches either.

Then Warren, his fist drawn back to jab in her ribs, swung at the nearest Grey instead, knocked him spinning. The clearing was suddenly filled with men in tough plastic suits. They didn't use guns, but long knives. It was massacre, for the Greys' knives couldn't pierce their suits.

It was massacre, and Virginia gladly helped in it. The moist black ground ran with blood, and none of it was red. The Greys didn't run. Inflamed with bloodlust, they couldn't suddenly switch over to reason and to fear. They stood their ground and were cut to pieces.

"Well, now you know the Greys," said Warren.

They were in a room, a civilized room in a city again. There were deep carpets on the floor and soft couches and armchairs. Virginia had thrown herself in one of them, still in her black suit. Her jacket was little more than a collar, there wasn't much left of her slacks, and Warren was surveying her at last with satisfied curiosity and smug satisfaction, but she didn't care.

"Glamour's husband was in Cefor," Warren murmured. "He came with the rescue party, poor devil. She's still a fool, but . . ."

"I know. Is she dead?"

"Not yet. I told her she'd saved the rest of us, which was a lie and not much good to her and her husband anyway, but maybe it was some comfort."

"It wasn't a lie really. She gave you an hour." Virginia shuddered. "Even though if it hadn't been for her we wouldn't have needed it. Why did you let them catch you?"

"To give the others time. And maybe to see how tough you were." He felt his ribs tenderly. "But this hero business has got to stop. The next time something like this happens,

I really will let someone else take the risk. All of it, not just some."

He grinned down at her, swaying a little on his feet.

"You first spoke to me about nine hours ago. And you spent a lot of that time hating me. Do you think we've known each other long enough for you to kiss me?"

"Nothing would make me get up."

"Nothing? You want another fight?"

She rose hurriedly. "Anything," she said, "but that."

THE LUCK OF IGNATZ

by LESTER DEL REY

MAYBE IT WAS SUPERSTITION, but Ignatz knew it was all his fault. For the last three days, Jerry Lord had sat in that same chair, his eyes conjuring up a vision of red hair and a dimple on the wall, and there was nothing Ignatz could do about it.

He grunted and grumbled his unhappiness, dug his tail into the carpet, and shoved forward on his belly plate until his antennae touched the Master's ankle. For the hundredth time he tried to mumble human words, and failed. But Jerry sensed his meaning and reached down absently to rub the horn on his snout.

"Ignatz," the Master muttered, "did I tell you Anne starhops on the *Burgundy* tonight? Bound for South Venus." He sucked on his cold pipe, then tossed it aside in disgust. "Pete Durnall's to guide her through Hellonfire swamps."

It was no news to Ignatz, who'd heard nothing else for the last three days, but he rumbled sympathetically in his foghorn voice. In the rotten inferno north of Hellas, any man who knew the swamps could be a hero to a mudsucker. Even veteran spacemen were usually mudsuckers on Venus, and Anne was earthbound, up to now.

Ignatz knew those swamps—none better. He'd lived there some hundred odd years until the Master caught him for a mascot. Oh, the swamp animals were harmless enough, most of them, but Anne wouldn't think so when she saw them. She'd screamed the first time she saw him—even a Venusian *zloaht,* or snail-lizard, was horrible to an Earthman; the other fauna were worse.

But the memory of the swamps suggested heat to Ignatz.

He crawled up the portable stove and plunked down into a pan of boiling water; after a few minutes, when the warmth took full effect, he relaxed comfortably on the bottom to sleep. Jerry'd have to solve his own problems, since he couldn't learn *zloaht* language. What was the sense of solving problems if he couldn't boast about it?

There was a thud and clank outside, and a chorus of shrieks rent the air. By the time Ignatz was fully awake, a man was pounding on the door, grumbling loudly. Jerry threw it open, and the hotel manager plunked in, face red and temper worse.

"Know what that was?" he shrieked. "Number two elevator broke the cable—brand-new it was, too. Stuck between floors, and we've got to cut through with a blow torch. Now!"

"So what? I didn't do it." The old weariness in Jerry's voice was all too familiar to Ignatz. He knew what was coming.

"No, you didn't do it; you didn't *do* it. But you were here." The red face turned livid, and the fat chest heaved convulsively. He threshed his fist in front of Jerry's face, and shrilled out in a quivering falsetto: "Don't think I haven't heard of you! I felt sorry for you, took you in for only double rates, and look what happens. Well, I'm through. Out you go—hear me? Out, now, at once."

Jerry shrugged. "Okay." He watched with detached interest as Ignatz climbed out of the pan and dropped over onto the manager's leg. With a wild shriek of confused profanity, the man jerked free and out. He went scurrying down the hall, his fat hands rubbing at the burned flesh.

"You shouldn't have done that, Ignatz," Jerry remarked mildly. "He'll probably have blisters where you touched him. But it's done now, so go cool off and help me pack." He put a pan of cold water on the floor and began opening closets and dragging out clothes. Ignatz climbed into the water and

let his temperature drop down to a safe limit, considering this latest incident ruefully.

Not that there was anything novel about it; the only wonder was that they had been in the hotel almost a week before it happened. And it was all his fault; he never did anything, but he was there, and trouble followed blissfully after. Of course, Jerry Lord should have known better than to catch a snail-lizard, but he did it, and things started.

The luckiest man in the star fleet, the Master had been head tester for the new rocket models until the O.M. decided he needed a rest and sent him to Venus. Any normal man would have been killed when the ship cracked up over the swamps, but Jerry came walking into Hellas with two hundred ounces of gold under one arm and Ignatz under the other.

Naturally, the Venusians had warned him. They knew, and had known for generations, that it was good luck to have a *zloaht* around in the swamps, but horribly bad outside. The members of Ignatz's tribe were plain Jonahs, back to the beginning. Ignatz knew it, too, and tried to get away; but by the time they were well out of the swamps, he liked the Master too well to leave.

To any other man, Ignatz would have spelled personal bad luck, with general misfortune left over. But Jerry's personal luck held out; instead of getting trouble himself, others around him were swamped with it. The test ships cracked up, one after another, while Jerry got away without a scratch. Too many cracked up, and the O.M. gave Jerry another vacation, this time a permanent one.

His reputation waxed great, and doors closed silently but firmly before him. "Sorry, Mr. Lord, we're not taking on new men this year." They weren't to be blamed; hadn't something gone wrong by the time he left the office—not just something, but everything? Nowadays, an ambulance fol-

lowed casually wherever he went walking with Ignatz, and some innocent bystander usually needed it.

Then Jerry met Anne Barclay, and the inevitable happened. Anne was the O.M.'s daughter, and as cute a yard engine as ever strode down the training field of the Six World Spaceport. Jerry took one look at her, said, "Ah," and developed a fever. He still had some of his money left, and he could dance, even if the orchestra always missed their cues when he was on the floor. By the time he'd known her three weeks, she was willing to say yes; that is, she was until the O.M. put her wise. Then she remembered that she'd lost the ring her mother had given her, had tooth trouble, sinus trouble, and a boil on her left shoulder, all since she met Jerry. With the O.M. helping her imagination along, she did a little thinking about what married life might lead to; they decided that a little trip to Venus, with Peter Durnall, the Old Man's favorite, was just the answer, and that Jerry could cool his heels and rot.

Not that they were superstitious, any more than all star-jumpers and their daughters were; Ignatz understood that. But when too many coincidences happen, it begins to look a bit shady. Now she was gone, or at least going, and Jerry was going out on his ear, from her life and from the hotel. Ignatz swore lustily in lizard language and crawled out of the pan. He rolled over in a towel, then began helping Jerry pack—a simple thing, since most of Jerry's wardrobe rested comfortably in old Ike's pawnshop.

"We'll go to the dock," Jerry decided. "I'm practically broke, fellow, so we'll sleep in a shed or an outbuilding if we can slip past the watch. Tomorrow, I'll look for work again."

He'd been looking for work for months, any work, but the only job he knew was handling the star-jumpers, or spaceships; and they had enough natural bad luck without adding Luckless Jerry to the crew. Ignatz wondered what the

chances of finding open garbage pails around the dock were, but he followed meekly enough.

A raw steam pipe led around the shed with the loose lock at the rear. It happened to be super-hot steam, so Ignatz's sleep was heavy and dreamless, and daylight came and went unknown. The first thing he knew was when Jerry knocked him down and dipped him in a cold puddle to wake him up. At least, it smelled like Jerry, though the face and clothes were all wrong.

The Master grinned down at Ignatz as the water fizzed and boiled. Overnight, apparently, he had grown a beard, and his straight hair was a mass of ringlets. Over one eye a scar ran down to his mouth, and pulled his lips up into a rough caricature of a smile; and the face was rough and brown, while his clothes might have been pulled off a refuse truck.

"Pretty slick, eh, Ignatz?" he asked. "Old Ike fixed me up for my watch and ring." He picked the *zloaht* up and chucked him into a traveling bag. "We can't let them see you now, so you'll have to stay under cover till we hit berth."

Ignatz hooted questioningly, and Jerry chuckled. "Sure, we've got a job—keeping the bearings oiled on a space-hopper. Remember that old tramp who was sleeping here last night? Well, he'd been a star-jumper till the weed hit him, and his papers were still clear. I got them for practically nothing, had Ike fix me up, and went calling today. Our luck's changed again. We're riding out tonight, bound for Venus!"

Ignatz grunted again. He might have known where they were bound for.

"Sure." Jerry was cocky again, banking on his luck. "Not another grunt from you, fellow. I can't take any chances on this trip."

The *zloaht* settled down on the clothes in the big and

chewed slowly on a piece of leather he'd found outside. Anything might happen now, but he had ideas of what that anything might be. The bag jerked and twisted as the Master slipped past the guards and out onto the rocket field where the hiss of rockets told Ignatz some ship was warming up, testing her exhaust. He stuck his eye to a crack in the bag and peered out.

It was an old freighter, but large and evidently well-kept. They were moving the derricks back and battening down the hatches, so the cargo was all aboard. From the smell, he decided they were carrying raisins, peanuts and chocolate, all highly prized by the spore prospectors on Venus. Venus grew little that equaled old Earth foods, and only the most concentrated rations could be carried by those wandering adventurers.

As he watched, Ignatz saw a big tanker run out on the tracks and the hose tossed over to fill the tanks with hydrogen peroxide to be burned into fuming exhaust gases by the atomic converters; the isotope plates were already in, apparently. Mechanics were scurrying around, inspecting the long blast tubes, and the field was swarming with airscrew tugs ready to pull the big freighter up where her blast could shoot out harmlessly and her air fins get a grip on the air.

These big freighters were different from the sleek craft that carried the passengers; the triangles were always neatly balanced on their jets, but the freighter was helpless in the grip of a planet unless buoyed up by the tugs until she reached a speed where the stubby fins supported her.

Evidently the Master had made it barely in time, for the crew plank was being unhitched. He ran up it, presented his papers, and was ordered to his berth. As he turned to leave, there was a halloo from below, and the plank was dropped again. Blane, the freighter's captain, leaned over, swearing.

"Supercargo! Why can't he take a liner? All right, we'll wait for him twenty minutes." He stumped up the stairs to the conning turret, and words drifted down sulfurously. "Every damned thing has gone wrong on this trip. I'm beginning to think there's a Jonah in the crew."

Jerry waited to hear no more, but moved to his berth—a little tin hole in the wall, with a hard bunk, a pan of water, and a rod for his clothes. He tested the oxygen helmet carefully, nodded his satisfaction, and stretched out on the bunk.

"You stay there, Ignatz," he ordered, "and keep quiet. There might be an inspection. I'll let you out when I go on second shift. Anyway, there isn't a steampipe in the hole, so it wouldn't do you any good."

The port above was closing with a heavy bang. "Supercargo must have come up early. Wonder who he was? Must have been somebody important to hold Blane waiting for him—friend of the O.M.'s, I guess." He grinned comfortably, then wiped it off his face as a shout came down the stairwell.

"Hey, down there! Bring up some tools, and make it snappy. The crew port's stuck, and we're taking off in five minutes."

Jerry swore, and Ignatz turned over with a disgruntled snort. "Well," the Master reflected, "at least I won't get the blame for it this time. But it's funny, all the same. Darned funny!"

Ignatz agreed. This promised to be an interesting voyage, if they ever reached Venus at all. If the Master had to keep a *zloaht* for a pet, he might have stayed on the ground where their necks would have been safe, instead of running off on this crazy chase after a girl. For once he was glad that Venus knew no sex—unless the incubator cows were called females.

Jerry let Ignatz out when he came back from shift. He was tired and grouchy, but nothing had gone wrong in particular.

There had been two minor accidents, and one of the tenders had his foot smashed by a loose coupling, but a certain amount of that had to be expected. At least no one had accused him of causing trouble.

"I found out who the supercargo is," he told the *zloaht.* "Nobody but the Old Man himself. So you lie low and I'll keep out of his way. The old buzzard has eyes like a hawk, and nobody ever called his memory bad."

The works of Robert Burns were unknown to Ignatz, but he did know the gist of the part that goes: "The best laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft agley." He waited results with foreboding, and they came when Jerry's next shift was half through.

It was the O.M. himself who opened the door and turned to a pair of brawny wipers. "All right, bring him in here, and lock the door. I don't know who he is, and I don't care. We can find that out later; but I do know he isn't the man his card says. That fellow has been rotten with weed for ten years.

"And Captain Blane," he addressed the officer as they tossed Jerry on the bunk, "in the future inspect your men more carefully. I can't make a tour of inspection on every freighter, you know. Maybe there's no harm in him, but I don't want men working for me on fake cards."

As they locked the door and went down the hall, the captain's voice was placating, the O.M. raving in soft words that fooled nobody by their mildness. Ignatz crawled out from under the bunk, climbed up the rail, and nuzzled Jerry soothingly.

Jerry spat with disgust. "Oh, he came down, pottered around the generator room and wanted to see my card; said he didn't know any oiler with a scar. Then Hades broke loose, and he yelled for Blane. Anyway, he didn't recognize me. Thank the Lord Harry, you had enough sense to duck, or my goose would have been cooked."

Ignatz rooted around and rubbed the horn on his snout lightly against the Master's chest. Jerry grinned sourly.

"Sure, I know. We haven't sunk yet, and we're not going to. Go on away, fellow, and let me think. There must be some way of getting off this thing after we reach Venus."

Ignatz changed the "after" to "if" in his mind, but he crawled back dutifully and tried to sleep; it was useless. In half an hour, Captain Blane rattled on the door and stalked in, his face pointing to cold and stormy. There was an unpleasant suggestion in the way he studied Jerry.

"Young fellow," he barked, "if the Old Man didn't have plans for you, I'd rip you in three pieces and strew you all over this cabin. Call that damned *zloaht* of yours out and take off those whiskers, Jerry Lord."

The Master grunted, as a man does after a blow to the stomach. "What makes you think I'm Lord?"

"Think? There's only one Jonah that big in the star fleet. Since you came aboard, every blamed thing's been one big mess. The O.M. comes on board as supercargo, the port sticks, three men get hurt fitting a new injector, I find Martian sand worms in the chocolate, and the O.M. threatens to yank my stars. Don't tell me you're anyone else!" He poked under the bunk. "Come out of there, you blasted *zloaht!*"

Ignatz came, with a rueful honk at Jerry, who pulled his false beard anxiously. "Well, Captain, what if I am? Does the O.M. know?"

"Of course not, and he better hadn't. If he found I'd shipped you with the crew, I'd never draw berth again. When we hit Venus, I'll try to let you out in a 'chute at the mile limit. Or would you rather stay and let the Old Man figure out ways and means?"

Jerry shook his head. "Let me out on your 'chute," he agreed hastily. "I don't care how, as long as I get free to Venus."

Blane nodded. "I'll catch hell anyway, but I'd rather not

have you around when we land. I never did trust my luck when a ship breaks up." He pointed at Ignatz. "Keep that under cover. If the O.M. finds out who you are, I'll put you off in a lead suit, *without* a 'chute. Savvy, mister?"

Jerry savvied plenty. He motioned Ignatz back under the bunk and moved over to the shelf where his grub lay. Blane turned to go. And then raw Hades broke loose.

There was a sick jarring, and a demon's siren seemed to go off in their ears. The shelf jumped across the room; Jerry hit the captain with his head. For half a second, there was complete silence, followed by bedlam, while the ship jerked crazily under their feet. Acting on instinct, both the captain and Master dashed for the oxygen helmet, and a private war started before either realized what had happened.

Jerry straightened up first. "That was the control engine," he yelled in Blane's ear. The man couldn't hear, but he caught the idea. "Get out of here and find out what happened."

There was no thought of prisoners. Jerry pounded along at the captain's heels, and Ignatz had only time to make a convulsive leap and slide down Jerry's neck under his jacket. Men were swarming down the stairwell and up from the main rocket rooms. A babble of voices blended with a shrilling of alarms and a thud of feet on cuproberyl decks.

The Old Man was in the engine room before them. "Blane! Blane! Hey, somebody find that lunkhead before these fools wreck the whole ship!"

Blane saluted roughly, his mouth open, his eyes darting about the wreck of the steering engine. "Wha-what happened?"

One quick glance had told Jerry. "Which one of you oilers let the main bearings run dry?"

A wiper pointed silently to a shapeless lump of bones and assorted cold cuts. While eyes turned that way, Ignatz

slipped out and pushed from sight between a post and wall that were still partly whole.

Jerry Lord's mouth was set as he swung to Blane. "Got a spare engine? No. Well, dismantle one of your gyro-stabilizer engines and hook it up. Send men to inspect what damage was done to the controls. Get the doctor up here to look over these men who are still in one piece. Wake up, man!"

Blane shut his mouth slowly, wheeled back to the men and began shouting instructions, until some order came out of the milling mass of men. In the confusion, the O.M. hadn't noticed Jerry, but he swung to him now.

"Who let you out? Never mind; you're here. It's a good thing somebody has some sense, or that yellow-belly'd still be dreaming! Captain Blane, get that wreck out of here, put this prisoner to work. We can't waste time or men now. I'm going back to the control co-ordinators to inspect the damage."

Now that the shock of his first major accident was over, Blane snapped briskly into it. He glared at Jerry, but postponed it for later. Ignatz knew this was to be held against the Master, as well as the other troubles were, and he mumbled uncomfortably.

With the engine in scattered parts, little dismantling was necessary. The men were cleaning the parts away, cutting such few bolts as were left in the base, and preparing the space for the new engine. The stabilizer motor came in, one part at a time, and Jerry oversaw its placement and assembly, set its governor, and hooked the controls to it as rapidly as the crew could cut away the bent rods and weld new ones in their place. In an emergency, no group of men on Earth can do the work that a space-crew can turn out in a scant half-hour, and these were all seasoned star-jumpers; to them the lack of gravity was a help rather than a hindrance in the swift completion of the work.

By the time the O.M. was back, the walls were being

welded over, the new engine was tuned, the controls hitched, and the captain was sweating and swearing, but satisfied that the work had been well done. Jerry came back from the stabilizer hold to report the motors retuned and set for the added load given by the loss of one of the five engines, with the juice feeding in evenly.

The Old Man motioned silently, his face blank and expressionless, and Blane gulped as he turned to follow. Jerry strung along without invitation, tucking Ignatz carefully out of sight under his clothes.

Back in the nerve center of the ship, the control integrators were a hopeless mess. The main thrust rods that coupled the control turret to the engine were still intact, but the cables and complex units of gears and eveners that formed the nearly human brain of the ship were ruined beyond possibility of repair.

The O.M.'s voice was almost purring, but his eyelids twitched. "Have you repairs, Captain?"

"Some. We might be able to jury-rig part of it, but not enough to couple the major rockets to the control panel. That looks to me like a one-way ticket to hell." Under the stress of danger, the man had relapsed into a numb hopelessness.

"How many hours to Venus, and where's the danger point?"

"Sixty hours, and we either get control in ten, or we fall straight into the sun. We're in Orbit C-3 now, and we'll miss Venus entirely."

"Not a chance to get repairs sent out in time," the O.M. muttered. "Well, I guess that's that."

Jerry pushed past the captain, saluted the O.M. quietly. "Beg pardon, sir, but it might be possible to control the ship manually from here, with observations relayed from the control turret."

Momentarily their eyes brightened, but only for a split

second. "Not one man in a thousand knows the layout of the cables here. and the job would be physically impossible. I don't know whether this rod should be forced back or that one forward. When the old manual controls were still in, we had them arranged logically in banks, but this is uncharted confusion."

"I know the layout," Jerry offered evenly. "It's simply a question of being able to move around fast enough to coordinate the thrust rods." Yet he looked at the mass of rods, levers, and cables with doubt large in his heart. It meant covering an eight-foot wall, and keeping the tangle of eveners clear in his mind every second of the time, though it might be done.

There was a snort from Blane, but the O.M. silenced it. "We have to believe in miracles now. It's our only chance. Are you sure you can do it, mister?"

"Fairly sure, sir."

"How many helpers?"

Jerry grinned sourly. "None; it's easier and surer doing it than telling others how to do it, and maybe having them mess things up. Has to be a one-man job."

"Right." There was grudging approval on the scowling face. "Blane, you take orders from him; get the wrecked parts out, uncouple the remaining automatics. You and the navigators will take turns relaying the chart data to this room —and it'd better be right. Get a phone hooked up at once, and put this man to work. If we get to Venus, he's free, no questions asked, and a good job waiting for him. If we don't, he won't need the job."

When the O.M. was gone, the captain shook his fist under Jerry's nose. "Jonah! If you hadn't been along, this wouldn't have happened. You'd better be good, *Mr.* Lord." He stopped suddenly, a new thought hitting him. "Do you realize that means sixty hours of steady, solid work down here?"

"Naturally, since your navigators never learned more than

they had to." Jerry shrugged with an entirely false optimism. "And you'll remember that hereafter every man on this ship will take orders from me, sir? I must insist on absolute co-operation."

"You'll get it, Jonah or not." Blane stuck out a hand. "I don't like your reputation, Lord, but I do like your guts. Good luck!"

In making an impressive exit, the captain forgot the oil on the floor; he executed a jerky half-twist before his back hit the deck. Ignatz backed further out of sight and prepared for the worst.

"Jonah!" said Blane, and it covered everything with no wasted syllables.

With the wreck carted out, the communication man came in, hooked up a phone, and coupled it by a spring reel of wire to sponge-covered earphones. He handed over a chart of present position and estimated orbit, then cleared out.

Jerry cut in on the phone. "All clear?"

"Waiting for orders, sir. Stern rocket seven has a point-oh-six underblast you'll have to counteract, and the stabilizers only work three-five. Venus now in position—" The navigator rattled off his co-ordinates, and Jerry set them up in his head as he reached for the main blast rods.

"Okay. Leave orders I'm not to be bothered by anyone but the mess boy." He pulled Ignatz out, patted his back, and grinned. "The room's yours, fellow. Stand to blast!"

"Clear to blast, sir. All-1-1 positions set! Trim-m-m and stow all-l-l!" The time-honored call rang down the stairwell as Jerry threw the manuals and braced himself for gravity-on.

The freighter shook like a cat coming out of a bathtub, groaned and bucked sullenly, as the controls were thrown one at a time; reluctantly she settled down to business. For a bottom-blaster, she was a sweet old bus, put out with the

craftsmanship of men who longed for the stars and took out that longing in building ships to carry others. Even with the overworked stabilizers and slight underblast she answered her helm better than some of the new triangles. Jerry bit into her levers savagely at first, then gently as she became part of him, hard to reach, yet sweet and honest.

The navigator was shouting down co-ordinates, drift ratios, and unnecessary pep talk, and the O.M.'s voice came through occasionally, sounding almost pleasant. The crusty old scalawag had what it took, Jerry conceded; no hysteria or nonsense about him. Under such an example, the captain and first navigator took heart, and the second navigator was jaunty with hope when he came on. Faith was dirt cheap in the conning turret at the moment; Jerry could have used more of it himself, but was careful not to show it in his voice.

The first ten hours were no worse than steady attention and driving work could make them, and he began to get the feel of the ship. His mind tuned in on the creaking of her girders, the sway of her deck, and the strange harmony that couples flesh to well-built metal. The pattern of the controls etched itself indelibly into his brain, short cuts came, and ways of throwing his combinations in less time and with less effort, until he became a machine integral with the parts he handled.

When food was brought down, he grinned confidently at the mess boy and snatched it in mouthfuls as the co-ordinates sent down and the movement felt sent him dancing across the room. Watching him, the boy grinned back, and snapped his fingers gleefully. Hop to Venus with ruined controls? A cinch!

Ignatz waited doubtfully, but nothing more seemed likely to happen. He honked hopefully—and an answering bark came out of the vent tubes. The exhaust blower went on noisily, but the current of cool air stopped.

Jerry cut in on the phone. "What happened?"

"Dust explosion in the filter chamber, sir. I'm afraid it'll take some time to fix it."

It did. While the hours passed, heat leaked in from the engine and refused to go out. Normal perspiration gave way to rivulets of sweat that tried to get in the Master's eyes and made his hands wet and slippery.

Ice and water, brought down at hourly intervals, helped, but did not alleviate the temperature. Men were working on the air ducts, but it promised to be a long job. Ignatz had secretly crawled up the maze of vent pipes to find the obstruction, nearly got lost, and come down without success.

When the twenty-hour period was up, Jerry was rocking on his heels, cursing the heat with every labored breath. He wore ice packs on every safe place, and still couldn't keep cool. The blowers were working again, keeping a steady current of air moving, but it was hot. Under the Master's shoes were heavy pads of rubberoid, and he wore stiff space mittens on his hands, but still the heat came through from the hot floor and control rods. A few more degrees would spell the limit.

Then the temperature reached a mark and held it. The heat seeping in and the air going out balanced, and Jerry settled down to a regular routine of ice packs and heat; even the air he breathed was filtered through an ice mask.

The phone buzzed and the O.M.'s voice came over. "One of the refrigerators overheated and burned a bearing. You'll have to cut down to half rations of ice."

"Okay." The Master stared thoughtfully at Ignatz, then caught him up and draped him over his shoulders. "Not enough ice, fellow. You like heat, but you'll have to cool me off. Come on, pal, show your stuff."

Ignatz did his best. He had the finest heat-regulating system on nine planets, and he put it to work, soaking up the heat from Jerry's sweaty body, dissipating it out into the air. Jerry never understood how it was done, but he knew Ignatz

could absorb heat or radiate it off at high efficiency; now the *zloaht* was absorbing on his flexible belly-plate and radiating from his back.

Jerry sighed with relief. "Ah, fine, fellow. You've got the ice packs beat three ways from Sunday." His eyes pulled shut and he relaxed against the control bars. Ignatz prodded him with the sharp end of his tail, waking him to his duties.

"Regular two-man crew we've got, fellow," the Master muttered. "You'll make me win this thing through yet, maybe." His beard was peeling off in the humid heat, and he pulled it away, along with the scar. The brown pigment had gone hours before.

But now things were letting up a little. The freighter had settled into the groove of her orbit, was balanced nicely, and required little more attention until they reached Venus. Jerry had an insulated chair rigged up and dropped into it when the pressure of the work would let him, while Ignatz listened for the opening buzz of the phone or watched gravely for a flash from the extension feed indicators. Fifteen minutes here, twenty there, once even a whole hour; Jerry's overworked system grabbed greedily at each minute, sucking up relief and rest like a dry sponge. If only the drugging, tiring heat would lift.

And then, miraculously, a shot of cold air *whooshed* out of the vent ports, and Jerry jerked up from his stupor. "They've got it, Ignatz; it's fixed!" He shivered gratefully under the draft, drew back from it while his body begged for coolness, afraid of too sudden a drop in temperature. "Now you can forget the heat, fellow; just wake me when I need it."

The air was dropping down smoothly, a degree every five minutes, and life seemed to flow back into the Master. Ignatz muttered softly and relaxed. The two-way heat control had been a heavy nervous strain on him, requiring hard mental discipline; he was thankful to fall back to normal.

The three-quarters mark came and went, with only fifteen

hours ahead—and the hardest part of the job still to do. Under his breath, Jerry was talking to himself, ordering his muscles as he might a crew of men, trying to forget the dull ache that found every muscle of his body, the hot acid pain in his head, the feeling of an expanding balloon against his brain. Another five hours, and they'd be teetering down through the heavy gravity zone, where every tube would have to be balanced until the tugs came to take over.

Old Man Barclay came down in place of the mess boy, a serious, worried O.M., but with a smile on his lips—until he saw Ignatz and Jerry's normal face. Then something hard shot into his eyes. He whistled.

"I had a hunch," he said softly. But his voice was even, his face relaxed. "You always were a fool, Jerry, even if you happen to be the best man that ever rode a star-hopper. This, and our cursed luck, should have told me. What is it—Anne?"

Jerry nodded, patted Ignatz back into place as the *zloaht* moved to avoid the O.M.'s look. "Anne," he agreed. He thrust back into the machinery as the navigator sent down fresh data, backed out, and faced the other quietly. "Well?"

"Of course." The old face never moved a muscle. "What I can't understand is how your luck can reach out ten million miles and hit another ship, though. Never mind, I'll tell you later—maybe."

Jerry dropped limply back into his chair, and the other moved over with a drink. Noting the trembling hands that lifted the glass, the Old Man's face softened. "Too much work for one man, son. I used to be pretty much up on the layout here. Maybe I can spell you."

"Maybe. It's routine stuff now, Mr. Barclay. All you need are the feed controls and gyro-eveners banked together there." The Master pointed them out, one by one, while the

O.M. nodded. "I'll have to take over in four, five hours though. Sure you can do it till then?"

"That much, yes." The O.M. tossed a blanket over the younger man and then moved over by the projecting feed bars. "Ever strike you as funny I came on this trip?"

"Didn't have time to think," said the Master.

Barclay squatted down on a beam, his eyes on the controls. "I don't do things without a purpose, Lord. Venus needs radium—needs it bad. They offer double price for three million dollars' worth. Earth price, when delivered at Hellas. But they want it quick, so it has to be sent in one load. You can't get insurance on that for a one-shipment cargo; too much risk. And no private company will ship it without insurance."

"So?"

"So I bought the radium on the market, had it stowed secretly with the chocolate—mutiny never happened, but it might—and came along to watch it. That represents my entire personal fortune. If it reaches Venus, I double my money; otherwise, I won't be there to worry about it."

He stopped, then went on in the same even voice. "That's why I could cheerfully kill you for putting a jinx on this voyage. But I won't. I have reasons for reaching Venus in a hurry. Put this ship down in one piece on the surface of Venus, and one-third of the profit is yours—one million dollars, cold cash, in any bank you want it."

Ignatz honked softly—for him—and Jerry blinked. He swung off at a tangent. "You spoke of my luck hitting another ship across ten million miles; and now you've got reasons for reaching Hellas quickly. Anne?"

The O.M. repeated Jerry's earlier answer. "Anne. Saw it from the conning turret. The *Burgundy* broke a steering tube bank, had to make a forced landing. We got the start of an SOS, but it faded off—must have ruined the radio as they hit."

"Where?"

"Latitude 78° 43' 28" south, longitude 24° 18' 27" west. SOS started with something about twin mountains. Know where it is?"

"Minerva's Breasts, in the middle of Despondency. I camped near the north breast. Worst spot on Venus, that isn't too hot for life."

"Exactly. We radioed Hellas, but in that jungle it may take weeks to find them. So there's a million in it for you—*and* my place in New Hampshire where your darned luck won't bother anyone but yourself—but not Anne, definitely not!"

But Jerry was dead to the world, and Ignatz, curled up in his lap, was deciding to sleep while he could, now that everything was settled.

They were only eight hours out from Hellas when Ignatz stirred and looked up. The Old Man was a frenzy of action, a scowl of concentration etched across his forehead, but he was still doggedly at the controls. Again the *zloaht* prodded his Master awake, and Jerry sat up, some of the bleariness gone from his eyes. He reached out for a caffeine and strychnine capsule, to help him stay awake, and tapped Barclay's shoulder.

"You should have dug me up hours ago, sir. I'll take over now; fresh as a daisy." That was a lie and the other knew it. "You've done a beautiful job, but I know the controls better."

The O.M. mustered a smile and looked up casually enough —even patted Ignatz—but he relinquished the job gratefully. "I couldn't have held on much longer," he agreed. "These controls are beyond me. Have to extend the navigator's knowledge in the future."

Jerry looked his thanks. "I didn't expect the relief, you know. But don't think what you said about Anne means anything to me!"

"So you did hear that? Look, son, I don't hold anything

against you, personally—always liked you. But unless you give up that animal and get rid of your hoodoo—"

Jerry's backbone stiffened visibly. "Ignatz stays."

"I thought so. In that case, I don't want you around. Nothing personal, you understand, but I'm not taking chances."

"Nothing personal, of course, sir." The door closed softly as the O.M. slipped out, and Jerry chuckled. For a second there was a sparkle in his eyes before the ache in his body cut it off. "Imagine the old boy taking over that way. Some father-in-law, eh, fellow?"

They hadn't landed yet, Ignatz thought, and Anne might have something to say. There was heavy doubt in his grunt, which Jerry interpreted correctly. But the Master was busy with his own thoughts.

Now that the fingers of Venus' gravity were reaching out harder for them, the lack of full efficiency from the stabilizers made itself felt. The long, cigar-like shape put the center of gravity above the rockets and the old ship suggested that it would be so much nicer to turn over and let gravity do its work; the suggestion was mild at first, but the freighter grew more positive with each mile, shimmying sidewise toward the planet like a girl edging toward her first crush.

"Easy, old girl," Jerry pleaded. "We've got to swing you in line with Venus' rotation and let you ride down with her." He babied the ship along, coaxed her into the new path, and performed mathematical magic in his head as the plot of the new orbit came down with corrections. The navigators were taking half-hour turns now, with the captain overseeing their work. Fast talk and absolute accuracy would have to be continuous until the tugs took over.

But she came down smoothly, arcing in toward the south pole, held up by sheer nerve and stimulants. A thousand miles up, relative speed was nine miles a second, fall-rate

three. Five hundred up, frontal speed checked to coasting, fall-rate down to normal landing curve. And then they hit the mythical cushion height, where the air was thick enough to support her on her fins, and the stabilizers purred pleasantly again. From there on they would coast into Hellas and let the tugs snag her.

"Your damned luck!" The O.M. cut in crisply. "Just got a radio that tugs are on strike at Hellas. You'll have to coast to Perdition on North Venus instead of Hellas. Can you hold her up?"

"I'll ride her. Navigator, I want co-ordinates for latitude 78° 43′ 28″ south, longitude 24° 18′ 27″ west."

"But Perdition—" The navigator was cut short by a burst of language from Barclay.

Jerry barked wearily. "Shut up! We're not going to Perdinition—nor Hellas! Navigator, you heard my orders. Give me data, and see that it's right. Get scared and blunder, and you'll never know what happened."

"But the tugs are in Perdition."

"To hell with the tugs! I'll set her down on her tail!" Gulps came over the phone, and Ignatz could hear the teeth of the navigator chattering. The O.M. was yelling about insanity, but he checked his raging and there was a muttered consultation too low to hear. Then Barclay's voice cleared.

"You're all in the hands of a lunatic, but your only chance is to give him his data. We'd be dead by the time we could dig him out. Take orders from Lord!" He spoke directly into the phone. "Jerry, I'll break you like a dry stick if I live. Not one tail landing out of three works with whole controls. Listen to reason, man! We can't help her if we're dead."

The junior navigator seized the phone, his nerves steady with desperation, his voice crisp and raw. Slowly the ship settled down, driving forward through the heavy air. Finally the navigator reported destination, and Jerry tipped the ship

up cautiously. She protested at such unorthodox treatment, but, reluctantly answered her controls.

"Eighteen thousand feet, directly over your destination. Weather quiet, no wind—thank God, sir! Fourteen thousand. You'll have to slow up!"

Ignatz prayed fervently to his forest and swamp gods, but they seemed far away. And the ground was rushing up while the ship swayed first to one side, then the other. Jerry was dancing a war jig in front of the balance jet bars; his eyes were glassy, his hands shook on the controls, but he fought her down, foot by foot, while the sickening speed slackened.

"Four hundred feet, level ground. Now the blast strikes, we can't see. Instrument at 300—200! Slower!"

She slowed grudgingly, but listed sidewise sharply; Jerry cut power for free fall, and she righted. Power boomed out again.

"Forty feet—God help us!"

That loss of power, short as it was, had been too much. She was all out now, but falling too fast. No, she was checking it. But another sway came. Ignatz groaned, saw that Jerry had deliberately swung her sidewise to land horizontal —at forty feet! There wasn't power enough in the laterals to hold her up. The speed picked up as she wobbled on her axis, slowed, and she righted. Jerry cut controls, grabbed a girder, and slumped. Ignatz went flaccid.

It sounded like a heavy scrunch, with attendant yells. She bounced slightly before settling. And then there was silence, and they were down. Jerry picked himself up, felt Ignatz carefully. "You're tough, fellow, not even scratched. If I hadn't been limp with exhaustion, that ten-foot free fall probably would have messed me up a little; but the others should be all right. This section took most of the shock."

Half a minute later there were groans and shouts all over the ship. The Master scooped Ignatz up. "Come on, fellow, we've got to go down and stock up on provisions."

The after hold was crowded with miscellaneous items for the comfort and safety of the spore-hunters, and he located a ready-packed kit of provisions, ample for three months' trek if the bearer could carry the load. He adjusted it carefully, felt to make sure of the feverin bottle, and took down three pairs of mud hooks, like skis crossed with canoes; the light berylium frames would support a man's weight on slimy mud or water and let him shuffle forward through the ooze of the swamps without sinking.

"Durnall's fool enough to go off in the mud," the Master told Ignatz. "That guy never did have good sense, so I've got to take three sets." He swung out to the emergency port, opened the inner seal, and pulled it shut. The outer one gave slowly, and opened—on the flat, sandy expanse of the Hellas landing field!

The old freighter had berthed neatly in the center of the rocket dock, and crowds, who'd heard or seen the landing, were streaming out. Mechanics were working on the crew port, which seemed to be giving trouble again.

Heavy hands reached up suddenly and dragged Jerry out onto the ground. "This way, fellow." Three dock flunkies held him securely, grinning as they felt him over for a concealed weapon. Then the leader motioned the others to lead him toward a waiting spinner.

"Smart guy, eh?" He looked at Jerry appraisingly. "You gotta be up early to catch old Barclay. We got a radio you'd be coming out of the emergency, so we waited for you. Got a nice little reception hall fixed up for you."

Jerry stopped swearing long enough to ask the obvious. "Where to?" They grinned again, the three of them holding him firmly as they seated him in the spinner. At the motion of the leader, the pilot cut the motor in, and they rose and headed toward the outskirts of Hellas—but in the opposite direction from the jail.

"You'll be nice and comfortable, you and your pet," the

headman volunteered. "The Old Man's putting you in one of the private suites belonging to Herndon, our branch manager. Says you're to have a nice long rest, where nobody'll bother you—or t'other way around."

No use questioning these dock flunkies, who probably knew less about it all than he did. Jerry slumped back silently, and Ignatz curled up to wait for the spinner to meet with an accident; but even misfortune refused to smile on them. They landed smoothly on the roof of one of the company's apartment buildings, and the men dragged the Master down through the roof entrance, across a hall, and into a well-fitted apartment.

"Make yourself to home," the big husky invited generously. "Herndon probably won't come here, so it's all yours. You'll find the walls and doors made of steel, the windows transplon, and locks that stay locked." He pulled the visiphone plug out and picked up the instrument. "Anything you'd like?"

The Master shrugged, estimating his chances. But they were all strong, young, and alert. He gave up any foolish ideas. "You might send up a diamond mine, or a dozen chorus girls."

"That's Herndon's specialty—chorines. See him about it." The flunkies grinned and began backing out. "The Old Man says he'll be down tomorrow, probably." The door closed and the key in the lock made a positive and unpleasant click.

Jerry turned in disgust toward the bedroom. "Sometimes, Ignatz," he muttered, "I begin to think—" He cut it as he saw the *zloaht's* expression. "Never mind, fellow. I'll turn the heat on low in the oven, and you can sleep there tonight. We both need shut-eye."

Sunlight was streaking through the translucent transplon windows when Ignatz awoke. His investigation showed that the Master was still sleeping, and he had no desire to

awaken him. Muttering in disgust at the world in general, he turned to the library in search of information on the peculiar disease with which humans seemed afflicted.

The dictionary defined love, and the encyclopedia gave an excellent medical and psychological version of it; but none of the sober, rational phrases gave any key to the idiocies Ignatz associated with that emotion. Other books bore gaudy titles that hinted at possibilities. He selected three at random, waded through pages here and there, honking and snorting loudly. They only served to confirm his preconceptions on the subject, without making things any clearer. Compared with the men in the books, Jerry was a rational being.

Still, books had their uses. Ignatz sniffed them over thoughtfully and found the usual strong glue had been used in binding them. Since the dictionary and encyclopedia were useful, he put them back with some difficulty. Then he tipped down half a dozen other books whose titles indicated they were on the same subject and began ripping the covers off methodically. A most excellent glue, well-flavored and potent; of course, the paper insisted on coming off with it, but that could always be spit out. What was left, he pushed into the incinerator closet.

With his stomach filled and the sleep out of his system, there was nothing left to do but explore. Sometimes these human habitations proved most interesting. He sampled a jar of vaseline, examined the workings of an electric mixer with some interest, and decided to satisfy his curiosity on another matter which had bothered him for months.

Jerry Lord awoke with Ignatz's doleful bellow in his ears, mixed with sundry threshings and bumpings, and the jangling of an uncertain bell. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes with hands that were sure and steady again, and looked down, to grin suddenly. "I told you to let those spring alarm clocks alone, fellow. Suppose they do go *tick-tick*

instead of purring like the electrics—do you have to see why?"

Ignatz had found out why—with details. Jerry untangled the *zloaht's* tail from the main spring and various brass wheels, and unwrapped the alarm spring from his inky body. Once that was done, they both prowled around until satisfied that escape from the apartment was completely impossible.

Jerry tried the stereovisor while eating breakfast, but there was no news; only the usual morning serials and music came over. He dug out a book on rocket motors to kill time, while Ignatz succeeded in turning on the hot water in the bathroom and crawling into the tub. If the O.M. ran true to form, he'd show up when it suited his own convenience.

It was noon when Barclay unlocked the door and came in, leaving a couple of guards outside. "Crazy young fool!"

Jerry grinned ruefully. "A nice trick, your fake data; I actually I was landing at Minerva's Breasts. Well, I didn't ruin your darned freighter."

"Didn't even wreck the radio. Sweetest tail landing I ever saw, and I made a couple myself." He chuckled as the Master stared. "Sure, I used to pilot them, back when it took men. But I never tried a horizontal, though I've heard of it."

He fished out an envelope. "Here, I keep my word. Deposit book, Prospectors Commercial, one million dollars. And the deed to the house in New Hampshire, if you ever get back there—which you won't on any of my ships. You can save your thanks."

Jerry took it calmly. "I didn't intend to thank you; I earned it." He stuffed the envelope in the prospector's kit he'd brought with him. "What word from Anne? And when do I get out of here?"

"I've made arrangements to have you leave today." Seeing Jerry's look, he shook his head. "Not to jail, exactly—just to the new detention house they've erected since you were here last; they use it for drunks and weed-chewers. I've

booked you as a stowaway to be held for convenient deportation, and I'll make the charge stick. Judging from last night, I don't want you in any of my employees' quarters; they get hit by sudden bad luck."

"Well?"

"Herndon got married and left me in the lurch last night—when I most need him."

"That looks like your bad luck, not his," Jerry pointed out. "Though I suppose you fired him."

"He quit—to lead the glamorous life." The O.M. smiled wryly. "His bad luck was that he married that woman who dances at the casino with a Martian sand-eel."

Jerry nodded; he'd seen her act, and there was no answer. Instead, he steered the conversation back to Anne. "You know I could locate the *Burgundy* in a couple of hours if you'd let me out of here. I didn't spend two months in Despondency for nothing. And Ignatz is supposed to bring good luck out there."

Barclay shrugged. "Good luck for you; that's what I'm afraid of. It so happens we've located the *Burgundy* already, without your help. Now we've been sending out searching parties on mud hooks for Anne and Pete; the captain had to take orders from her and let them go." His face was momentarily bitter. "I thought Durnall had better sense than to go lugging her around the swamps where even the compass is cockeyed."

"I was afraid of that. You made a mistake, sir, in making me land at Hellas instead of the Breasts."

Barclay grunted, and let it pass. They all knew there was about as much chance of one man finding her in the steaming swamp jungle as the proverbial needle. "If I thought you could find her, I'd probably be fool enough to let you go. Better pack up your luggage. These men will take you over to detention house."

The detention ward was comfortable enough, and Barclay had arranged for all the Master's ordinary wants. But it was no nearer Anne. He paced the room endlessly until Slim, the flunky, brought his supper. Bribery had failed before, but he tried it again.

The guard grinned. "Here's your supper, such as it is. We found the food's mostly turned sour since you moved in this noon. And your check's no good; Prospectors Commercial closed its doors until a new shipment of gold can come through from Earth."

Ignatz grunted, but the Master refused to give up. "But the check will be good when it opens."

Slim hunched his shoulders. "Not with your money in it; it won't open."

"You don't believe that superstition, do you?" Jerry's voice was not particularly convincing.

"Huh? Look, mister, since you come here, I got word my wife just had triplets—and me a poor man! I don't want nothing to do with you or yourn." He shoved the food in and swung on his heel.

Jerry swore, then called after the jailer. "Hey, wait! Can you get a message to Manager Barclay? Tell him I know how he can find his daughter. Tell him I want to see him tomorrow morning!"

Slim nodded glumly and went on. Jerry turned to his meal, refusing to answer Ignatz's inquiring grunts. The *zloaht* watched his Master finish and begin the endless pacing again, smoking incessantly on the pungent Venusian cigarettes. He picked up a butt and honked curiously.

"Nerves, fellow," Jerry answered. "They're supposed to calm you when something bothers you—like my pipe that I left back on Earth. Want to try one?" He placed one between Ignatz's sharp lips, and lit it. "Now, you puff in, take the smoke into your lungs, then blow it out. Sure, like that."

Ignatz coughed the smoke out and bellowed hoarsely,

swearing heatedly at the Master. An odd sensation stirred in him somewhere, however, and he regarded the cigarette thoughtfully; sometimes a thing was better after a time or two. Dubiously, he picked it up with his antennae and tried again, with slightly better success. It didn't taste so nauseous that time. And the third try was still better.

"Better go easy on it, fellow," Jerry advised. "I don't know how it'll affect your metabolism; alcohol had no results with you, but this might."

Ignatz heard vaguely, but didn't trouble his head about it. There was a nice warm feeling stealing along his nerves and down toward his tail. He'd been a fool to think life was hard—it was ducky—that's what. And this room was beautiful, when it stood still. Just now, it was running around in circles; he pursued the walls in their crazy rotation, but gave up—they were too fast for him.

Jerry giggled for no reason Ignatz could see. "Ignatz, you're acting drunk. And that butt's going to burn you if you don't spit it out."

"Hwoonk!" said Ignatz. Still, it was a little warm; laboriously he removed the burning thing and tossed it away. *"Hwulp!"* Now why did his tail insist on jerking him up like that? *"Hwuppl"* If it insisted, he'd be the last one to stop it. He gazed up at the moon that had mysteriously sailed away from Earth and was gliding across the ceiling of the room. Such a lovely night. Must make a song about the lovely night. Lovely song.

His fog-horn voice creaked out in a quivering bellow, rose to a crescendo wail, and popped out with a sound like a starting rocket. Lovely song—lovely! Jerry stuffed him in a pillow and tried to silence him, but without immediate success. If the men in detention wanted to sleep, what of it? Anyway, they were making too much noise themselves.

Who wanted to sleep? Too nice a night to sleep. He executed a remarkable imitation of a steam buzz-saw. Jerry

gave up and crawled in beside him, growling unhappily. Ignatz honked reproachfully at the Master, rolled over and snored loudly.

The next morning he awoke to see the guard let the O.M. in, and tried to climb down from the bunk. Something lanced through his head, and he fell back with a mournful bellow. He hadn't felt like that last night.

Jerry grinned at him. "Hangover—what'd you expect?" He turned to Barclay. "The flunky delivered my message, then?"

"He did." The O.M. hadn't been doing much sleeping, from the look on his face. "If your plan involves letting you out, don't bother telling me."

"It doesn't. I've found from experience there's no use trying to change your mind." He jerked back the package of cigarettes as Ignatz dived for it. "But the semiannual mud run is due any day now, and Despondency is hell then. You've got to get her out."

The O.M. nodded; he'd been thinking the same. Jerry went on. "All right. A man can't locate anything smaller than a rocketship up there But a *zloaht* can. Well, thirty miles north of Minerva's Breasts—the compass points south by southeast, in that neighborhood—there's a village of Ignatz's people built out in a little lake. They've damned up Forlorn River there, and built their houses on rafts, working with their antennae and practically no raw materials. They grow food along the shores and they've got a mill of sorts to grind it with. Of course, they're not human, but they'll be up alongside us yet, if we don't kill them off first. Highly civilized now."

The O.M. snorted, glanced at Ignatz hunting for butts. "Civilized! Sounds more like beavers to me."

"Okay, have it your way." Jerry was used to man's eternal sense of divine descent—or maybe the word was ascent. "Anyway, they've developed an alphabet of sorts and have

tame animals. What's more important, I taught them some English, and they'll do almost anything for chocolate and peanuts."

Barclay caught the idea. "You mean, I'm to send up there, get in touch with them, and have them look for Anne? Sounds pretty farfetched, but I'm willing to try anything once."

Jerry began sketching a crude map. "They can't talk to you, but when one of them comes for the chocolate, you'll know he's found her—they're honest about bargains. Then all you have to do is follow."

The O.M. took the note and started toward the door. "I'll let you know how it works," he promised. "If they find her, I'll even risk shipping you back to Earth." Jerry grunted and turned back to Ignatz, who was rumbling unhappily on the cot, his foot-and-a-quarter body a bundle of raw nerves.

It was three slow, dull days later when Slim brought another note. "Mr. Barclay sent this down to you," he said briefly. Slim had as little to do with the Master as possible.

Jerry opened it eagerly, to find the wording terse and to the point.

Three spinners, trying to make your lake, broke down. Rescue crews out for them now. I'll have nothing more to do with any of your fool plans.

He passed it to Ignatz, who read it glumly, then watched hopefully as Jerry shook out a cigarette. Seeing the pack returned to its place, beyond his reach, he snorted his disgust and retired to the corner in sulky silence.

The silence was broken by a reverberating boom that rocked the detention house like a straw in the wind. The floor twisted crazily and the transplon window fell out with a brittle snap. Then the noise quieted and Jerry picked himself up from the floor, grabbed Ignatz and the prospector pack. He wasted no words, but dived toward the open window.

Slim came racing down the corridor. "Air-conditioner

motor exploded right below," he yelled. "You all right, Lord?" As he saw the two climbing out the window, he grabbed for his needle gun, then rammed it back. "I ain't taking chances with this thing; it'd explode in my hands with you around. The farther you two get, the happier I'll be!"

Sometimes a bad reputation had its uses. Jerry dropped ten feet to the ground, spotted a spinner standing empty and unlocked to the rear of the building, and set out for it. He dived through the door, yanked it shut, and cut in the motor as the guards began streaming out. Ignatz looked at the fuel gauge and was surprised to see it full.

Before the gun on the roof could be lined up, the spinner was rising smoothly and speeding away. Jerry swung in a half circle and headed north, with the rheostat clear over, and the little ship cut through the air with a whistling rush. Hellas dropped behind, five miles, ten, then fifteen. Ten miles ahead lay the muck of Hellonfire, beyond that Despondency.

"Only let me reach the swamps, fellow," Jerry begged. "Don't get us in any funny business now." Ignatz had his antennae curled up in a tight knot, trying by mental concentration to oblige.

Two miles short of the swamps, the engine began to stutter, starting and stopping erratically. Jerry fussed with the controls, but the ship slowed, moving along at an uncertain speed. The first line of the Hellonfire verdure rose through the thin mists as the motor stopped. Jerry's teeth were clenched as he tried to hold the spinner in a flat curve that would carry them clear. But the ground came up steadily as the ship crawled toward the swamp.

By a hair-thick margin they cleared the tangled swamp growth, and were over Hellonfire. And the little motor caught, purred softly, and drove the vanes steadily against the air, lifting them up easily. Ignatz relaxed and Jerry

reached over to pat him softly. Now, according to the legend, luck should be good.

It was. They glided along across Hellonfire smoothly, passed over the wreck of the first spinner sent out by the O.M., and headed on. The compass began to waver and twist without good reason, and Jerry was forced to rely on Ignatz's sense of direction. The *zloaht* held his antennae out as a pointer toward his home village, and the Master followed his direction confidently.

Hellonfire drifted by under them, and gave place to the heavy tangle of Despondency. Looking down, they could see the slow crawl of the mud-run that made the swamp even more impassable twice a year, and Jerry shook his head. If Anne were out in that, unless she stayed on a high hummock, there was little hope of finding her. They swept between the Breasts and saw the temporary camp, established as a base for searchers, being dismantled; the men would leave before the mud crept higher.

And then Ignatz hooted, and Jerry looked down to see the little lake glistening below them. Floating rafts covered it, neatly laid out in rows, and thatched over with fine craftsmanship. *Zloahts* like Ignatz were busily engaged in the huts and canals between them. On the shores of the lake, others were driving their tame *zihis*, twenty times as large as they were, about in the fields. Now and again, a fog-horn yelp across the lake was answered from the largest raft.

Jerry let down the pontoons and dropped the spinner lightly on the lake. Ignatz ducked out and across the water to the chief's building, dragging a waterproof package of chocolate with him. He was back inside of ten minutes, hooting shrilly, a small bundle in his mouth.

The Master took it. On the coarse papyrus he made out a roughly executed picture of a man and woman, pulled on a narrow raft by two of the *zihis*. Under it, there were two black squares with one white sandwiched between them,

and inside the drawing was a bar of chocolate of a different brand from that which Jerry had sent them.

The Master snapped the rheostat over. "So she left a day and two nights ago, with Durnall. Traded her chocolate for *zihis* and raft. Know what direction she went?"

Ignatz hooted and pointed south and east, along a sluggish stream that fed into Forlorn River. Jerry turned the spinner and headed that way, searching for signs of them. *Zihi* travel should average twenty or more miles a day, which would place them some twenty miles out. He slowed up after fifty, noting that the stream was narrowing. If it ended before he reached Anne, it meant hours of scouting, probably hopelessly, in search of her. There were a hundred different courses she could take once she left the Little Hades.

But he sighted her before the stream ended in its twisted little feeders. She had stopped, probably picking her course, and he could see her look up at the sound of his motor and begin signaling frantically. He set the spinner down sharply, jerking it to a short stop within a few feet of the raft and opened the door as she headed the *zihis* toward him. Durnall was lying on the raft, covered by a poncho.

"Jerry Lord!" Her voice was shrill, tired, her eyes red and sleepless. "Thank heaven! Pete's got the fever—red fever—and we had no feverin in our packs." She grabbed the bottle he handed her, poured three tablets down Durnall's throat. "Help me load him in and the duffel—and take us to the hospital, pronto!"

Jerry grabbed Durnall and loaded him in the back as quickly as he could. Ignatz was giving orders to the *zihis* to return to the village with the raft, while Anne gathered the duffel and climbed in back. She sank beside the sick man, whose face had the dull brick-red of an advanced case of swamp fever.

"Your father's been worried sick—so have I."

"Have you?" Her voice was flat. "Jerry, how soon can we reach the hospital?"

He shrugged. "Three hours, I guess." Ignatz glanced up at the Master's face and grunted as softly as he could. Of course, Anne had been gone for days, alone with Durnall, and sick men had a way of working on a woman's sympathies. He brushed his antennae lightly against the Master's ankles.

"How'd you find the village?" Jerry asked. "I've been trying to get a chance to help you, but I was afraid you'd be lost in the mud-run."

She looked up, but went on fussing over Durnall. "When we couldn't find the *Burgundy*, I remembered your story about getting lost yourself, and how you found the village. We headed the way you said the compass pointed, and holed up there, till I found they understood me. Then I bartered some supplies for their raft and animals. With what you'd told me helping us, we'd have made out all right if Pete hadn't come down with fever; I was lucky, myself, and didn't catch it."

Durnall was groaning and tossing uneasily, and she turned her attention back to him. Jerry bent over his controls, and drove silently south toward Hellas, watching Despondency change to Hellonfire. Then they were out of the swamps, and he turned back to assure Anne they were almost there.

But his head jerked back sharply. The rotor, which had been circling sweetly overhead, now twanged harshly and dragged back on the motor. Ignatz ducked back to avoid the Master's look and groaned. One of the rotor vanes had cracked off, and the others were unbalanced and moving sluggishly. The ship was coming down much too fast. Jerry cut the motor off, tried to flatten the fall, and failed. He yanked the shock-cushion lever out, and a rubber mattress zipped out behind him, designed to save the passengers from a nose collision in the fog. Before he could reach the pilot's

cushion lever, the ship's nose hit the ground and buckled in.

Ignatz saw the Master slump forward over the controls, and then something tore sharply at the *zloaht's* snout horn, and little lights streaked out. Blackness shot over him hotly.

He swam up through a gray haze, tried to snort, and failed. When he opened his eyes, he saw yards of gauze covering his snout, and Jerry was propped up in bed watching him.

"Major operation, fellow. The doc says he had to cut out half your horn because of something that splintered it. You had me beat by half a day, and the doc says I was out for forty-eight hours." He wiggled in the bed. "I'm still solid enough, though, except for a couple of bones, and a bump on the head."

Ignatz looked around slowly, conscious from his sluggish reactions that they must have given him drugs. He was in a small room, and his bed was a miniature replica of Jerry's. But it wasn't a hospital.

Jerry grinned. "They were afraid you'd be a jinx in the city, and I kept yelling for you, so they put us both up here in a house the O.M. owns just inside Hellonfire. I've been waiting for them to bring you to before we entertained visitors." He raised his voice. "Hey, nurse, tell them all clear here."

With his words, the door burst open and the Old Man hurried in. "Well, it's about time. Look fit as ever."

"Yeah, fit to go back to your lousy detention house."

The O.M. was pleased with himself. "Not this time. I figured out something else. Got the deed to the New Hampshire house still? Good. Well, I'm taking it back, and putting this deed to the swamp house in its place. That pet of yours should be harmless here. And I'm advising you to invest your money in our stock."

"So you won't ship me back to Earth, eh? Afraid I'd get your ship smashed?"

Barclay shook his head. "I'm not worried about the ship. What I'm worried about is a branch manager, and you're it —if you want the job."

Jerry took it calmly. "What's the catch?"

"None. Bad luck or not, you get things done, and you know rockets. That's what I need, you impudent young puppy. Just keep your pet out here and things should go swimmingly." He got up brusquely. "You've got another visitor."

"Don't forget what I said about—" Jerry started to shout, and then she was framed in the door.

"Hi, Jerry. You both four-oh again?"

Ignatz grunted, while Jerry stared. "Durnall?"

"He's doing all right." Anne took a seat beside him, held out her hands. "Now that he's safe, let's forget him. Pete isn't a bad guy, but I don't like darn fools who get me into messes like the last one, even when it's half my fault."

Jerry digested it slowly, and Ignatz cursed his bandages. Now was the time for him to slip back into the swamps, where Jerry could never make the mistake of taking him out again. He could see where the Master was going to need decent breaks with all the responsibility coming up. But the bandages held him securely.

Anne hauled the little bed closer, ran warm fingers over Ignatz's back. "You'll have to live out here and commute by spinner, of course, but I'll take care of Ignatz while you're gone. He owes us a lot of good fortune, and we're going to collect it."

"I—" Jerry glanced at Ignatz. "You know how your father feels about him."

She smiled impishly. "Dad figured it all out. You see, I brought back something with me in my duffel, and when he found I meant to keep it, he gave up." She reached into a

little bag and hauled out the snooty head of another *zloaht*. "Meet Ichabod."

Jerry gulped. "Well, I'll be—" And suddenly he had a great deal of urgent business.

Ignatz longed for a cigarette, but he snorted softly and turned away.

THE LOTUS EATERS

by STANLEY G. WEINBAUM

"WHEW!" WHISTLED "HAM" HAMMOND, staring through the right forward observation port. "What a place for a honeymoon!"

"Then you shouldn't have married a biologist," remarked Mrs. Hammond over his shoulder, but he could see her gray eyes dancing in the glass of the port. "Nor an explorer's daughter," she added. For Pat Hammond, until her marriage to Ham a scant four weeks ago, had been Patricia Burlingame, daughter of the great Englishman who had won so much of the twilight zone of Venus for Britain, exactly as Crowly had done for the United States.

"I didn't," observed Ham, "marry a biologist. I married a girl who happened to be interested in biology; that's all. It's one of her few drawbacks."

He cut the blast to the underjets, and the rocket settled down gently on a cushion of flame toward the black landscape below. Slowly, carefully, he dropped the unwieldy mechanism until there was the faintest perceptible jar; then he killed the blast suddenly, the floor beneath them tilted slightly, and a strange silence fell like a blanket after the cessation of the roaring blast.

"We're here," he announced.

"So we are," agreed Pat. "Where's here?"

"It's a point exactly seventy-five miles east of the Barrier opposite Venoble, in the British Cool Country. To the north is, I suppose, the continuation of the Mountains of Eternity, and to the south is Heaven knows what. And this last applies to the east."

"Which is a good technical description of nowhere." Pat laughed. "Let's turn off the lights and look at nowhere."

She did, and in the darkness the ports showed as faintly luminous circles.

"I suggest," she proceeded, "that the Joint Expedition ascend to the dome for a less restricted view. We're here to investigate; let's do a little investigating."

"This joint of the expedition agrees," chuckled Ham.

He grinned in the darkness at the flippancy with which Pat approached the serious business of exploration. Here they were, the Joint Expedition of the Royal Society and the Smithsonian Institute for the Investigation of Conditions on the Dark Side of Venus, to use the full official title.

Of course Ham himself, while technically the American half of the project, was in reality a member only because Pat wouldn't consider anything else; but she was the one to whom the bearded society and institute members addressed their questions, their terms, and their instructions.

And this was no more than fair, for Pat, after all, was the leading authority on Hotland flora and fauna, and, moreover, the first human child born on Venus, while Ham was only an engineer lured originally to the Venusian frontier by a dream of quick wealth in xixtchil trading in the Hotlands.

It was there he had met Patricia Burlingame, and there, after an adventurous journey to the foothills of the Mountains of Eternity, that he had won her. They had been married in Erotia, the American settlement, less than a month ago, and then had come the offer of the expedition to the dark side.

Ham had argued against it. He had wanted a good terrestrial honeymoon in New York or London, but there were difficulties. Primarily there was the astronomical one; Venus was past perigee, and it would be eight long months before

its slow swing around the Sun brought it back to a point where a rocket could overtake the Earth.

Eight months in primitive, frontier-built Erotia, or in equally primitive Venoble, if they chose the British settlement, with no amusement save hunting, no radio, no plays, even very few books. And if they must hunt, Pat argued, why not add the thrill and danger of the unknown?

No one knew what life, if any, lurked on the dark side of the planet; very few had even seen it, and those few from rockets speeding over vast mountain ranges or infinite frozen oceans. Here was a chance to explain the mystery, and explore it, expenses paid.

It took a multimillionaire to build and equip a private rocket, but the Royal Society and the Smithsonian Institute, spending government money, were above such considerations. There'd be danger, perhaps, and breath-taking thrills, but—they could be alone.

The last point had won Ham. So they had spent two busy weeks provisioning and equipping the rocket, had ridden high above the ice barrier that bounds the twilight zone, and dashed frantically through the storm line, where the cold Underwind from the sunless side meets the hot Upper Winds that sweep from the desert face of the planet.

For Venus, of course, has no rotation, and hence no alternate days and nights. One face is forever sunlit, and one forever dark, and only the planet's slow liberation gives the twilight zone a semblance of seasons. And this twilight zone, the only habitable part of the planet, merges through the Hotlands on one side to the blazing desert, and on the other side ends abruptly in the ice barrier where the Upper Winds yield their moisture to the chilling breaths of the Underwind.

So here they were, crowded into the tiny glass dome above the navigation panel, standing close together on the top rung of the ladder, and with just room in the dome for both their

heads. Ham slipped his arm around the girl as they stared at the scene outside.

Away off to the west was the eternal dawn—or sunset, perhaps—where the light glistened on the ice barrier. Like vast columns, the Mountains of Eternity thrust themselves against the light, with their mighty peaks lost in the lower clouds twenty-five miles above. There, a little south, were the ramparts of the Lesser Eternities, bounding American Venus, and between the two ranges were the perpetual lightnings of the storm line.

But around them, illuminated dimly by the refraction of the sunlight, was a scene of dark and wild splendor. Everywhere was ice—hills of it, spires, plains, boulders, and cliffs of it, all glowing a pallid green in the trickle of light from beyond the barrier. A world without motion, frozen and sterile, save for the moaning of the Underwind outside, not hindered here as the barrier shielded it from the Cool Country.

"It's—glorious!" Pat murmured.

"Yes," he agreed, "but cold, lifeless, yet menacing. Pat, do you think there is life here?"

"I should judge so. If life can exist on such worlds as Titan and Iapetus, it should exist here. How cold is it?" She glanced at the thermometer outside the dome, its column and figures self-luminous. "Only thirty below zero, Fahrenheit. Life exists on Earth at that temperature."

"Exists, yet. But it couldn't have developed at a temperature below freezing. Life has to be lived in liquid water."

She laughed softly. "You're talking to a biologist, Ham. No, life couldn't have *evolved* at thirty below zero; but suppose it originated back in the twilight zone and migrated here? Or suppose it was pushed here by the terrific competition of the warmer regions? You know what conditions are in the Hotlands, with the molds and doughpots and Jack

Ketch trees, and the millions of little parasitic things, all eating each other."

He considered this. "What sort of life should you expect?"

She chuckled. "Do you want a prediction? Very well. I'd guess, first of all, some sort of vegetation as a base, for animal life can't keep eating itself without some added fuel. It's like the story of the man with the cat farm, who raised rats to feed the cats, and then when he skinned the cats, he fed the bodies to the rats, and then fed more rats to the cats. It sounds good, but it won't work."

"So there ought to be vegetation. Then what?"

"Then? Heaven knows. Presumbaly the dark-side life, if it exists, came originally from the weaker strains of twilight-zone life, but what it might have become—well, I can't guess. Of course, there's the *triops noctivivans* that I discovered in the Mountains of Eternity—"

"*You* discovered!" He grinned. "You were out as cold as ice when I carried you away from the nest of devils. You never even saw one!"

"I examined the dead one brought into Venoble by the hunters," she returned imperturbably. "And don't forget that the society wanted to name it after me—the *triops Patriciae.*" Involuntarily a shudder shook her at the memory of those satanic creatures that had all but destroyed the two of them. "But I chose the other name—*triops noctivivans,* the three-eyed dweller in the dark.

"Romantic name for a devilish beast!"

"Yes, but what I was getting at is this: it's probable that triops—or triopses—say, what is the plural of triops?"

"Trioptes," he grunted. "Latin root."

"Well, it's probable that trioptes, then, are among the creatures to be found here on the night side, and that those fierce devils who attacked us in that shadowed canyon in the Mountains of Eternity are an outpost, creeping into the twilight zone through the dark and sunless passes in the

mountains. They can't stand light; you saw that yourself."

"So what?"

Pat laughed at the Americanism. "So this. From their form and structure—six limbs, three eyes, and all—it's plain that the trioptes are related to ordinary native Hotlanders. Therefore, I conclude that they're recent arrivals on the dark side; that they didn't evolve here, but were driven here quite lately, geologically speaking. Or geologically isn't quite the word, because *geos* means earth. *Venusologically* speaking, I should say."

"You shouldn't say. You're substituting a Latin root for a Greek one. What you mean is aphrodisiologically speaking."

She chuckled again. "What I mean, and should have said right away to avoid argument, is paleontologically speaking, which is better English. Anyway, I mean that trioptes haven't existed on the dark side for more than twenty to fifty thousand Earth years, or maybe less, because what do we know about the speed of evolution on Venus? Perhaps it's faster than on the Earth; maybe a triops could adapt itself to night life in five thousand."

"I've seen college students adapt themselves to night life in one semester!" He grinned.

She ignored this. "And therefore," she proceeded, "I argue that there must have been life here before triops arrived, since it must have found something to eat when it got here or it couldn't have survived. And since my examination showed that it's partly a carnivorous feeder, there must have been not only life here, but animal life. And that's as far as pure reason can carry the argument."

"So you can't guess what sort of animal life. Intelligent, perhaps?"

"I don't know. It might be. But in spite of the way you Yankees worship intelligence, biologically it's unimportant. It hasn't even much survival value."

"What? How can you say that, Pat? What except human

intelligence has given man the supremacy of the Earth—and of Venus, too, for that matter?"

"But *has* man the supremacy of the Earth? Look here, Ham, here's what I mean about intelligence. A gorilla has a far better brain than a turtle, hasn't it? And yet which is the more successful—the gorilla, which is rare and confined only to a small region in Africa, or the turtle, which is common everywhere from the arctic to the antarctic? And as for man—well, if you had microscopic eyes, and could see every living thing on the Earth, you'd decide that man was just a rare specimen, and that the planet was really a nematode world—that is, a worm world—because the nematodes far outnumber all the other forms of life put together."

"But that isn't supremacy, Pat."

"I didn't say it was. I merely said that intelligence hasn't much survival value. If it has, why are the insects that have no intelligence, but just instinct, giving the human race such a battle? Men have better brains than corn borers, boll weevils, fruit flies, Japanese beetles, gypsy moths, and all the other pests, and yet they match our intelligence with just one weapon—their enormous fecundity. Do you realize that every time a child is born, until it's balanced by a death, it can be fed in only one way? And that way is by taking the food away from the child's own weight of insects."

"All that sounds reasonable enough, but what's it got to do with intelligence on the dark side of Venus?"

"I don't know," replied Pat, and her voice took on a queer tinge of nervousness. "I just mean—look at it this way, Ham. A lizard is more intelligent than a fish, but not enough to give it any advantage. Then *why* did the lizard and its descendants keep on developing intelligence? Why—unless all life tends to become intelligent in time? And if that's true, then there may be intelligence even here—strange, alien, incomprehensible intelligence."

She shivered in the dark against him. "Never mind," she

said in suddenly altered tones. "It's probably just fancy. The world out there is so weird, so unearthly—I'm tired, Ham. It's been a long day."

He followed her down into the body of the rocket. As the lights flicked on, the strange landscape beyond the ports was blotted out, and he saw only Pat, very lovely in the scanty costume of the Cool Country.

"Tomorrow, then," he said. "We've food for three weeks."

Tomorrow, of course, meant only time and not daylight. They rose to the same darkness that had always blanketed the sunless half of Venus, with the same eternal sunset green on the horizon at the barrier. But Pat was in better humor, and went eagerly about the preparations for their first venture into the open. She brought out the parkas of inch-thick wool sheathed in rubber, and Ham, in his capacity as engineer, carefully inspected the hoods, each with its crown of powerful lamps.

These were primarily for vision, of course, but they had another purpose. It was known that the incredibly fierce trioptes could not face light, and thus, by using all four beams in the helmet, one could move, surrounded by a protective aura. But that did not prevent both of them from including in their equipment two blunt blue automatics and a pair of the terrifically destructive flame pistols. And Pat carried a bag at her belt, into which she proposed to drop specimens of any dark-side flora she encountered, and fauna, too, if it proved small and harmless enough.

They grinned at each other through their masks.

"Makes you look fat," observed Ham maliciously, and enjoyed her sniff of annoyance.

She turned, threw open the door, and stamped into the open.

It was different from looking out through a port. Then the scene had some of the unreality and all of the immobility

and silence of a picture, but now it was actually around them, and the cold breath and mournful voice of the Underwind proved definitely enough that the world was real. For a moment they stood in the circlet of light from the rocket ports, staring awe-struck at the horizon where the unbelievable peaks of the Greater Eternities towered black against the false sunset.

Nearer, for as far as vision reached through that sunless, moonless, starless region, was a desolate tumbled plain where peaks, minarets, spires, and ridges of ice and stone rose in indescribable and fantastic shapes, carved by the wild artistry of the Underwind.

Ham slipped a padded arm around Pat, and was surprised to feel her shiver. "Cold?" he asked, glancing at the dial thermometer on his wrist. "It's only thirty-six below."

"I'm not cold," replied Pat. "It's the scenery; that's all." She moved away. "I wonder what keeps the place as warm as it is. Without sunlight you'd think—"

"Then you'd be wrong," cut in Ham. "Any engineer knows that gases diffuse. The Upper Winds are going by just five or six miles over our heads, and they naturally carry a lot of heat from the desert beyond the twilight zone. There's some diffusion of the warm air into the cold, and then, besides, as the warm winds cool, they tend to sink. And, what's more, the contour of the country has a lot to do with it."

He paused. "Say," he went on reflectively, "I shouldn't be surprised if we found sections near the Eternities where there was a down draft, where the Upper Winds slid right along the slope and gave certain places a fairly bearable climate."

He followed Pat as she poked around the boulders near the edge of the circle of light from the rocket.

"Ha!" she exclaimed. "There it is, Ham! There's our specimen of dark-side plant life."

She bent over a gray bulbous mass. "Lichenous or fun-

goid," she continued. "No leaves, of course; leaves are only useful in sunlight. No chlorophyl for the same reason. A very primitive, very simple plant, and yet—in some ways—not simple at all. Look, Ham—a highly developed circulatory system!"

He leaned closer, and in the dim yellow light from the ports he saw the fine tracery of veins she indicated.

"That," she proceeded, "would indicate a sort of heart and —I wonder!" Abruptly she thrust her dial thermometer against the fleshy mass, held it there a moment, and then peered at it. "Yes! Look how the needle's moved, Ham. It's warm! A warm-blooded plant. And when you think of it, it's only natural, because that's the one sort of plant that could live in a region forever below freezing. Life *must* be lived in liquid water."

She tugged at the thing, and with a sullen plump it came free, and dark driblets of liquid welled out of the torn root.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Ham. "What a disgusting thing! 'And tore the bleeding mandragore,' eh? Only they were supposed to scream when you uprooted them."

He paused. A low, pulsing, wailing whimper came out of the quivering mass of pulp, and he turned a startled gaze on Pat. "Ugh!" he grunted again. "Disgusting!"

"Disgusting? Why, it's a beautiful organism! It's adapted perfectly to its environment."

"Well, I'm glad I'm an engineer," he growled, watching Pat as she opened the rocket's door and laid the thing on a square of rubber within. "Come on. Let's look around."

Pat closed the door and followed him away from the rocket. Instantly the night folded in around them like a black mist, and it was only by glancing back at the lighted ports that Pat could convince herself that they stood in a real world.

"Should we light our helmet lamps?" asked Ham. "We'd better, I suppose, or risk a fall."

Before either could move farther, a sound struck through the moaning of the Underwind, a wild, fierce, unearthly shrieking like laughter in hell, hoots and howls and mirthless chuckling noises.

"It's trioptsl" gasped Pat, forgetting plurals and grammar alike.

She was frightened; ordinarily she was as courageous as Ham, and rather more reckless and daring, but those uncanny shrieks brought back the moments of torment when they had been trapped in the canyon in the Mountains of Eternity. She was badly frightened and fumbled frantically and ineffectually at light switch and revolver.

Just as half a dozen stones hummed fast as bullets around them, and one crashed painfully on Ham's arm, he flicked on his lights. Four beams shot in a long cross on the glittering peaks, and the wild laughter rose in a crescendo of pain. He had a momentary glimpse of shadowy figures flinging themselves from pinnacle and ridge, flitting specterlike into the darkness, and then silence.

"Oh-o-oh!" murmured Pat. "I—was scared, Ham." She huddled against him, then continued more strongly: "But there's proof. *Triops noctivivans* actually is a night-side creature, and those in the mountains are outposts or fragments that've wandered into the sunless chasms."

Far off sounded the hooting laughter. "I wonder," mused Ham, "if that noise of theirs is in the nature of a language."

"Very probably. After all, the Hotland natives are intelligent, and these creatures are a related species. Besides, they throw stones, and they know the use of those smothering pods they showered on us in the canyon—which, by the way, must be the fruit of some night-side plant. The trioptes are doubtless intelligent in a fierce, bloodthirsty, barbaric fashion, but the beasts are so unapproachable that I doubt if human beings ever learn much of their minds or language."

Ham agreed emphatically, the more so as a viciously cast

rock suddenly chipped glittering particles from an icy spire a dozen paces away. He twisted his head, sending the beams of his helmet lamps angling over the plain, and a single shrill cachinnation drifted out of the dark.

"Thank Heaven the lights keep 'em fairly out of range," he muttered.

But Pat was again engaged in her search for specimens. She had switched on her lamps now, and scrambled agilely in and out among the fantastic monuments of that bizarre plain. Ham followed her, watching as she wrenched up bleeding and whimpering vegetation. She found a dozen varieties, and one little wriggling cigar-shaped creature that she gazed at in perplexity, quite unable to determine whether it was plant, animal, or neither. And at last her specimen bag was completely filled, and they turned back over the plain toward the rocket, whose ports gleamed afar like a row of staring eyes.

But a shock awaited them as they opened the door to enter. Both of them started back at the gust of warm, stuffy, putrid, and unbreathable air that gushed into their faces with an odor of carrion.

"What—" gasped Ham, and then laughed. "Your mandragore!" He chuckled. "Look at it!"

The plant she had placed within was a mass of decayed corruption. In the warmth of the interior it had decomposed rapidly and completely, and was now but a semiliquid heap on the rubber mat. She pulled it through the entrance and flung mat and all away.

They clambered into an interior still reeking, and Ham set a ventilator spinning. The air that came in was cold, of course, but pure with the breath of the Underwind, sterile and dustless from its sweep across five thousand miles of frozen oceans and mountains. He swung the door closed, set a heater going, and dropped his visor to grin at Pat.

"So that's your beautiful organism!" he chuckled.

"It was. It *was* a beautiful organism, Ham. You can't blame it because we exposed it to temperatures it was never supposed to encounter." She sighed and slung her specimen pouch to the table. "I'll have to prepare these at once, I suppose, since they don't keep."

Ham grunted and set about the preparation of a meal, working with the expert touch of a true Hotlander. He glanced at Pat as she bent over her specimens, injecting the bichloride solution.

"Do you suppose," he asked, "that the triops is the highest form of life on the dark side?"

"Beyond doubt," replied Pat. "If any higher form existed, it would long ago have exterminated those fierce devils."

But she was utterly wrong.

Within the span of four days they had exhausted the possibilities of the tumbled plain around the rocket. Pat had accumulated a variegated group of specimens, and Ham had taken an endless series of observations on temperature, on magnetic variations, on the direction and velocity of the Underwind.

So they moved their base, and the rocket flared into flight southward, toward the region where, presumably, the vast and mysterious Mountains of Eternity towered across the ice barrier into the dusky world of the night side. They flew slowly, throttling the reaction motors to a bare fifty miles an hour, for they were flying through night, depending on the beam of the forward light to warn against looming peaks.

Twice they halted, and each time a day or two sufficed to indicate that the region was similar to that of their first base. The same veined and bulbous plants, the same eternal Underwind, the same laughter from bloodthirsty trioptic throats.

But on the third occasion, there was a difference. They came to rest on a wild and bleak plateau among the foothills of the Greater Eternities. Far away to the westward,

half the horizon still glowed green with the false sunset, but the whole span south of the due-west point was black, hidden from view by the vast ramparts of the range that soared twenty-five miles above them into the black heavens. The mountains were invisible, of course, in that region of endless night, but the two in the rocket felt the colossal nearness of those incredible peaks.

And there was another way in which the mighty presence of the Mountains of Eternity affected them. The region was warm—not warm by the standards of the twilight zone, but much warmer than the plain below. Their thermometers showed zero on one side of the rocket, five above on the other. The vast peaks, ascending into the level of the Upper Winds, set up eddies and stray currents that brought warm air down to temper the cold breath of the Underwind.

Ham stared gloomily over the plateau visible in the lights. "I don't like it," he grunted. "I never did like these mountains, not since you made a fool of yourself by trying to cross 'em back in the Cool Country."

"A fool!" echoed Pat. "Who named these mountains? Who crossed them? Who discovered them? My father, that's who!"

"And so you thought you inherited 'em," he retorted, "and that all you had to do was to whistle and they'd lie down and play dead, and Madman's Pass would turn into a park walk. With the result that you'd now be a heap of clean-picked bones in a canyon if I hadn't been around to carry you out of it."

"Oh, you're just a timid Yankee!" she snapped. "I'm going outside to have a look." She pulled on her parka and stepped to the door, and there paused. "Aren't you—aren't you coming, too?" she asked hesitantly.

He grinned. "Sure! I just wanted to hear you ask." He slipped into his own outdoor garb and followed.

There was a difference here. Outwardly the plateau presented the same bleak wilderness of ice and stone that they

had found on the plain below. There were wind-eroded pinnacles of the utmost fantasy of form, and the wild landscape that glittered in the beams from their helmet lamps was the same bizarre terrain that they had first encountered.

But the cold was less bitter here; strangely, increasing altitude on this curious planet brought warmth instead of cold, as on the Earth, because it raised one closer to the region of the Upper Winds, and here in the Mountains of Eternity the Underwind howled less persistently, broken into gusts by the mighty peaks.

And the vegetation was less sparse. Everywhere were the veined and bulbous masses, and Ham had to tread carefully lest he repeat the unpleasant experience of stepping on one and hearing its moaning whimper of pain. Pat had no such scruples, insisting that the whimper was but a tropism; that the specimens she pulled up and dissected felt no more pain than an apple that was eaten; and that, anyway, it was a biologist's business to be a biologist.

Somewhere off among the peaks shrilled the mocking laughter of a triops, and in the shifting shadows at the extremities of their beams, Ham imagined more than once that he saw the forms of these demons of the dark. If there they were, however, the light kept them at a safe distance, for no stones hummed past.

Yet it was a queer sensation to walk thus in the center of a moving circle of light; he felt continually as if just beyond the boundary of visibility lurked Heaven only knew what weird and incredible creatures, though reason argued that such monsters couldn't have remained undetected.

Ahead of them their beams glistened on an icy rampart, a bank or cliff that stretched right and left across their course.

Pat gestured suddenly toward it. "Look there!" she exclaimed, holding her light steady. "Caves in the ice—burrows, rather. See?"

He saw—little black openings as large, perhaps, as a man-

hole cover, a whole row of them at the base of the ice rampart. Something black skittered laughing up the glassy slope and away—a triops. Were these the dens of the beasts? He squinted sharply.

"Something's there!" he muttered to Pat. "Look! Half the openings have something in front of them—or are those just rocks to block the entrance?"

Cautiously, revolvers in hand, they advanced. There was no more motion, but in the growing intensity of the beams, the objects were less and less rocklike, and at last they could make out the veinings and fleshy bulbousness of life.

At least the creatures were a new variety. Now Ham could distinguish a row of eyelike spots, and now a multiplicity of legs beneath them. The things were like inverted bushel baskets, about the size and contour, veined, flabby, and featureless save for a complete circle of eye spots. And now he could even see the semitransparent lids that closed, apparently, to shield the eyes from the pain of their lights.

They were barely a dozen feet from one of the creatures. Pat, after a moment of hesitation, moved directly before the motionless mystery.

"Welll" she said. "Here's a new one, Ham. Hello, old fella!"

An instant later both of them were frozen in utter consternation, completely overwhelmed by bewilderment, amazement, and confusion. Issuing, it seemed, from a membrane at the top of the creaure, came a clicking, high-pitched voice.

"Hello, fella!" it said.

There was an appalled silence. Ham held his revolver, but had there been need, he couldn't have used it, nor even remembered it. He was paralyzed; stricken dumb.

But Pat found her voice. "It—isn't real," she said faintly. "It's a tropism. The thing just echoes whatever sounds strike it. Doesn't it, Ham? Doesn't it?"

"I—I—of course!" He was staring at the lidded eyes. "It must be. Listen!" He leaned forward and yelled, "Hello!" directly at the creature. "It'll answer."

It did. "It isn't a tropism," it clicked in shrill but perfect English.

"*That's* no echo!" gasped Pat. She backed away. "I'm scared," she whimpered, pulling at Ham's arm. "Come away —quick!"

He thrust her behind him. "I'm just a timid Yankee," he grunted, "but I'm going to cross-question this living phonograph until I find out what—or who—makes it tick."

"No! No, Ham! I'm scared!"

"It doesn't look dangerous," he observed.

"It isn't dangerous," remarked the thing on the ice.

Ham gulped, and Pat gave a horrified little moan.

"Who—who are you?" he faltered.

There was no answer. The lidded eyes stared steadily at him.

"What are you?" he tried again.

Again no reply.

"How do you know English?" he ventured.

The clicking voice sounded: "I isn't know English."

"Then—uh—then why do you speak English?"

"You speak English," explained the mystery, logically enough.

"I don't mean why. I mean *how!*"

But Pat had overcome a part of her terrified astonishment, and her quick mind perceived a clue. "Ham," she whispered tensely, "it uses the words we use. It gets the meaning from us!"

"I gets the meaning from you," confirmed the thing ungrammatically.

Light dawned on Ham. "Lord!" he gasped. "Then it's up to us to give it a vocabulary."

"You speak, I speak," suggested the creature.

"Sure! See, Pat? We can say just anything." He paused. "Let's see— 'When in the course of human events it—' "

"Shut up!" snapped Pat. "Yankee! Remember you're on English territory now. 'To be or not to be; that is the question just—' "

Ham grinned and was silent. When she had exhausted her memory, he took up the task: "Once upon a time there were three bears—"

And so it went. Suddenly the situation struck him as fantastically ridiculous—there was Pat carefully relating the story of Little Red Riding Hood to a humorless monstrosity of the night-side of Venus! The girl cast him a perplexed glance as he roared into a gale of laughter.

"Tell him the one about the traveling salesman and the farmer's daughter!" he said, choking. "See if you can get a smile from him!"

She joined his laughter. "But it's really a serious matter," she concluded. "Imagine it, Ham! Intelligent life on the dark side! Or *are you* intelligent?" she asked suddenly of the thing on the ice.

"I am intelligent," it assured her. "I am intelligently intelligent."

"At least you're a marvelous linguist," said the girl. "Did you ever hear of learning English in half an hour, Ham? Think of that!" Apparently her fear of the creature had vanished.

"Well, let's make use of it," suggested Ham. "What's your name, friend?"

There was no reply.

"Of course," put in Pat. "He can't tell us his name until we give it to him in English, and we can't do that because—oh, well, let's call him Oscar, then. That'll serve."

"Good enough. Oscar, what are you, anyway?"

"Human, I'm a man."

"Eh? I'll be damned if you are!"

"Those are the words you've given me. To me I am a man to you."

"Wait a moment. 'To me I am—' I see, Pat. He means that the only words we have for what he considers himself are words like man and human. Well, what are your people, then?"

"People."

"I mean your race. What race do you belong to?"

"Human."

"Owl" groaned Ham. "You try, Pat."

"Oscar," said the girl, "you say you're human. Are you a mammal?"

"To me man is a mammal to you."

"Oh, good heavens!" She tried again. "Oscar, how does your race reproduce?"

"I have not the words."

"Are you born?"

The queer face, or faceless body, of the creature changed slightly. Heavier lids dropped over the semitransparent ones that shielded its many eyes; it was almost as if the thing frowned in concentration.

"We are not born," he clicked.

"Then—seeds, spores, parthenogenesis? Or fissure?"

"Spores," shrilled the mystery, "and fissure."

"But—"

She paused, nonplussed. In the momentary silence came the mocking hoot of a triops far to their left, and both turned involuntarily, stared, and recoiled aghast. At the very extremity of their beam one of the laughing demons had seized and was bearing away what was beyond doubt one of the creatures of the caves. And to add to the horror, all the rest squatted in utter indifference before their burrows.

"Oscar!" Pat screamed. "They got one of you!"

She broke off suddenly at the crack of Ham's revolver, but it was a futile shot.

"O-oh!" she gasped. "The devils! They got one!" There was no comment at all from the creature before them. "Oscar," she cried, "don't you care? They murdered one of you! Don't you understand?"

"Yes."

"But—doesn't it affect you at all?" The creatures had come, somehow, to hold a sort of human sympathy in Pat's mind. They could talk; they were more than beasts. "Don't you care at all?"

"No."

"But what are those devils to you? What do they do that you let them murder you?"

"They eat us," said Oscar placidly.

"Oh!" gasped Pat in horror. "But—but why don't—"

She broke off; the creature was backing slowly and methodically into its burrow.

"Wait!" she cried. "They can't come here! Our lights—"

The clicking voice drifted out: "It is cold. I go because of the cold."

There was silence.

It was colder. The gusty Underwind moaned more steadily now, and, glancing along the ridge, Pat saw that every one of the cave creatures was slipping like Oscar into his burrow. She turned a helpless gaze on Ham.

"Did I—dream this?" she whispered.

"Then both of us dreamed it, Pat." He took her arm and drew her back toward the rocket, whose round ports glowed an invitation through the dusk.

But once in the warm interior, with her clumsy outer garments removed, Pat drew her dainty legs under her, lighted a cigarette, and fell to more rational consideration of the mystery.

"There's something we don't understand about this, Ham. Did you sense anything queer about Oscar's mind?"

"It's a devilishly quick one!"

"Yes, he's intelligent enough. Intelligence of the human level, or even"—she hesitated—"above the human. But it isn't a human mind. It's different, somehow—alien, strange. I can't quite express what I felt, but did you notice Oscar never asked a question? Not one!"

"Why—he didn't, did he? That's queer!"

"It's darn queer. Any human intelligence, meeting another thinking form of life, would ask plenty of questions. We did." She blew a thoughtful puff of smoke. "And that isn't all. That—that indifference of his when the triops attacked his fellow—was that human, or even earthly? I've seen a hunting spider snatch one fly from a swarm of them without disturbing the rest, but could that happen to intelligent creatures? It couldn't; not even to brains as undeveloped as those in a herd of deer, or a flock of sparrows. Kill one and you frighten all."

"That's true, Pat. They're damn queer ducks, these fellow citizens of Oscar's. Queer animals."

"Animals? Don't tell me you didn't notice, Ham!"

"Notice what?"

"Oscar's no animal. He's a plant—a warm-blooded, mobile vegetable! All the time we were talking to him he was rooting around below him with his—well, his root. And those things that looked like legs—they were pods. He didn't walk on them; he dragged himself on his root. And, what's more, he—"

"What's more?"

"What's more, Ham, those pods were the same sort as the ones that the triops threw at us in the canyon of the Mountains of Eternity, the ones that choked and smothered us so—"

"The ones that laid you out so cold, you mean."

"Anyway, I had wits enough to notice them!" she retorted, flushing. "But there's part of the mystery, Ham.

Oscar's mind is a vegetable mind!" She paused, puffing her cigarette as he packed his pipe.

"Do you suppose," she asked suddenly, "that the presence of Oscar and his crew represents a menace to human occupancy of Venus? I know they're dark-side creatures, but what if mines are discovered here? What if there turns out to be a field for commercial exploitation? Humans can't live indefinitely away from sunlight, I know, but there might be a need for temporary colonies here, and what then?"

"Well, what then?" rejoined Ham.

"Yes; what then? Is there room on the same planet for two intelligent races? Won't there be a conflict of interests sooner or later?"

"What of it?" he grunted. "Those things are primitive, Pat. They live in caves, without culture, without weapons. They're no danger to man."

"But they're magnificently intelligent. How do you know that these we've seen aren't just a barbaric tribe, and that somewhere on the vastness of the dark side there isn't a vegetable civilization? You know civilization isn't the personal prerogative of mankind—look at the mighty decadent culture on Mars, and the dead remnants on Titan. Man has simply happened to have the strangest brand of it, at least so far."

"That's true enough, Pat," he agreed. "But if Oscar's fellows aren't any more pugnacious than they were toward that murderous triops, then they aren't much of a menace."

She shuddered. "I can't understand that at all. I wonder if—" She paused, frowning.

"If what?"

"I don't know. I had an idea—a rather horrible idea." She looked up suddenly. "Ham, tomorrow I'm going to find out exactly how intelligent Oscar really is. Exactly how intelligent—if I can."

There were certain difficulties, however. When Ham and Pat approached the ice ridge, plodding across the fantastic terrain, they found themselves in utter perplexity as to which of the row of caves was the one before which they had stood in conversation with Oscar. In the glittering reflections from their lamps each opening appeared exactly like every other, and the creatures at their mouths stared at them with lidded eyes in which there was no readable expression.

"Well," said Pat in puzzlement, "we'll just have to try. You there, are you Oscar?"

The clicking voice sounded: "Yes."

"I don't believe it," objected Ham. "He was over more to the right. Hey! Are you Oscar?"

Another voice clicked: "Yes."

"You can't *both* be Oscar!"

Pat's choice responded: "We are all Oscar."

"Oh, never mind," cut in Pat, forestalling Ham's protests. "Apparently what one knows they all know, so it doesn't make any difference which we choose. Oscar, you said yesterday you were intelligent. Are you more intelligent than I am?"

"Yes. Much more intelligent."

"Hah!" snickered Ham. "Take that, Pat!"

She sniffed. "Well, that puts him miles above you, Yankee! Oscar, do you ever lie?"

Opaque lids dropped over translucent ones. "Lie?" repeated the shrill voice. "No. There is no need."

"Well, do you—" She broke off suddenly at the sound of a dull pop. "What's that? Oh! Look, Ham, one of his pods burst!" She drew back.

A sharply pungent odor assailed them, reminiscent of that dangerous hour in the canyon, but not strong enough this time to set Ham choking or send the girl reeling into unconsciousness. Sharp, acrid, and yet not entirely unpleasant.

"What's that for, Oscar?"

"It is so we—" The voice was cut short.

"Reproduce?" suggested Pat.

"Yes. Reproduce. The wind carries our spores to each other. We live where the wind is not steady."

"But yesterday you said fissure was your method."

"Yes. The spores lodge against our bodies and there is a—" Again the voice died.

"A fertilization?" suggested the girl.

"No."

"Well, a—I know! An irritation!"

"Yes."

"That causes a tumorous growth?"

"Yes. When the growth is complete, we split."

"Ugh!" snorted Ham. "A tumor!"

"Shut up!" snapped the girl. "That's all a baby is—a normal tumor."

"A normal—well, I'm glad I'm not a biologist! Or a woman!"

"So'm I," said Pat demurely. "Oscar, how much do you know?"

"Everything."

"Do you know where my people come from?"

"From beyond the light."

"Yes, but before that?"

"No."

"We come from another planet," said the girl impressively. At Oscar's silence she said, "Do you know what a planet is?"

"Yes."

"But did you know before I said the word?"

"Yes. Long before."

"But how? Do you know what machinery is? Do you know what weapons are? Do you know how to make them?"

"Yes."

"Then—why don't you?"

"There is no need."

"No need!" she gasped. "With light—even with fire—you could keep the trioptes away. You could keep them from eating you!"

"There is no need."

She turned helplessly to Ham.

"The thing's lying," he suggested.

"I don't think so," she murmured. "It's something else—something we don't understand. Oscar, how do you know all those things?"

"Intelligence."

At the next cave another pod popped sullenly.

"But how? Tell me how you discover facts."

"From any fact," clicked the creature on the ice, "intelligence can build a picture of the—" There was silence.

"Universe?" she suggested.

"Yes. The universe. I start with one fact and I reason from it. I build a picture of the universe. I start with another fact. I reason from it. I find that the universe I picture is the same as the first. I know that the picture is true."

Both listeners stared in awe at the creature. "Say!" gulped Ham. "If that's true, we could find out anything from Oscar! Oscar, can you tell us secrets that we don't know?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You must first have the words to give me. I cannot tell you that for which you have no words."

"It's true!" whispered Pat. "But, Oscar, I have the words time and space and energy and matter and law and cause. Tell me the ultimate law of the universe?"

"It is the law of—" Silence.

"Conservation of energy or matter? Gravitation?"

"No."

"Of—of God?"

"No."

"Of—life?"

"No. Life is of no importance."

"Of—what? I can't think of another word."

"There's a chance," said Ham tensely, "that there is no word!"

"Yes," clicked Oscar. "It is the law of chance. Those other words are different sides of the law of chance."

"Good Heaven!" breathed Pat. "Oscar, do you know what I mean by stars, suns, constellations, planets, nebulae, and atoms, protons, and electrons?"

"Yes."

"But—how? Have you ever seen the stars that are above these eternal clouds? Or the Sun there beyond the barrier?"

"No. Reason is enough, because there is only one possible way in which the universe could exist. Only what is possible is real; what is not real is also not possible."

"That—that seems to mean something," murmured Pat. "I don't see exactly what. But, Oscar, why don't you use your knowledge to protect yourselves from your enemies?"

"There is no need. There is no need to do anything. In a hundred years we shall be—" Silence.

"Safe?"

"Yes—no."

"What?" A horrible thought struck her. "Do you mean—extinct?"

"Yes."

"But—oh, Oscar! Don't you *want* to live? Don't your people want to survive?"

"Want," shrilled Oscar. "Want—want—want. That word means nothing."

"It means—it means desire, need."

"Desire means nothing. Need? No. My people do not need to survive."

"Oh," said Pat faintly. "Then why do you reproduce?"

As if in answer, a bursting pod sent its pungent dust over them. "Because we must," clicked Oscar. "When the spores strike us, we must."

"I see," murmured Pat slowly. "Ham, I think I've got it. I think I understand. Let's get back to the ship."

Without farewell she turned away and he followed her thoughtfully. A strange listlessness oppressed him.

They had one slight mishap. A stone flung by some stray trioptes sheltered behind the ridge shattered the left lamp in Pat's helmet. It seemed hardly to disturb the girl; she glanced briefly aside and plodded on. But all the way back, in the gloom to their left now illumined only by his own lamp, hoots and shrieks and mocking laughter pursued them.

Within the rocket Pat swung her specimen bag wearily to the table and sat down without removing her heavy outer garment. Nor did Ham; despite the oppressive warmth of it, he, too, dropped listlessly to a seat on the bunk.

"I'm tired," said the girl, "but not too tired to realize what that mystery out there means."

"Then let's hear it."

"Ham," she said, "what's the big difference between plant and animal life?"

"Why—plants derive their sustenance directly from soil and air. Animals need plants or other animals as food."

"That isn't entirely true, Ham. Some plants are parasitic, and prey on other life. Think of the Hotlands, or think, even, of some terrestrial plants—the fungi, the pitcher plant, the *Dionaea* that trap flies."

"Well, animals move, then, and plants don't."

"That's not true, either. Look at microbes; they're plants, but they swim about in search of food."

"Then what *is* the difference?"

"Sometimes it's hard to say," she murmured, "but I think I see it now. It's this: Animals have desire and plants necessity. Do you understand?"

"Not a damn bit."

"Listen, then. A plant—even a moving one—acts the way it does because it *must,* because it's made so. An animal acts because it *wants* to, or because it's made so that it wants to."

"What's the difference?"

"There is a difference. An animal has will, a plant hasn't. Do you see now? Oscar has all the magnificent intelligence of a god, but he hasn't the will of a worm. He has reactions, but no desire. When the wind is warm he comes out and feeds; when it's cold he crawls back into the cave melted by his body heat, but that isn't will, it's just a reaction. He has no desires!"

Ham stared, roused out of his lassitude. I'll be damned if it isn't true!" he cried. "That's why he—or they—never ask questions. It takes desire or will to ask a question! And that's why they have no civilization and never will have!"

"That and other reasons," said Pat. "Think of this: Oscar has no sex, and, in spite of your Yankee pride, sex has been a big factor in building civilization. It's the basis of the family, and among Oscar's people there is no such thing as parent and child. He splits; each half of him is an adult, probably with all the knowledge and memory of the original.

"There's no need for love, no place for it, in fact, and therefore no call to fight for mate and family, and no reason to make life easier than it already is, and no cause to apply his intelligence to develop art or science or—or anything!" She paused. "And did you ever hear of the Malthusian law, Ham?"

"Not that I remember."

"Well, the law of Malthus says that population presses on the food supply. Increase the food and the population increases in proportion. Man evolved under that law; for a century or so it's been suspended, but our race grew to be human under it."

"Suspended! It sounds sort of like repealing the law of gravitation or amending the law of inverse squares."

"No, no," she said. "It was suspended by the development of machinery in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which shot the food supply so far ahead that population hasn't caught up. But it will, and the Malthusian law will rule again."

"And what's that got to do with Oscar?"

"This, Ham. He never evolved under that law. Other factors kept his numbers below the limit of the food supply, and so his species developed free of the need to struggle for food. He's so perfectly adapted to his environment that he needs nothing more. To him a civilization would be superfluous!"

"But—then what of the trioptes?"

"Yes, the trioptes. You see, Ham, just as I argued days ago, the trioptes are newcomers, pushed over from the twilight zone. When those devils arrived, Oscar's people were already evolved, and they couldn't change to meet the new conditions, or couldn't change quickly enough. So—they're doomed.

"As Oscar says, they'll be extinct soon—and—and they don't even care." She shuddered. "All they do, all they *can* do, is sit before their caves and think. Probably they think godlike thoughts, but they can't summon even a mouse-like will. That's what a vegetable intelligence is; that's what it has to be!"

"I think—I think you're right," he muttered. "In a way it's horrible, isn't it?"

"Yes." Despite her heavy garments she shivered. "Yes, it's horrible. Those vast, magnificent minds and no way for them to work. It's like a powerful gasoline motor with its drive shaft broken, and no matter how well it runs it can't turn the wheels. Ham, do you know what I'm going to name them? The *Lotophagi Veneris*—the Lotus Eaters! Content to sit and

dream away existence while lesser minds—ours and the trioptes'—battle for their planet."

"It's a good name, Pat." As she rose he asked in surprise, "Your specimens? Aren't you going to prepare them?"

"Oh, tomorrow." She flung herself, parka and all, on her bunk.

"But they'll spoil! And your helmet light—I ought to fix it."

"Tomorrow," she repeated wearily, and his own langour kept him from further argument.

When the nauseous odor of decay awakened him some hours later, Pat was asleep, still garbed in the heavy suit. He flung bag and specimens from the door, and then slipped the parka from her body. She hardly stirred as he tucked her gently into her bunk.

Pat never missed the specimen bag at all, and, somehow, the next day, if one could call that endless night a day, found them trudging over the bleak plateau with the girl's helmet lamp still unrepaired. Again at their left, the wildly mocking laughter of the night dwellers followed them, drifting eerily down on the Underwind, and twice far-flung stones chipped glittering ice from neighboring spires. They plodded listlessly and silently, as if in a sort of fascination, but their minds seemed strangely clear.

Pat addressed the first Lotus Eater they saw. "We're back, Oscar," she said with a faint rebirth of her usual flippancy. "How'd you spend the night?"

"I thought," clicked the thing.

"What'd you think about?"

"I thought about—" The voice ceased.

A pod popped, and the curiously pleasant pungent odor was in their nostrils.

"About—us?"

"No."

"About—the world?"

"No."

"About—what's the use?" she ended wearily. "We could keep that up forever, and perhaps never hit on the right question."

"If there is a right question," added Ham. "How do you know there are words to fit it? How do you even know that it's the kind of thought our minds are capable of conceiving? There must be thoughts that are beyond our grasp."

Off to their left a pod burst with a dull *pop*. Ham saw the dust move like a shadow across their beams as the Underwind caught it, and he saw Pat draw a deep draft of the pungent air as it whirled around her. Queer how pleasant the smell was, especially since it was the same stuff which in higher concentration had nearly cost their lives. He felt vaguely worried as that thought struck him, but could assign no reason for worry.

He realized suddenly that both of them were standing in complete silence before the Lotus Eater. They had come to ask questions, hadn't they?

"Oscar," he said, "what's the meaning of life?"

"No meaning. There is no meaning."

"Then why fight for it so?"

"We do not fight for it. Life is unimportant."

"And when you're gone, the world goes on just the same? Is that it?"

"When we are gone it will make no difference to any except the trioptes who eat us."

"Who eat you," echoed Ham.

There was something about that thought that did penetrate the fog of indifference that blanketed his mind. He peered at Pat, who stood passively and silently beside him, and in the glow of her helmet lamp he could see her clear gray eyes behind her goggles, staring straight ahead in what was apparently abstraction or deep thought. And beyond the

ridge sounded suddenly the yells and wild laughter of the dwellers in the dark.

"Pat," he said.

There was no answer.

"Pat!" he repeated, raising a listless hand to her arm. "We have to go back." To his right a pod popped. "We have to go back," he repeated.

A sudden shower of stones came glancing over the ridge. One struck his helmet, and his forward lamp burst with a dull explosion. Another struck his arm with a stinging pain, though it seemed surprisingly unimportant.

"We have to go back," he reiterated doggedly.

Pat spoke at last without moving. "What's the use?" she asked dully.

He frowned over that. What was the use? To go back to the twilight zone? A picture of Erotia rose in his mind, and then a vision of that honeymoon they had planned on the Earth, and then a whole series of terrestrial scenes—New York, a tree-girt campus, the sunny farm of his boyhood. But they all seemed very far away and unreal.

A violent blow that stung his shoulder recalled him, and he saw a stone bound from Pat's helmet. Only two of her lamps glowed now, the rear and the right, and he realized vaguely that on his own helmet shone only the rear and the left. Shadowy figures were skittering and gibbering along the crest of the ridge now left dark by the breaking of their lights, and stones were whizzing and spattering around them.

He made a supreme effort and seized her arm. "We've got to go back!" he muttered.

"Why? Why should we?"

"Because we'll be killed if we stay."

"Yes. I know that, but—"

He ceased to listen and jerked savagely at Pat's arm. She spun around and staggered after him as he turned doggedly toward the rocket.

Shrill hoots sounded as their rear lamps swept the ridge, and as he dragged the girl with infinite slowness, the shrieks spread out to the right and left. He knew what that meant; the demons were circling them to get in front of them where their shattered forward lamps cast no protecting light.

Pat followed listlessly, making no effort of her own. It was simply the drag of his arm that impelled her, and it was becoming an intolerable effort to move even himself. And there directly before him, flitting shadows that howled and hooted, were the devils that sought their lives.

Ham twisted his head so that his right lamp swept the area. Shrieks sounded as they found shelter in the shadows of peaks and ridges, but Ham, walking with his head sidewise, tripped and tumbled.

Pat wouldn't rise when he tugged at her. "There's no need of it," she murmured, but made no resistance when he lifted her.

An idea stirred vaguely; he bundled her into his arms so that her right lamp shot its beam forward, and so he staggered at last to the circle of light about the rocket, opened the door, and dumped her on the floor within.

He had one final impression. He saw the laughing shadows that were the trioptes skipping and skittering across the darkness toward the ridge where Oscar and his people waited in placid acceptance of their destiny.

The rocket was roaring along at two hundred thousand feet, because numberless observations and photographs from space had shown that not even the vast peaks of the Mountains of Eternity project forty miles above the planet's surface. Below them the clouds glistened white before and black behind, for they were just entering the twilight zone. At that height one could even see the mighty curvature of the planet.

"Half cue ball, half eight ball," said Ham, staring down. "Hereafter we stick to the cue-ball half."

"It was the spores," proceeded Pat, ignoring him. "We *knew* they were narcotic before, but we couldn't be expected to guess that they'd carry a drug as subtle as that—to steal away your will and undermine your strength. Oscar's people are the Lotus Eaters and the Lotus, all in one. But somehow I'm sorry for them. Those colossal, magnificent, useless minds of theirs!" She paused. "Ham, what woke you up to what was happening? What snapped you out of it?"

"Oh, it was a remark of Oscar's, something about his being only a square meal for a triops."

"Well?"

"Well, did you know we've used up all our food? That remark reminded me that I hadn't eaten for two days!"

TERROR OUT OF SPACE

by LEIGH BRACKETT

LUNDY WAS FLYING THE aero-space convertible by himself. He'd been doing it for a long time. So long that the bottom half of him was dead to the toes and the top half even deader, except for two separate aches like ulcerated teeth; one in his back, one in his head.

Thick pearly-grey Venusian sky went past the speeding flier in streamers of torn cloud. The rockets throbbed and pounded. Instruments jerked erratically under the swirl of magnetic currents that makes the Venusian atmosphere such a swell place for pilots to go nuts in.

Jackie Smith was still out cold in the copilot's seat. From in back, beyond the closed door to the tiny inner cabin, Lundy could hear Farrell screaming and fighting.

He'd been screaming a long time. Ever since the shot of *avertin* Lundy had given him after he was taken had begun to wear thin. Fighting the straps and screaming, a hoarse jarring sound with no sense in it.

Screaming to be free, because of *It.*

Somewhere inside of Lundy, inside the rumpled, sweat-soaked black uniform of the Tri-World Police, Special Branch, and the five-foot-six of thick springy muscle under it, there was a knot. It was a large knot, and it was very, very cold in spite of the sweltering heat in the cabin, and it had a nasty habit of yanking itself tight every few minutes, causing Lundy to jerk and sweat as though he'd been spiked.

Lundy didn't like that cold tight knot in his belly. It meant he was afraid. He'd been afraid before, plenty of times, and he wasn't ashamed of it. But right now he needed all the brains and guts he had to get *It* back to Special head-

quarters at Vhia, and he didn't want to have to fight himself, too.

Fear can screw things for you. It can make you weak when you need to be strong, if you're going to go on living. You, and the two other guys depending on you.

Lundy hoped he could keep from getting too much afraid, and too tired—because It was sitting back there in its little strongbox in the safe, waiting for somebody to crack.

Farrell was cracked wide open, of course, but he was tied down. Jackie Smith had begun to show signs before he passed out, so that Lundy had kept one hand over the anaesthetic needle gun holstered on the side of his chair. And Lundy thought,

The hell of it is, you don't know when It starts to work on you. There's no set pattern, or if there is we don't know it. Maybe right now the readings I see on those dials aren't there at all . . .

Down below the torn grey clouds he could see occasional small patches of ocean. The black, still, tideless water of Venus, that covers so many secrets of the planet's past.

It didn't help Lundy any. It could be right or wrong, depending on what part of the ocean it was—and there was no way to tell. He hoped nothing would happen to the motors. A guy could get awfully wet, out in the middle of that still black water.

Farrell went on screaming. His throat seemed to be lined with impervium. Screaming and fighting the straps, because *It* was locked up and calling for help.

"I'm cold," he said. "Hi, Midget."

Lundy turned his head. Normally he had a round, fresh, merry face, with bright dark eyes and a white, small-boyish grin. Now he looked like something the waiter had swept out from under a table at four A.M. on New Year's Day.

"You're cold," he said sourly. He licked sweat off his lips. "Oh, fine! That was all I needed."

Jackie Smith stirred slightly, groaned, to joggle himself. His black tunic was open over his chest, showing the white strapping of bandages, and his left hand was thrust in over the locked top of the tunic's zipper. He was a big man, not any older than Lundy, with big, ugly, pleasant features, a shock of coarse pale hair, and a skin like old leather.

"On Mercury, where I was born," he said, "the climate is suitable for human beings. You Old-World pantywaists . . ." He broke off, turned white under the leathery burn, and said through set teeth, "Oi! Farrell sure did a good job on me."

"You'll live," said Lundy. He tried not to think about how nearly both he and Smith had come to not living. Farrell had put up one hell of a fight, when they caught up with him in a native village high up in the Mountains of White Cloud.

Lundy still felt sick about that. The bull-meat, the hard boys, you didn't mind kicking around. But Farrell wasn't that kind. He was just a nice guy that got trapped by something too big for him.

A nice guy, crazy blind in love with somebody that didn't exist. A decent hardworking guy with a wife and two kids who'd lost his mind, heart, and soul to a Thing from outer space, so that he was willing to kill to protect It.

Oh, hell! thought Lundy wearily, *won't he ever stop screaming?*

The rockets beat and thundered. The torn grey sky whipped past. Jackie Smith sat rigid, with closed eyes, white around the lips and breathing in shallow, careful gasps. And Vhia still a long way off.

Maybe farther off than he knew. Maybe he wasn't heading toward Vhia at all. Maybe *It* was working on him, and he'd never know it till he crashed.

The cold knot tightened in his belly like a cold blade stabbing.

Lundy cursed. Thinking things like that was a sure way to punch your ticket right straight to blazes.

But you couldn't help thinking, about *It.* The Thing you had caught in a special net of tight-woven metal mesh, aiming at something Farrell could see but you couldn't. The Thing you had forced into the glassite box and covered up with a black cloth, because you had been warned not to look at *It.*

Lundy's hands tingled and burned, not unpleasantly. He could still feel the small savage Thing fighting him, hidden in the net. It had felt vaguely cylindrical, and terribly alive.

Life. Life from outer space, swept out of a cloud of cosmic dust by the gravitic pull of Venus. Since Venus had hit the cloud there had been a wave of strange madness on the planet. Madness like Farrell's, that had led to murder, and some things even worse.

Scientists had some ideas about that life from Out There. They'd had a lucky break and found one of The Things, dead, and there were vague stories going around of a crystalline-appearing substance that wasn't really crystal, about three inches long and magnificently etched and fluted, and supplied with some odd little gadgets nobody would venture an opinion about.

But the Thing didn't do them much good, dead. They had to have one alive, if they were going to find out what made it tick and learn how to put a stop to what the telecommentators had chosen to call The Madness from Beyond, or The Vampire Lure.

One thing about it everybody knew. The guys who suddenly went sluggy and charged off the rails all made it clear that they had met the ultimate Dream Woman of all women and all dreams. Nobody else could see her, but that didn't bother them any. They saw her, and she was—*She.* And her eyes were always veiled.

And *She* was a whiz at hypnosis and mind-control. That's

why *She,* or *It,* hadn't been caught alive before. Not before Lundy and Smith, with every scientific aid Special could give them, had tracked down Farrell and managed to get the breaks.

The breaks. Plain fool luck. Lundy moved his throbbing head stiffly on his aching neck, blinked sweat out of his bloodshot eyes, and wished to hell he was home in bed.

Jackie Smith said suddenly, "Midget, I'm cold. Get me a blanket."

Lundy looked at him. His pale green eyes were half open, but not as though they saw anything. He was shivering.

"I can't leave the controls, Jackie."

"Nuts. I've got one hand. I can hang onto this lousy tin fish that long."

Lundy scowled. He knew Smith wasn't kidding about the cold. The temperatures on Mercury made the first-generation colonists sensitive to anything below the range of an electric furnace. With the wound and all, Smith might wind up with pneumonia if he wasn't covered.

"Okay." Lundy reached out and closed the switch marked A. "But I'll let Mike do the flying. He can probably last five minutes before he blows his guts out."

Iron Mike was just a pattycake when it came to Venusian atmosphere flying. The constant magnetic compensation heated the robot coils to the fusing point in practically no time at all.

Lundy thought fleetingly that it was nice to know there were still a couple of things men could do better than machinery.

He got up, feeling like something that had stood outside rusting for four hundred years or so. Smith didn't turn his head. Lundy growled at him.

"Next time, sonny, you wear your long woolen undies and let me alone!"

Then he stopped. The knot jerked tight in his stomach.

Cold sweat needled him, and his nerves stung in a swift rush of fire.

Farrell had quit screaming.

There was silence in the ship. Nothing touched it. The rockets were outside it and didn't matter. Even Jackie Smith's careful breathing had stopped. Lundy went forward slowly, toward the door. Two steps.

It opened. Lundy stopped again, quite still.

Farrell was standing in the opening. A nice guy with a wife and two kids. His face still looked like that, but the eyes in it were not sane, nor even human.

Lundy had tied him down to the bunk with four heavy straps. Breast, belly, thighs, and feet. The marks of them were on Farrell. They were cut into his shirt and pants, into his flesh and sinew, deep enough to show his bare white ribs. There was blood. A lot of blood. Farrell didn't mind.

"I broke the straps," he said. He smiled at Lundy. "She called me and I broke the straps."

He started to walk to the safe in the corner of the cabin. Lundy gagged and pulled himself up out of a cold black cloud and got his feet to moving.

Jackie Smith said quietly, "Hold it, Midget. She doesn't like it there in the safe. She's cold and she wants to come out."

Lundy looked over his shoulder. Smith was hunched around in his seat, holding the needle-gun from Lundy's holster on the pilot's chair. His pale green eyes had a distant, dreamy glow, but Lundy knew better than to trust it.

He said, without inflection, "You've seen her."

"No. No, but—I've heard her." Smith's heavy lips twitched and parted. The breath sucked through between them, hoarse and slow.

Farrell went down on his knees beside the safe. He put his hands on its blank and gleaming face and turned to Lundy. He was crying.

"Open it. You've got to open it. She wants to come out. She's frightened."

Jackie Smith raised the gun, a fraction of an inch. "Open it, Midget," he whispered. "She's cold in there."

Lundy stood still. The sweat ran on him and he was colder than a frog's belly in the rain; and for no reason at all he said thickly,

"No. She's hot. She can't breathe in there. She's hot."

Then he jerked his head up and yelled. He came around to face Smith, unsteady but fast, and started for him.

Smith's ugly face twisted as though he might be going to cry. "Midget! I don't want to shoot you. Open the safe!"

Lundy said, "You damned fool," with no voice at all, and went on.

Smith hit the firing stud.

The anaesthetic needles hit Lundy across the chest. They didn't hurt much. Just a stinging prick. He kept going. No reason. It was just something he seemed to be doing at the time.

Behind him Farrell whimpered once like a puppy and lay down across the little safe. He didn't move again. Lundy got down on his hands and knees and reached in a vague sort of way for the controls. Jackie Smith watched him with dazed green eyes.

Quite suddenly, Iron Mike blew his guts out.

The control panel let go a burst of blue flame. The glare and heat of it knocked Lundy backward. Things hissed and snarled and ran together, and the convertible began to dance like a leaf in a gale. The automatic safety cut the rockets dead.

The ship began to fall.

Smith said something that sounded like *She* and folded up his chair. Lundy rubbed his hand across his face. The lines of it were blurred and stupid. His dark eyes had no sense in them.

He began to crawl over the lurching floor toward the safe.

The clouds outside ripped and tore across the ship's nose, and presently only water showed. Black, still, tideless water dotted with little islands of floating weed that stirred and slithered with a life of their own.

Black water, rushing up.

Lundy didn't care. He crawled through Farrell's blood, and he didn't care about that, either. He pushed Farrell's body back against the cabin wall and began to scratch at the shiny door, making noises like a hound shut out and not happy about it.

The ship hit the water with a terrific smack. Spray geysered up, dead white against the black sea, fell back, and closed in. Presently even the ripples went away.

Dark green weed-islands twined sinuously upon themselves, a flock of small seadragons flapped their jeweled wings down and began to fish, and none of them cared at all about the ship sinking away under them.

Not even Lundy cared, out cold in the space-tight cabin, with his body wedged up against the safe and tears drying with the sweat on his stubbled cheeks.

II

THE FIRST THING Lundy knew about was the stillness. A dead feeling, as though everything in creation had stopped breathing.

The second thing was his body. It hurt, like hell, and it was hot, and it didn't like the thick, foul air it was getting. Lundy pushed himself into a sitting position and tried to boot his brain into action. It was hard work, because someone had split his head open four ways with an axe.

It wasn't really dark in the cabin. A wavering silver glow almost like moonlight came in through the ports. Lundy could

see pretty well. He could see Farrell's body sprawled out on the floor, and a mess of junk that had once been equipment.

He could see the safe.

He looked at it a long time. There wasn't much to look at. Just an open safe with nothing in it, and a piece of black cloth dropped on the floor.

"Oh, Lord," whispered Lundy. "Oh, my Lord!"

Everything hit him at once then. There wasn't much in him but his stomach, and that was tied down. But it tried hard to come up. Presently the spasms stopped, and then Lundy heard the knocking.

It wasn't very loud. It had a slow, easy rhythm, as though the knocker had a lot of time and didn't care when he got in. It came from the airlock panel.

Lundy got up. Slowly, cold as a toad's belly and as white. His lips drew back from his teeth and stayed there, frozen.

The knocking kept on. A sleepy kind of sound. The guy outside could afford to wait. Sometime that locked door was going to open, and he could wait. He wasn't in a hurry. He would never be in a hurry.

Lundy looked all around the cabin. He didn't speak. He looked sideways out of the port. There was water out there. The black sea-water of Venus; clear and black, like deep night.

There was level sand spreading away from the ship. The silver light came up out of it. Some kind of phosphorescence, as bright as moonlight and faintly tinged with green.

Black sea-water. Silver sand. The guy kept on knocking at the door. Slow and easy. Patient. One—two. One—two. Just off beat with Lundy's heart.

Lundy went to the inner cabin, walking steadily He looked around carefully and then went back. He stopped by the lock panel.

"Okay, Jackie," he said. "In a minute. In a minute, boy."

Then he turned and went very fast to the port locker and

got a quart bottle out of its shock cradle, and raised it. It took both hands.

After a while he dropped the bottle and stood still, not looking at anything, until he stopped shaking. Then he pulled his vac-suit down off its hook and climbed into it. His face was grey and quite blank.

He took all the oxygen cylinders he could carry, emergency rations, and all the benzedrine in the medicine kit. He put the limit dose of the stimulant down on top of the brandy before he locked his helmet. He didn't bother with the needle gun. He took the two Service blasters—his own, and Smith's. The gentle knocking didn't stop.

He stood for a moment looking at the open safe and the black cloth dropped beside it. Something cruel came into his face. A tightness, a twitching and setting of the muscles, and a terrible look of patience.

Being under water wouldn't bother a Thing from outer space. He reached up and lifted the net of tight-woven metal-mesh down off its hook and fastened it on his belt. Then he walked over and opened the airlock door.

Black water swirled in around his weighted boots, and then the door opened wide and Jackie Smith came in.

He'd been waiting in the flooded lock-chamber. Kicking his boots against the inner door, easy, with the slow breathing of the sea. Now the water pushed his feet down and held him upright from behind, so he could walk in and stand looking at Lundy. A big blond man with green eyes, and white bandages strapped under his open black tunic, looking at Lundy. Not long. Only for a second. But long enough.

Lundy stopped himself after the third scream. He had to, because he knew if he screamed again he'd never stop. By that time the black water had pushed Jackie Smith away, over to the opposite wall, and covered his face.

"Oh, Lord," whispered Lundy. "Oh, Lord, *what did he see before he drowned?*"

No one answered. The black water pushed at Lundy, rising high around him, trying to take him over to Jackie Smith. Lundy's mouth began to twitch.

He shut his teeth on his lower lip, holding it, holding his throat. He began to run, clumsily, fighting the water, and then he stopped that, too. He walked, not looking behind him, out into the flooded lock. The door slid shut behind him, automatically.

He walked out across the firm green-silver sand, swallowing the blood that ran in his mouth and choked him.

He didn't hurry. He was going to be walking for a long, long time. From the position of the ship when it fell he ought to be able to make it to the coast—unless It had been working on him so the figures on the dials hadn't been there at all.

He checked his direction, adjusted the pressure-control in his vac-suit, and plodded on in the eerie undersea moonlight. It wasn't hard going. If he didn't hit a deep somewhere, or meet something too big to handle, or furnish a meal for some species of hungry Venus-weed, he ought to live to face up to the Old Man at H.Q. and tell him two men were dead, the ship lost, and the job messed to hell and gone.

It was beautiful down there. Like the dream-worlds you see when you're doped or delirious. The phosphorescence rose up into the black water and danced there in wavering whorls of cold fire. Fish, queer gaudy little things with jewelled eyes, flicked past Lundy in darts of sudden color, and there were great stands of weed like young forests, spangling the dark water and the phosphorescence glow with huge burning spots of blue and purple and green and silver.

Flowers. Lundy got too close to some of them once. They reached out and opened round mouths full of spines and sucked at him hungrily. The fish gave them a wide berth. After that, so did Lundy.

He hadn't been walking more than half an hour when he hit the road.

It was a perfectly good road, running straight across the sand. Here and there it was cracked, with some of the huge square blocks pushed up or tipped aside, but it was still a good road, going somewhere.

Lundy stood looking at it with cold prickles running up and down his spine. He'd heard about things like this. Nobody knew an awful lot about Venus yet. It was a young, tough, be-damned-to-you planet, and it was apt to give the snoopy scientific guys a good swift boot in their store teeth.

But even a young planet has a long past, and stories get around. Legends, songs, folk tale. It was pretty well accepted that a lot of Venus that was under water now hadn't been once, and vice versa. The old girl had her little whimsies while doing the preliminary mock-up of her permanent face.

So once upon a time this road had crossed a plain under a hot pearl-grey sky, going somewhere. Taking caravans from the seacoast, probably. Bales of spices and spider-silk and casks of *vakhi* from the Nahali canebrakes, and silver-haired slavegirls from the high lands of the Cloud People, going along under sultry green *liha*-trees to be sold.

Now it crossed a plain of glowing sand under still black water. The only trees that shadowed it were tall weeds with brilliant, hungry flowers, and the only creatures that followed it were little fish with jewelled eyes. But it was still there, still ready, still going somewhere.

It was headed the same way Lundy was. It must have made a bend somewhere and turned to meet him. Lundy licked cold sweat off his lips and stepped out on it.

He stepped slow and careful, like a man coming alone down the aisle of an empty church.

He walked on the road for a long time. The weeds crowded in thicker along its edges. It seemed to run right through a dense forest of them that spread away as far as Lundy could see on either side. He was glad of the road. It was wide, and

if he stayed in the middle of it the flowers couldn't reach him.

It got darker outside, because of the weeds covering the sand. Whatever made the phosphorescence didn't like being crowded that way, and pretty soon it was so dark that Lundy had to switch on the light in the top of his helmet. In the edges of the beam he could see the weed fronds moving lazily with the slow breathing of the sea.

The flowers were brighter here. They hung like lamps in the black water, burning with a light that seemed to come out of themselves. Sullen reds and angry yellows, and coldly vicious blues.

Lundy didn't like them.

The weeds grew in thicker and closer. They bulged out their roots, in over the stone edges. The flowers opened their bright hungry mouths and yearned at Lundy, reaching.

Reaching. Not quite touching. Not yet.

He was tired. The brandy and the benzedrine began to die in him. He changed his oxygen cylinder. That helped, but not much. He took more dope, but he was afraid to go heavy on it lest he drive his heart too hard. His legs turned numb.

He hadn't slept for a long time. Tracking Farrell hadn't been any breeze, and taking him—and It—had been plain and fancy hell. Lundy was only human. He was tired. Bushed. Cooked. Beat to the socks.

He sat down and rested a while, turning off his light to save the battery. The flowers watched him, glowing in the dark. He closed his eyes, but he could still feel them, watching and waiting.

After a minute or two he got up and went on.

The weeds grew thicker, and taller, and heavier with flowers.

More benzedrine, and damn the heart. The helmet light cut a cold white tunnel through the blackness. He followed

it, walking faster. Weed fronds met and interlaced high above him, closing him in. Flowers bent inward, downward. Their petals almost brushed him. Fleshy petals, hungry and alive.

He started to run, over the wheel-ruts and the worn hollows of the road that still went somewhere, under the black sea.

Lundy ran clumsily for a long time between the dark and pressing walls. The flowers got closer. They got close enough to catch his vac-suit, like hands grasping and slipping and grasping again. He began using the blaster.

He burned off a lot of them that way. They didn't like it. They began swaying in from their roots and down from the laced ceiling over his head. They hurt. They were angry. Lundy ran, sobbing without tears.

The road did him in. It crossed him up, suddenly, without warning. It ran along smoothly under the tunnel of weeds, and then it was a broken, jumbled mass of huge stone blocks, tipped up and thrown around like something a giant's kid got tired of playing with.

And the weeds had found places to stand in between them.

Lundy tripped and fell, cracking his head against the back of his helmet. For a moment all he could see was bright light flashing. Then that stopped, and he realized he must have jarred a connection loose somewhere because his own light was out.

He began to crawl over a great tilted block. The flowers burned bright in the darkness. Bright and close. Very close. Lundy opened his mouth. Nothing came out but a hoarse animal whimper. He was still holding a blaster. He fired it off a couple of times, and then he was on top of the block, lying flat on his belly.

He knew it was the end of the line, because he couldn't move any more.

The bright flowers came down through the dark. Lundy

lay watching them. His face was quite blank. His dark eyes held a stubborn hatred, but nothing else.

He watched the flowers fasten on his vac-suit and start working. Then, from up ahead, through the dark close tunnel of the weeds, he saw the light.

It flared out suddenly, like lightning. A sheet of hot, bright gold cracking out like a whipped banner, lighting the end of the road.

Lighting the city, and the little procession coming out of it.

Lundy didn't believe any of it. He was half dead already, with his mind floating free of his body and beginning to be wrapped up in dark clouds. He watched what he saw incuriously.

The golden light died down, and then flared out twice more, rhythmically. The road ran smooth again beyond the end of the tunnel, straight across a narrow plain. Beyond that, the city rose.

Lundy couldn't see much of it, because of the weeds. But it seemed to be a big city. There was a wall around it, of green marble veined with dusky rose, the edges worn round by centuries of water. There were broad gates of pure untarnished gold, standing open on golden pintles. Beyond them was a vast square paved in cloud-grey quartz, and the buildings rose around it like the castles Lundy remembered from Earth and his childhood, when there were clouds of a certain kind at sunset.

That's what the whole place looked like, under the flaring golden light. Cloud-cuckoo land at sunset. Remote, dreaming in beauty, with the black water drawn across it like a veil—something never destroyed because it never existed.

The creatures who came from between the golden gates and down the road were like tiny wisps of those clouds, torn free by some cold wandering breeze and driven away from the light.

They came drifting toward Lundy. They didn't seem to be moving fast, but they must have been because quite suddenly they were among the weeds. There were a lot of them; maybe forty or fifty. They seemed to be between three and four feet tall, and they were all the same sad, blue-grey, twilight color.

Lundy couldn't see what they were. They were vaguely man-shaped, and vaguely finny, and something that was more than vaguely something else, only he couldn't place it.

He was suddenly beyond caring. The dull black curtain around his mind got a hole in it, and fear came shrieking through it. He could feel the working and pulling of his vacsuit where the flowers were chewing on it as though it were his own skin.

He could feel sweat running cold on his body. In a minute that would be sea water running, and then . . .

Lundy began to fight. His lips peeled back off his teeth, but he didn't make any noise except his heavy breathing. He fought the flowers, partly with the blaster, partly with brute strength. No science, no thought. Just the last blind struggle of an animal that didn't want to die.

The flowers held him. They smothered him, crushed him down, wrapped him in lovely burning petals of destruction. He seared a lot of them, but there were always more. Lundy didn't fight long.

He lay on his back, knees drawn up a little toward a rigid, knotted belly, blind with sweat, his heart kicking him like a logger's boot. Cold, tense—waiting.

And then the flowers went away.

They didn't want to. They let go reluctantly, drawing back and snarling like cats robbed of a fat mouse, making small hungry feints at him. But they went.

Lundy came nearer fanning off for keeps then than he ever had. Reaction wrung him out like a wet bar-rag. His heart quit beating; his body jerked like something on a string.

Then, through a mist that might have been sweat, or tears, on the edge of the Hereafter, he saw the little blue-grey people looking down at him.

They hovered in a cloud above him, holding place with membranes as fluttering and delicate as bird-calls on a windy day. The membranes ran between arm- and leg-members, both of which had thin flat swimming-webs. There were suckers on the legs, about where the heels would have been if they'd had feet.

Their bodies were slender and supple, and definitely feminine without having any of the usual human characteristics. They were beautiful. They weren't like anything Lundy had even seen before, or even dreamed about, but they were beautiful.

They had faces. Queer little pixie things without noses. Their noses were round and tiny and rather sweet, but their eyes were their dominant feature.

Huge round golden eyes with pupils of deep brown. Soft eyes, gentle, inquiring, it made Lundy feel like crying, and so scared it made him mad.

The flowers kept weaving around hopefully. When one got too close to Lundy, one of the little people would slap it gently, the way you would a pet dog, and shoo it away.

"Do you live?"

III

LUNDY WASN'T SURPRISED BY the telepathic voice. Thought-communication was commoner than speech and a lot simpler in many places on the inhabited worlds. Special gave its men a thorough training in it.

"I live, thanks to you."

There was something in the quality of the brain he touched that puzzled him. It was like nothing he'd ever met before.

He got to his feet, not very steadily. "You came just in time. How did you know I was here?"

"Your fear-thoughts carried to us. We know what it is to be afraid. So we came."

"There's nothing I can say but 'Thank you.'"

"But of course we helped! Why not? You needn't thank us."

Lundy looked at the flowers burning sullenly in the gloom. "How is it you can boss them around? Why don't they . . ."

"But they're not cannibals! Not like—*The Others.*" There was pure cold dread in that last thought.

"Cannibals." Lundy looked up at the cloud of dainty blue-grey woman-things. His skin got cold and a size too small for him.

Their soft golden eyes smiled down at him. "We're different from you, yes. Just as we're different from the fish. What is your thought? Bright things growing—weed—yes, they're kin to us."

Kin, thought Lundy. Yeah. About like we are to the animals. Plants. Living plants were no novelty on Venus. Why not plants with thinking minds? Plants that carried their roots along with them, and watched you with sad soft eyes.

"Let's get out of here," said Lundy.

They went down along the dark tunnel and out onto the road, and the flowers yearned like hungry dogs after Lundy but didn't touch him. He started out across the narrow plain, with the plant-women drifting cloudlike around him.

Seaweed. Little bits of kelp that could talk to you. It made Lundy feel queer.

The city made him feel queer, too. It was dark when he first saw it from the plain, with only the moonlight glow of the sand to touch it. It was a big city, stretching away behind its barrier wall. Big and silent and very old, waiting there at the end of its road.

It was curiously more real in the dim light. Lundy lost

trace of the water for a moment. It was like walking toward a sleeping city in the moonlight, feeling the secretive, faintly hostile strength of it laired and leashed, until dawn. . . .

Only there would never be a dawn for this city. Never, any more.

Lundy wanted suddenly to run away.

"Don't be afraid. We live there. It's safe."

Lundy shook his head irritably. Quite suddenly the brilliant light flared out again, three regular flashes. It seemed to come from somewhere to the right, out of a range of undersea mountains. Lundy felt a faint trembling of the sand. A volcanic fissure, probably, opened when the sand sank.

The golden light changed the city again. Cloud-cuckoo land at sunset—a place where you could set your boots down on a dream.

When he went in through the gates he was awed, but not afraid. And then, while he stood in the square looking up at the great dim buildings, the thought came drifting down to him out of the cloud of little woman-things.

"It *was* safe. It was happy—before *She* came."

After a long moment Lundy said, "She?"

"We haven't seen her. But our mates have. She came a little while ago and walked through the streets, and all our mates left us to follow her. They say she's beautiful beyond any of us, and . . ."

"And her eyes are hidden, and they have to see them. They have to look into her eyes or go crazy, so they follow her."

The sad little blue-grey cloud stirred in the dark water. Golden eyes looked down at him.

"How did you know? Do you follow her, too?"

Lundy took a deep, slow breath. The palms of his hands were wet. "Yes. Yes, I followed her, too."

"We feel your thought. . . ." They came down close around

him. Their delicate membranes fluttered like fairy wings. Their golden eyes were huge and soft and pleading.

"Can you help us? Can you bring our mates back safe? They've forgotten everything. If The Others should come . . ."

"The Others?"

Lundy's brain was drowned in stark and terrible fear. Pictures came through it. Vague gigantic dreams of nightmare . . .

"They come, riding the currents that go between the hot cracks in the mountains and the cold deeps. They eat. They destroy." The little woman-things were shaken suddenly like leaves in a gust of wind.

"We hide from them in the buildings. We can keep them out, away from our seed and the little new ones. But our mates have forgotten. If The Others come while they follow Her, outside and away from safety, they'll all be killed. We'll be left alone, and there'll be no more seed for us, and no more little new ones."

They pressed in close around him, touching him with their small blue-grey forefins.

"Can you help us? Oh, can you help us?"

Lundy closed his eyes. His mouth twitched and set. When he opened his eyes again they were hard as agates.

"I'll help you," he said, "or die trying."

It was dark in the great square, with only the pale sand-glow seeping through the gates. For a moment the little blue-grey woman-creatures clung around him, not moving, except as the whole mass of them swayed slightly with the slow rhythm of the sea.

Then they burst away from him, outward, in a wild surge of hope—and Lundy stood with his mouth open, staring.

They weren't blue-grey any longer. They glowed suddenly, their wings and their dainty, supple bodies, a warm soft green that had a vibrant pulse of life behind it. And they blossomed.

The long, slender, living petals must have been retracted, like the fronds of a touch-me-not, while they wore the sad blue-grey. Now they broke out like coronals of flame around their small heads.

Blue and scarlet and gold, poppy-red and violet and flame, silver-white and warm pink like a morning cloud, streaming in the black water. Streaming from small green bodies that rolled and tumbled high up against the dark, dreaming buildings like the butterflies that had danced there before the sunlight was lost forever.

Quite suddenly, then, they stopped. They drifted motionless in the water, and their colors dimmed. Lundy said,

"Where are they?"

"Deep in the city, beyond our buildings here—in the streets where only the curious young ones ever go. Oh, bring them back! Please bring them back!"

He left them hovering in the great dark square and went on into the city.

He walked down broad paved streets channeled with wheel-ruts and hollowed by generations of sandalled feet. The great water-worn buildings lifted up on either side, lighted by the erratic glare of the distant fissure.

The window-openings, typical of most Venusian architecture, were covered by grilles of marble and semi-precious stone, intricately hand-pierced like bits of jewelry. The great golden doors stood open on their uncorroded hinges. Through them Lundy could watch the life of the little plant-people being lived.

In some of the buildings the lower floor had been covered with sand. Plant-women hovered protectively over them, brushing the sand smooth where the water disturbed it. Lundy guessed that these were seed beds.

In other places there were whole colonies of tiny flower-things still rooted in the sand; a pale spring haze of green in the dimness. They sat in placid rows, nodding their pastel

baby coronals and playing solemnly with bits of bright weed and colored stones. Here, too, the plant-women watched and guarded lovingly.

Several times Lundy saw groups of young plantlings, grown free of the sand, being taught to swim by the woman-creatures, tumbling in the black water like bright petals on a spring wind.

All the women were the same sad blue-grey, with their blossoms hidden.

They'd stay that way, unless he, Lundy, could finish the job Special had sent him to do. The job he hadn't been quite big enough to handle up to now.

Farrell, with the flesh flayed off his bones, and not feeling it because *She* was all he could think of. Jackie Smith, drowned in a flooded lock because *She* wanted to be free and he had helped her.

Was this Lundy guy so much bigger than Farrell and Smith, and all the other men who had gone crazy over Her? Big enough to catch The Vampire Lure in a net and keep it there, and not go nuts himself?

Lundy didn't feel that big. Not anywhere near that big.

He was remembering things. The first time he'd had It in a net. The last few minutes before the wreck, when he'd heard Her crying for freedom from inside the safe. Jackie Smith's face when he walked in with the water from the flooded lock, and his, Lundy's, own question—*Oh Lord, what did he see before he drowned?*

The tight cold knot was back in Lundy's belly again, and this time it had spurs on.

He left the colony behind him, walking down empty streets lit by the rhythmic flaring of the volcanic fissure. There was damage here. Pavements cracked and twisted with the settling, towers shaken down, the carved stone jalousies split out of the windows. Whole walls had fallen in, in some

places, and most of the golden doors were wrecked, jammed wide open or gone entirely.

A dead city. So dead and silent that you couldn't breathe with it, and so old it made you crawl inside.

A swell place to go mad in, following a dream.

After a long time Lundy saw them—the mates of the little seaweed women. A long, long trail of them like a flight of homing birds, winding between the dark and broken towers.

They looked like their women. A little bigger, a little coarser, with strong tough dark-green bodies and brilliant coronals. Their golden eyes were fixed on something Lundy couldn't see, and they looked like the eyes of Lucifer yearning at the gates of Heaven.

Lundy began to run against the water, cutting across a wide plaza to get under the head of the procession. He unhooked the net from his belt with hands that felt like a couple of dead fish.

Then he staggered suddenly, lost his footing, and went sprawling. It was as though somebody had pushed him with a strong hand. When he tried to get up it pushed him again, hard. The golden glare from the fissure was steadier now, and very bright.

The trail of little man-things bent suddenly in a long whipping bow, and Lundy knew what was the matter.

There was a current rising in the city. Rising like the hot white winds that used to howl in from the sea, carrying the rains.

"They ride the currents that go between the hot cracks in the mountains and the cold deeps. They eat. They destroy."

The Others. The Others, who were cannibals . . .

She led the bright trail of plant-men between the towers, and there was a current rising in the streets.

Lundy got up. He balanced himself against the thrust of the current and ran, following the procession. It was clumsy work, with the water and his leaded boots. He tried to gauge

where *It*—or *She*—was from the focus of the plant-men's eyes.

The hot light flared up brighter. The water pulled and shoved at him. He looked back once, but he couldn't see anything in the shadows between the towers. He was scared.

He shook the net out, and he was scared.

Funny that *It*—or *She*—didn't see him. Funny *It* didn't sense his mind, even though he tried to keep it closed. But he wasn't a very big object down there in the shadows under the walls, and creating an illusion for that many minds would be a strain on anything, even creature from outer space.

He'd had the breaks once before, when he caught up with Farrell. He prayed to have them again.

He got them, for what good it did him.

The current caught the procession and pulled it down close to Lundy. He watched their eyes. She was still leading them. She had a physical body even if you couldn't see it, and the current would pull it, no matter how tiny it was.

He cast his net out, fast.

It bellied out in the black water and came swooping back to his pull, and there was something in it. Something tiny and cylindrical and vicious. Something alive.

He drew the net tight, shivering and sweating with nervous excitement. And the plant-men attacked.

They swooped on him in a brilliant cloud. Their golden eyes burned. There was no sense in them. Their minds shrieked and clamored at him, a formless howl of rage—and fear, for *Her*.

They beat at him with their little green fins. Their coronals blazed, hot angry splashes of colored flame against the dark water. They wrenched at the net, tore at it, beating their membranes like wings against the rising current.

Lundy was a solid, muscular little guy. He snarled and fought for the net like a wolf over a yearling lamb. He lost it anyway. He fell on his face under a small mountain of churning man-things and lay gasping for the breath they

knocked out of him, thankful for the vac-suit that saved him from being crushed flat.

He watched them take the net. They clustered around it in a globe like a swarm of bees, rolling around in the moving water. Their golden eyes had a terrible stricken look.

They couldn't open the net. Lundy had drawn it tight and fastened it, and they didn't have fingers. They stroked and pawed it with their fins, but they couldn't let *Her* out.

Lundy got up on his hands and knees. The current quickened. It roared down between the broken towers like a black wind and took the swarm of man-things with it, still clutching the net.

And then The Others came.

IV

LUNDY SAW THEM A LONG WAY OFF. For a moment he didn't believe it. He thought they must be shadows cast by the fitful glare of the fissure. He braced himself against a building and stood watching.

Stood watching, and then seeing as the rushing current brought them closer. He didn't move, except to lift his jaw a little trying to breathe. He simply stood, cold as a dead man's feet and just as numb.

They looked something like the giant rays he'd seen back on Earth, only they were plants. Great sleek bulbs of kelp with their leaves spread like wings to the current. Their long teardrop bodies ended in a flange like a fishtail that served as a rudder and they had tentacles for arms.

They were colored a deep red-brown like dried blood. The golden flare of the fissure made their cold eyes gleam. It showed their round mouth-holes full of sharp hairspines, and the stinging deadly cups on the undersides of their huge tentacles.

Those arms were long enough and tough enough to pierce even the fabric of a vac-suit. Lundy didn't know whether they ate flesh or not, but it didn't matter. He wouldn't care, after he'd been slapped with one of those tentacles.

The net with *Her* in it was getting away from him, and The Others were coming down on top of him. Even if he'd wanted to quit his job right then there wasn't any place to hide in these ruined, doorless buildings.

Lundy shot his suit full of precious oxygen and added himself to the creatures riding that black current to hell.

It swept him like a bubble between the dead towers, but not fast enough. He wasn't very far ahead of the kelp-things. He tried to swim, to make himself go faster, but it was like racing an oared dinghy against a fleet of sixteen-meter sloops with everything set.

He could see the cluster of plant-men ahead of him. They hadn't changed position. They rolled and tumbled in the water, using a lot of the forward push to go around with, so that Lundy was able to overhaul them.

But not fast enough. Not nearly fast enough.

The hell of it was he couldn't see anything to do if he got there. The net was way inside the globe. They weren't going to let him take it away. And if he did, what would it get anybody? They'd still follow *Her*, without sense enough to run away from the kelp-beasts.

Unless . . .

It hit Lundy all of a sudden. A hope, a solution. Hit him neatly as the leading kelp-thing climbed up on his heels and brought its leaf-wings in around him, hard.

Lundy let go an animal howl of fear and kicked wildly, shooting more air into his suit. He went up fast, and the wings grazed his boots but didn't quite catch him. Lundy rolled over and fed the thing a full charge out of his blaster, right through the eye.

It began to thrash and flounder like a shot bird. The ones

coming right behind it got tangled up with it and then stopped to eat. Pretty soon there were a lot of them tumbling around it and fighting like a flock of gulls over a fish. Lundy swam furiously, cursing the clumsy suit.

There were a lot of the things that hadn't stopped, and the ones that had wouldn't stay long. Lundy kicked and strained and sweated. He was scared. He had the wind up so hard it was blowing his guts out, and it was like swimming in a nightmare, where you're tied.

The current seemed to move faster up where he was now. He gathered his thoughts into a tight beam and threw them into the heart of the cluster of plant-men, at the creature in the net.

I can free you. I'm the only one that can.

A voice answered him, inside his mind. The voice he had heard once before, back in the cabin of the wrecked flier. A voice as sweet and small as Pan-pipes calling on the Hills of Fay.

I know. My thought crossed yours. . . . The elfin voice broke suddenly, almost on a gasp of pain. Very faintly, Lundy heard:

Heavy! Heavy! I am slow. . . .

A longing for something beyond his experience stabbed Lundy like the cry of a frightened child. And then the globe of man-things burst apart as though a giant wind had struck them.

Lundy watched them wake up, out of their dream.

She had vanished, and now they didn't know why they were here or what they were doing. They had a heart-shaking memory of some beauty they couldn't touch, and that was all. They were lost, and frightened.

Then they saw The Others.

It was as though someone had hit them a stunning blow with his fist. They hung motionless, swept along by the current, staring back with dazed golden eyes. Their brilliant

petals curled inward and vanished, and the green of their bodies dulled almost to black.

The kelp-beasts spread their wings wide and rushed toward them like great dark birds. And up ahead, under the sullen golden glare, Lundy saw the distant buildings of the colony. Some of the doors were still open, with knots of tiny figures waiting beside them.

Lundy was still a little ahead of the kelp-things. He grabbed up the floating net and hooked it to his belt, and then steered himself clumsily toward a broken tower jutting up to his right.

He hurled a wild telepathic shout at the plant-men, trying to make them turn and run, telling them that he'd hold off The Others. They were too scared to hear him. He cursed them, almost crying. On the third try he got through and they came to life in a hurry, rushing away with all the speed they had.

By that time Lundy was braced on his pinnacle of stone, and the kelp-beasts were right on top of him.

He got busy with both blasters. He burned down a lot of the things. Pretty soon the water all around him was full of thrashing bodies where the living had stopped to fight over the dead. But he couldn't get them all, and a few got by him.

Almost without turning his head he could see the huge red bird-shapes overhauling stragglers, wrapping them in broad wings, and then lying quiet in the rush of the current, feeding.

They kept the doors, open, those little woman-things. They waited until the last of their mates came home, and then slammed the golden panels on the blunt noses of the kelp-things. Not many of the little men were lost. Only a few small wives would hide their petals and wear their sad blue-grey. Lundy felt good about that.

It was nice he felt good about something, because Old Mr. Grim was climbing right up on Lundy's shoulders, showing

his teeth. The kelp-beasts had finally found out who was hurting them. Also, now, Lundy was the only food in sight.

They were ganging up for a rush, wheeling and side-slipping in the spate of black water. Lundy got two more, and then one blaster charge fizzled out, and right after it the other one became dull.

Lundy stood alone on his broken tower and watched death sweep in around him. And the sweet elfin voice spoke out of the net:

Let me free. Let me free!

Lundy set his jaw tight and did the only thing he could think of. He deflated his vac-suit and jumped, plunging down into the black depths of the ruined building.

The kelp-things folded their leaves back like the wings of a diving bird and came down after him, using their tails for power.

Fitful flares of light came through broken walls and window openings. Lundy went down a long way. He didn't have to bother about stairs. The quakes had knocked most of the floors out.

The kelp-things followed him. Their long sinuous bodies were maneuverable as a shark's, and they were fast.

And all the time the little voice cried in his mind, asking for freedom.

Lundy hit bottom.

The walls were fairly solid down here, and it was dark, and the place was choked with rubble. Things got a little confused. Lundy's helmet light was shot, and he wouldn't have used it anyway because it would have guided the hunters.

He felt them, swirling and darting around him. He ran, to no place in particular. The broken stones tripped him. Three times great sinewy bodies brushed him, knocking him spinning, but they couldn't quite find him in the darkness, chiefly because they got in each other's way.

Lundy fell through suddenly into a great hall, lying beside whatever room he had been in and a little below it. It was hardly damaged. Golden doors stood open to the water, and there was plenty of light.

Plenty of light for Lundy to see some more of the kelp-beasts poking hopeful faces in, and plenty of light for them to see Lundy.

The elfin voice called, *Let me out! Let me out!*

Lundy didn't have breath enough left to curse. He turned and ran, and the kelp-beasts gave a lazy flirt of their tails and caught up with him in the first thirty feet. They almost laughed in his face.

The only thing that saved Lundy was that when they opened their leaf-wings to take him they interfered with each other. It slowed them, just for a moment. Just long enough for Lundy to see the door.

A little door of black stone with no carving on it, standing half-open on a golden pivot, about ten feet away.

Lundy made for it. He dodged out from under one huge swooping wing, made a wild leap that almost tore him apart, and grabbed the edge of the door with his hands, doubling up and pulling.

A tentacle tip struck his feet. His lead boots hit the floor, and for a minute he thought his legs were broken. But the surge of water the blow made helped to carry him in through the narrow opening.

Half a dozen blunt red-brown heads tried to come through after him, and were stopped. Lundy was down on his hands and knees. He was trying to breathe, but somebody had put a heavy building on his chest. Also, it was getting hard to see anything.

He crawled over and put his shoulder against the door and pushed. It wouldn't budge. The building had settled and jammed the pivot for keeps. Even the butting kelp-things couldn't jar it.

But they kept on trying. Lundy crawled away. After a while some of the weight went off his chest and he could see better.

A shaft of fitful golden light shot in through a crack about ten feet above him. A small crack, not even big enough to let a baby in and out. It was the only opening other than the door.

The room was small, too. The stone walls were dead black, without ornament or carving, except on the rear wall.

There was a square block of jet there, about eight feet long by four wide, hollowed in a peculiar and unpleasantly suggestive fashion. Above it there was a single huge ruby set in the stone, burning red like a foretaste of hell fire.

Lundy had seen similar small chambers in old cities still on dry land. They were where men had gone to die for crimes against society and the gods.

Lundy looked at the hungry monsters pushing at the immovable door and laughed. There was no particular humor in it. He fired his last shot, and sat down.

The brutes might go away sometime, maybe. But unless they went within a very few minutes, it wasn't going to matter. Lundy's oxygen was getting low, and it was still a long way to the coast.

The voice from the net cried out, *Let me free!*

"The hell with you," said Lundy. He was tired. He was so tired he didn't care much whether he lived or died.

He made sure the net was fast to his belt, and tightly closed.

"If I live, you go back to Vhia with me. If I die—well, you won't be able to hurt anybody again. There'll be one less devil loose on Venus."

Free! Free! Free! I must be free! This heavy weight. . . .

"Sure. Free to lead guys like Farrell into going crazy, and leaving their wives and kids. Free to kill. . . ." He looked with sultry eyes at the net. "Jackie Smith was my pal. You

think I'd let you go? You think anything you could do would make me let you go?"

Then he saw her.

Right through the net, as though the metal mesh was cellophane. She crouched there in his lap, a tiny thing less than two feet high, doubled over her knees. The curve of her back was something an angel had carved out of a whisp of warm, pearl-pink cloud.

V

LUNDY BROKE INTO A TREMBLING sweat. He shut his eyes. It didn't matter. He saw her. He couldn't help seeing her. He tried to fight his mind, but he was tired. . . .

Her hair hid most of her. It had black night in it, and moonbeams, and glints of fire like a humming-bird's breast. Hair you dream about. Hair you could smother yourself in, and die happy.

She raised her head slowly, letting the veil of warm darkness fall away from her. Her eyes were shadowed, hidden under thick lashes. She raised her hands to Lundy, like a child praying.

But she wasn't a child. She was a woman, naked as a pearl, and so lovely that Lundy sobbed with it, in shivering ecstasy.

"No," he said hoarsely. "No. No!"

She held her arms up to be free, and didn't move.

Lundy tore the net loose from his belt and flung it on the altar block. He got up and went lurching to the door, but the kelp-things were still there, still hungry. He sat down again, in a corner as far away from both places as he could get, and took some benzedrine.

It was the wrong thing to do. He'd about reached his limit. It made him lightheaded. He couldn't fight her, couldn't

shut her out. She knelt on the altar with her hands stretched out to him, and a shaft of golden light falling on her like something in a church.

"Open your eyes," he said. "Open your eyes and look at me."

Let me free. Let me free!

Freedom Lundy didn't know anything about. The freedom of outer space, with the whole Milky Way to play in and nothing to hold you back. And with the longing, fear. A blind, stricken terror. . . .

"No!" Lundy said.

Things got dark for Lundy. Presently he found himself at the altar block, fumbling at the net.

He wrenched away and went stumbling back to his corner. He was twitching all over like a frightened dog.

"Why do you want to do it? Why do you have to torture me—drive them crazy for something they can't have—kill them?"

Torture? Crazy? Kill? I don't understand. They worship me. It is pleasant to be worshiped.

"Pleasant?" Lundy was yelling aloud, and didn't know it. "Pleasant, damn you! So you kill a good guy like Farrell, and drown Jackie Smith. . . ."

Kill? Wait—give me the thought again. . . .

Something inside Lundy turned cold and still, holding its breath. He sent the thought again. Death. Cessation. Silence, and the dark.

The tiny glowing figure on the black stone bent over its knees again, and it was sadder than a seabird's cry at sunset.

So will I be soon. So will all of us. Why did this planet take us out of space? The weight, the pressure breaks and crushes us, and we can't get free. In space there was no death, but now we die. . . .

Lundy stood quite still. The blood beat like drums in his temples.

"You mean that all you creatures out of space are dying? That the—the madness will stop of itself?"

Soon. Very soon. There was no death in space! There was no pain! We didn't know about them. Everything here was new, to be tasted and played with. We didn't know. . . .

"Hell!" said Lundy, and looked at the creatures beating at the crack of the stone door. He sat down.

You, too, will die.

Lundy raised his head slowly. His eyes had a terrible brightness.

"You like to be worshiped," he whispered. "Would you like to be worshiped after you die? Would you like to be remembered always as something good and beautiful—a goddess?"

That would be better than to be forgotten.

"Will you do what I ask of you, then? You can save my life, if you will. You can save the lives of a lot of those little flower-people. I'll see to it that everyone knows your true story. Now you're hated and feared, but after that you'll be loved."

Will you let me free of this net?

"If you promise to do what I ask?"

I would rather die at least free of this net. The tiny figure trembled and shook back the veil of dark hair. *Hurry. Tell me. . . .*

"Lead these creatures away from the door. Lead all of them in the city away, to the fire in the mountain where they'll be destroyed."

They will worship me. It is better than dying in a net. I promise.

Lundy got up and went to the altar. His feet were not steady. His hands were not steady, either, untying the net. Sweat ran in his eyes. She didn't have to keep her promise. She didn't have to. . . .

The net fell away. She stood up on her tiny pink feet.

Slowly, like a swirl of mist straightening in a little breeze. She threw her head back and smiled. Her mouth was red and sulky, her teeth whiter than new snow. Her lowered lids had faint blue shadows traced on them.

She began to grow, in the golden shaft of light, like a pillar of cloud rising toward the sun. Lundy's heart stood still. The clear gleam of her skin, the line of her throat and her young breasts, the supple turn of her flank and thigh. . . .

You worship me, too.

Lundy stepped back, two lurching steps. "I worship you," he whispered. "Let me see your eyes."

She smiled and turned her head away. She stepped off the altar block, floating past him through the black water. A dream-thing, without weight or substance, and more desirable than all the women Lundy had seen in his life or his dreams.

He followed her, staggering. He tried to catch her. "Open your eyes! Please open your eyes!"

She floated on, through the crack of the stone door. The kelp-things didn't see her. All they saw was Lundy coming toward them.

"Open your eyes!"

She turned, then, just before Lundy had stepped out to death in the hall beyond. He stopped, and watched her raise her shadowed lids.

He screamed, just once, and fell forward onto the black floor.

He never knew how long he lay there. It couldn't have been long in time, because he still had barely enough oxygen to make it to the coast when he came to. The kelp-beasts were gone.

But the time to Lundy was an eternity—an eternity he came out of with whitened hair and bitter lines around his mouth, and a sadness that never left his eyes.

He'd only had his dream a little while. A few brief moments, already shadowed by death. His mind was drugged

and tired, and didn't feel things as deeply and clearly as it might. That was all that saved him.

But he knew what Jackie Smith saw before he drowned. He knew why men had died or gone mad forever, when they looked into the eyes of their dream, and by looking, destroyed it.

Because, behind those shadowed, perfect lids, there was—*Nothing.*

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