

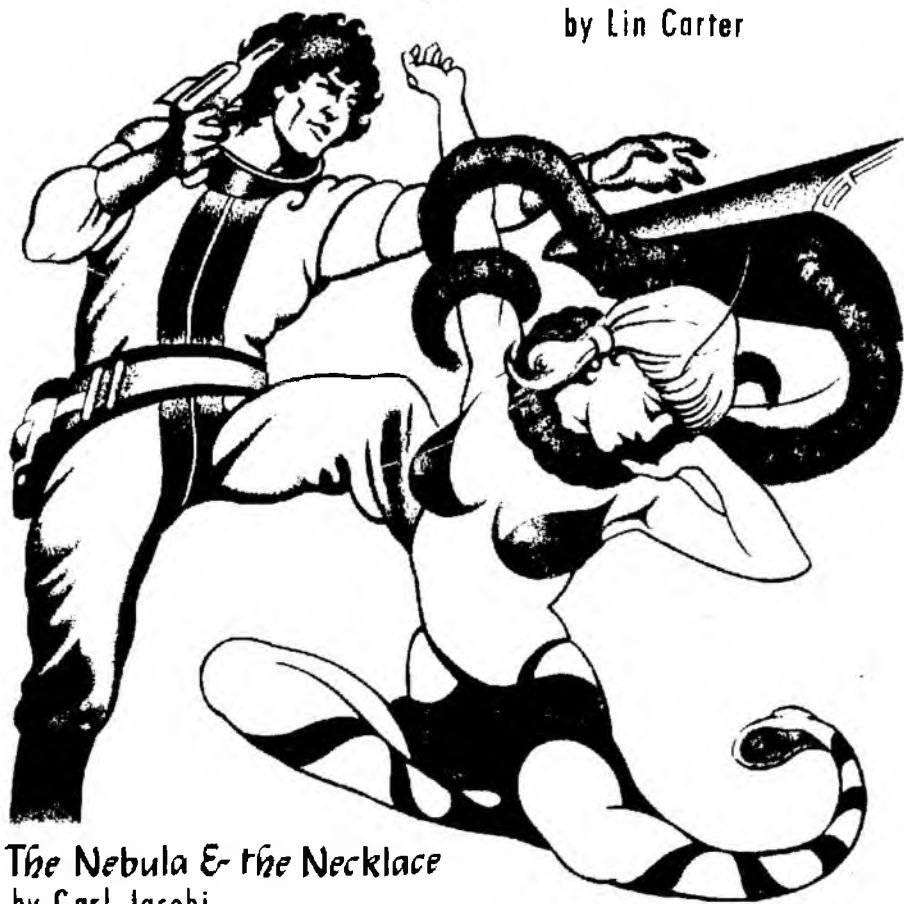
No. 3

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... Tales of Scientifiction

ASTRO- Adventures

Star Pirate Returns in ~~GHOSTS~~ of ~~GANYMEDE~~
by Lin Carter



The Nebula & the Necklace
by Carl Jacobi

Sauce for the Gander by Frank Belknap Long

... Tales of Scientifiction

The logo for 'ASTRO-Adventures' features the word 'ASTRO-' in a large, bold, italicized sans-serif font, followed by a stylized rocket ship graphic. The rocket is pointed to the right with motion lines behind it. Below the rocket, the word 'Adventures' is written in a smaller, elegant script font.

ASTRO- Adventures

Number Three

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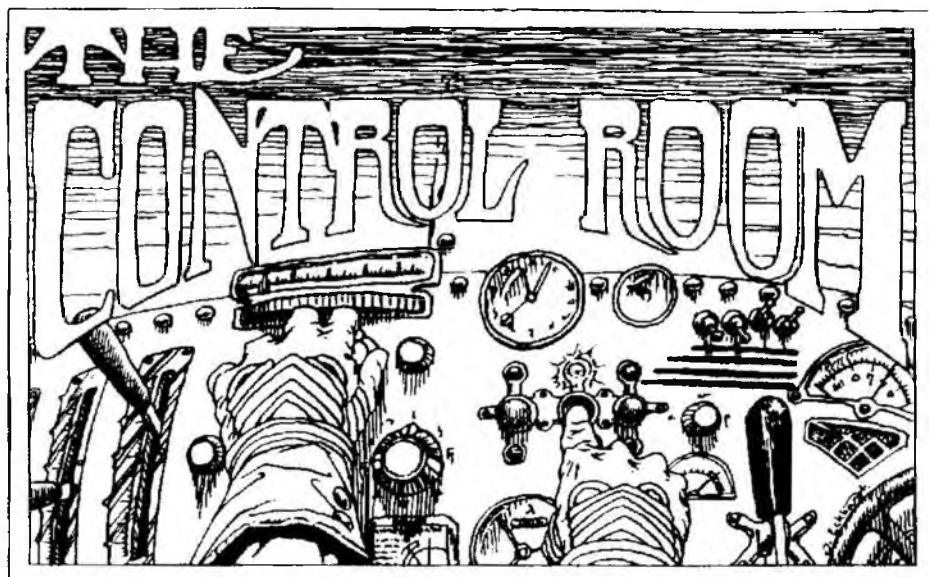
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--Do you copy? Do you copy?--

Captain Astro, your cosmic commander here, ready to take you on a hyper-space leap into uncharted quadrants of the imagination! This issue's fictional gems are rarer than the diamond tusks of the three-eyed mammoths of Mercury!

That rocketing rogue Star Pirate and his Venusian man Friday Phath are back facing planetary perils aplenty in "Ghosts of Ganymede" by Lin Carter, extraterrestrial extrovert extraordinaire!

Frank Belknap Long, whose tales of ultratellurian adventure have fascinated readers for nigh onto seven (count 'em) decades, returns to the power-pulsating pages of Astro-Adventures with "Sauce for the Gander," in which Long lays bare

some of the strange social mores that might evolve alongside the super-space-age technology of the future.

Cosmonaut Carl Jacobi brings back his dazzling devil-may-care hero-villain the Nebula in a galactically good adventure-mystery called "The Nebula and the Necklace," a sequel to his "Enter the Nebula" (Planet Stories, June-August 1946) written in 1946, but appearing here for the first time.

Finally, Newcomer Pierre Comtois spins a space-spanning yarn sure to delight all you planetary pulpsters. It's called "Brain-Slaves of the Asteroid Belt." Do you dare join his astronomical expedition into extremity? We sure hope so!

Captain Astro



GHOSTS OF GANYMEDE

by Lin Carter

Star Pirate fights a phantom killer!

1. Mystery Moon

Meteor miners live a hard, lonely life. In their little cargo tugs they lurk about the outer precincts of the atmospheres of the giant planets, Jupiter or Saturn, waiting for the immensely powerful gravity fields of those enormous worlds to draw into their embrace the countless swarms of meteors that wander endlessly in the void.

When this occurs, the miners are glued to their 'scopes. Meteors largely composed of ice or frozen methane or stone behave differently than do those with cores of heavy

metals, which the miners prize. And when they observe meteors which fall shrieking into the upper atmosphere of one of the giant worlds, fluttering in that characteristic manner, they know they have their prize.

Then comes the long, dangerous, often futile struggle to lock their grappling beams on the metal meteors, as their stubborn little tugs battle grimly against the measureless power of the giant planet's gravitational field. More than one little tug has lost that struggle, and fallen to a fiery doom . . .

The little two-man tug, Sweet Sue, registered to Big Bill Barlow

and his scrawny sidekick, Scotty McGuire, had been five weeks circling the ochre-banded orb of giant Jupiter, and had taken nothing but some tungsten and copper ore, when they spotted the uncharted moon. That the tiny worldlet had hitherto gone unnoticed by astronomers was hardly surprising. The minuscule planetoid was scarcely more than half-a-mile long . . . but what Big Bill saw in the 'scope alerted him to the chance of a real find.

"Scotty!" the big, red-faced man boomed. "Looky here! That moonlet's got an atmosphere, and vegetation of some sort--see!"

The diminutive little Scotsman limped over to the twin 'scope and peered within. There could be no doubt about it--and any kind of an atmosphere on a moonlet so small as this meant a core of heavy, very heavy metal.

And heavy metals were valuable.

"Let's take 'er down, Bill, and check 'er out," suggested Scotty. His huge partner agreed, and the battered and rusty little space tug settled to the surface of the mysterious moon.

The two suited up before leaving their vessel. Atmosphere or no atmosphere, they had not survived as long as they had in their hard and dangerous profession by taking foolish risks. Outside, their space boots squealed and crunched in the queer pink moss and lavender lichens that clung to the moist soil.

All was deathly still. The weird scene was flooded by the amber radiance of Jupiter, whose ochre-banded shield filled almost all the visible sky. They had come down in a small clearing. To all sides loomed strange fungoid growths like enormous mushrooms, whose umbrella-like heads nodded to the impulse of unheard and unfelt winds. The spongy boles of these fungus-trees were pale or creamy or tan, striped or splotched with amazing scarlet, canary, indigo, purple. Neither of the two miners

had ever seen or heard of the like.

Bill and Scotty unlimbered and set up the drill on its sturdy tripod. The little Scotsman peered around at the uncanny scene; his superstitious Celtic blood liked not at all this nameless moon, and he yearned to be gone.

Big Bill also felt the strange allure of the mystery moon. Straightening, he glanced about.

"Lissen, Scotty, you take some core samples, okay? I'm gonna have a look around and see what's to be seen. You never know what a funny place like this could hold . . ."

"Okay, Bill, but you be careful, now," warned the Scotsman. The big man strode off and was soon lost to view among the tall stalks of the fungus forest. The sandy-haired Scotsman busied himself with the drill.

Suddenly a muffled exclamation sounded over the intercom that linked the suits of the two miners.

"Well, for th' luvva--hey, Scotty! Drop what you're doin' and c'mere--if this don't beat all!" boomed the big man's voice, almost deafening his partner.

"On my way, Bill!" snapped Scotty, sprinting for the fungus forest and clawing one of his heavy proton needles clear of its worn leather holster as he ran.

2. Seven Black Pearls

In the back-alleys behind the big spaceport on Ganymede, moon of Jupiter, stands a two-storey edifice whose illusion-sign proclaims it to be "The Spaceman's Rest."

Although it did not noticeably differ in any particular way from any of the other dozen or so saloons that lined the narrow dirt alley, it was the favorite rendezvous of Big Bill Barlow and Scotty McGuire, whenever they happened to be in port between voyages. The reason for their giving the Spaceman's Rest their exclusive custom may perhaps lie in the

fact that, somehow or other, the owner and bartender always managed to have on hand (although at hefty prices) genuine Scotch whiskey imported all the way from earth. And this beverage was favored by both Big Bill and Scotty.

They had arrived in parking orbit above Ganymede that morning, wasted no time in selling their meagre claim of copper and tungsten ore to the first-comers, and had taken their tiny gig down to the spaceport for a night of celebration. As they entered the Spaceman's Rest, they found the joint crowded with other meteor miners and crewmen from various freighters--even a handful of tourists out for a night of slumming. The saloon was thronged with ruddy-faced, burly Jovians, slim, pale-skinned Venusians, Mercurians, dark as mahogany, with eyes like gold coins, and the usual sprinkling of Earthlings in their usual variety of shapes, sizes and colors.

Room was swiftly made for Big Bill Barlow and his treckle-faced little sidekick at one long table in front of the fire, for the two miners were favorites here. Although noisy and boisterous when in his cups, Bill never got into brawls in the bar and usually stood drinks for everybody in sight, so long as he still had a few credits in his pocket. The bartender and owner of the saloon, a fat, moon-faced, yellow-skinned Uranian named Quarl, brought a pitcher of water and a bottle of good, well-aged Earth Scotch over to their table, and two tumblers.

In no time, Bill was busy regaling some of his friends with the tale of their discovery of the uncharted moonlet of Jupiter, and of the weird treasure that it had held.

"... And there it was, mates," rumbled Big Bill, waving his heavy hands expansively, "buried in them weird mushroom jungles, for the Lord on'y knows how many millions of years!"

He described the view that had greeted him on the other side of the fungus forest, where a structure of black basalt protruded from the loam of the nameless moonlet, half-overgrown with uncanny pink moss. There were few who did not know that it was theorized that the Asteroid Belt--and many of the moons of Jupiter--were actually fragments of a shattered planet, the mysterious "Aster," torn asunder aeons before in a tug of war between the gravitational forces of the giants, Jupiter and Saturn, and the mighty Sun. And that some weird form of intelligent life had inhabited the Lost Planet was also no secret, for more than a few asteroids and moons bore the enigmatic ruins of this forgotten race.

Barlow told his breathless audience how he had pried open the sealed stone vault, discovering naught within but a metal box of unknown and nameless alloy, which, when forced open, revealed seven strange, unearthly stones--

One of these he had brought with him, and now displayed it solemnly on his palm. The miners and spacemen gaped, staring avidly at the mystery jewel, which was unlike anything they had ever seen before.

It was a perfect sphere, larger than a man's thumb, and black as night itself, but with a queer bloom upon it like that upon the skin of a purple grape. Many of those present had heard of black pearls--but never of one as huge or as dark as this...

"And there are seven in all, mates," breathed Big Bill Barlow, staring down at the dark shape which shimmered in his grasp. "Seven black pearls..."

"And each one worth a fortune, I'll wager," muttered the fat bartender, Quarl. "I've heard of unknown gems like this, found in the hearts of meteors or the soil of far-off worlds and moons, going for half a million credits each to the

big jewellers on mars . . . say, in Syrtis Port, or Propontis, or Sun Lake . . ."

"Half a million . . ." breathed someone in the crowd.

"Then my partner and I are rich," grinned Big Bill, wrapping one huge arm around the skinny shoulders of the Scotchman. "Rich . . . we can retire from space, and live at ease like gentlemen on one of them pleasure moons . . . 'cause with Scotty an' me, it's always been half an' half, an' always will be . . ."

In the rear of the saloon, half-hidden in a booth which lay in the shadow of a stone pillar, two men sat hunched over the remnants of their meal and half-empty winecups, listening to the loud voice of the meteor miner.

One was a slender, milk-pale Venusian, with the pink eyes and hairless pate of his kind. The other was a tall, long-legged, rangy, broad-shouldered and lean-hipped Earthling who wore leathern space-boots and a drab one-piece zipper suit of gray synthetic. He was wrapped in a gray wool hooded cloak, whose cowl was drawn up around his face, perhaps to conceal features already a bit too well known in these parts.

He had a merry, space-tanned, clean-shaven face, with an impish grin, and his eyes were sparkling green with mischief under an unruly mop of red curls.

They called him Star Pirate.

3. Death by Ghostly Hands

Big Bill Barlow bought round after round of drinks for his fellow spacemen and miners in the saloon, including the two strangers in the back booth. The more he drank, the happier and noisier he got, boasting of the high and glorious days to come when he and Scotty would be living it up in Luna City or Paris or anywhere else in the System they

cared to travel--maybe in their private space yacht, with girl stewards and manicurists and the choicest wines and finest gourmet chefs, and

* * *

Eventually, husky Quarl helped little Scotty guide the faltering footsteps of the stumbling giant up the steep stairs to the little green room on the second floor where the two miners often slept off their night's carousal at the Spaceman's Rest, at the end of a long and usually successful voyage.

Scotty put his snoring friend to bed and fell into bed himself.

Below, spacemen marvelled over Barlow's remarkable discovery, and enviously vied with each other in estimating the enormous value of the seven strange black gems the big man had discovered in the age-old Asterian sepulchre--or whatever it was.

As for Star Pirate and his Venusian sidekick, Phath, they finished their wine, and had a cup of strong black coffee, before going back to their ship. The two space adventurers were returning to their secret base in the Belt after a voyage to one of the moons of Uranus, where they had been instrumental in frustrating the plans of a brilliant but deranged scientist who had attempted to use his formidable intelligence and technical wizardry to subjugate bands of innocent natives to his own unscrupulous ends. On their way back to Haven, as Star's hidden headquarters was called, they had stopped off briefly here at Gany-mede to replace worn receptor coils with new ones aboard their trim little speedster, the Jolly Roger.

The two had just reached the door of the saloon and were about to venture out into the dark alleyway beyond, when they were frozen in their tracks by a screech of unearthly horror sounding from one of the little rooms above--

"Bill!--Bill! Curse you, get off him, you fiend! Oh, Gawd help

me! Help me, somebody--the black ghost is murderin' me partner--!"

A bartender is always the soberest, most alert man in any saloon--since he's working, not drinking, unlike everyone else in the place. So it was not surprising that the echoes of Scotty McGuire's anguished plea for assistance had barely died away before the huge and hefty Uranian had vaulted over the bar, a stout cudgel clasped in one thick-fingered hand, and went charging up the steep wooden stair to the rooms above.

And, since they were already on their feet, it was also no wonder that Star Pirate and his Venusian sidekick, Phath, were on his very heels, their proton needles in their hands, ready for trouble.

They found the scrawny little Scotsman crouched over the sprawled corpse of his giant friend, babbling and trying to snuffle back the tears that flowed down his freckled cheeks.

"--Bill, Bill! Speak to me, ol' pal! Say you ain't croaked--that shadow-devil didn't kill yer.--Bill!"

But Scotty's tears were useless. The big, brawny Earthling miner was stone dead. While Quarl led the diminutive prospector downstairs for a slug of brandy, Star swiftly examined the body. As far as could be told by eye alone, Barlow had been strangled . . . but, curiously, no marks were to be found upon his throat. At least, no marks that could have been made by human hands . . . there was only one thick, continuous bruise, purpling now in the crushed flesh and muscle . . . a belt-like mark, such as might have been made by a band of living steel, tightening with frightful power about the dead man's throat!

"By Yakdar's brazen backside," whispered the Venusian feelingly, "what on Earth, or off it, did this thing, chief?" Phath came from a hard school and had seen sudden death--aye, and slow and lingering death--in all its many forms. But never

had he seen anything remotely like this before.

The dead man's features were contorted into an expression of such unbelieving horror that it sent a chill of cold fear traveling up the spine of the lithe Venusian.

"I'd like to know the answer to that question myself," grunted Star Pirate. And his face was hard, his eyes wary and watchful, and his hand hovered only inches from the worn butt of his weapon.

4. Branigan Investigates

While the Jovian moon had its own constabulary, of course, the spaceport and its precincts happened to be under the direct authority of the Space Patrol, so it was a veteran Patrol officer who was dispatched to investigate the murder of Big Bill Barlow--for that it was obviously murder no one could doubt.

This officer was a granite-jawed man in his middle years, with thin disapproving lips and cold, colorless eyes. He was lean and trim, his spare figure taut in the dead-black tunic and leggings of the Patrol, and the silver crescent moon of an inspector-major gleamed on his high collar. His name was Branigan, and, as it happened, he and Star were rivals from the days of old.

When the rangy redhead had been a cunning and elusive rogue back in the wild and reckless days of his outlawry, it had been Branigan's bad luck to be assigned the task of bringing Star to justice. But the mischievous young daredevil had outsmarted him at every twist and turn, leaving him to writhe in impotent fury as Star Pirate vanished into the void with the loot from his most recent caper.

These things rankle in a lawman's soul; and even in these later days, when Star had received a full pardon for his crimes from a grateful System government for a favor done freely,

Branigan still held a grudge against the impudent youth who had dared make such mock of him in the old days. Hence it came as no surprise to any when at the very sight of his arch-nemesis and the slim Venusian, Branigan swore by twenty space-devils, and his hard face flushed crimson.

"So, you're mixed up in this affair, are you, you sly young devil! Well, maybe this time you've just possibly outsmarted yourself, for once!" grated Branigan.

Those green eyes twinkled with innocent merriment into his own gimlet gaze. "Doubt it, Branigan," Star drawled with a wry grin. "Thirty customers will tell you that Phath and I were nearly out of the door when McGuire called out from the floor above that his partner was being murdered by a 'black ghost'--whatever he meant by that."

"He's right," rumbled the moon-faced Uranian. "And I was the first one in the room, just before these two." In a sober voice and without wasting words the bartender told how he had found the babbling little Scotsman crouched tearfully over the corpse of his partner. A few quick questions from Branigan brought out the whole story--the mystery moon, the secret tomb, the treasure of black pearls.

"What happened to the gem Barlow was flashing around?" demanded the inspector. Quarl shrugged, his wide moon yellow face wearing a baffled expression.

"Search me, inspector! It's--it's gone!"

"Aye," barked Branigan gruffly. "Search you I will, and everybody else on the scene--starting with you, Pirate!"

"Search away," grinned the red-head. "But please be careful around the ribs--I'm awfully ticklish!"

Branigan had brought with him two husky ratings of the Port patrol. Together they made short work of searching the patrons of the Space-

man's Rest, and the murder room. They found nothing of consequence: in particular, they did not find the mysterious black pearl the two miners had found in space.

When they were done, and Branigan grudgingly permitted the now-sobered patrons to leave the saloon in the dim pink light of morning, Star Pirate took him aside.

"Have you come to any conclusion as yet, or are you as baffled by all this as I am?" asked Star.

The inspector smirked nastily.

"What, the great Star Pirate--mystified? Well, I'm not. It's open and shut. Nothing to it; easiest case I ever cracked," he said in tones redolent of self-satisfaction.

"Pray enlighten me, then," murmured Star politely.

"When you're confronted with a case of murder, look for motive," the inspector said sententiously. "Who profits most by the man's death? His partner, of course, McGuire--"

"Not before the law," said Star instantly. "Barlow has a niece who keeps house for the two men. They have a little shack out in the back-country, where they rest up between voyages and raise a small crop of vegetables. As Barlow's only heir, the girl inherits everything he leaves. The fifty-fifty agreement between the two partners was only verbal, a mutual agreement, and was to be terminated by the death of either one of them. Not that Miss Barlow won't, most likely, be extremely generous with McGuire, who has been as much an uncle to her as Barlow himself ever was."

Branigan's mouth was hanging open. He noticed the fact, and closed it. "H-how did you . . . latch onto all this?" he asked.

"Easy," Star grinned. "I talked to McGuire."

Branigan purpled, then, restraining his temper with a visible effort, he growled, "Those pearls were taken on a mining trip, and it'll be a pretty problem for the courts to

decide whether they're Barlow's private property or belonged to both men, since they shared the proceeds from their mining trips equally. But that's for the courts to worry about--me, I look for motive, then for opportunity. McGuire had both--nobody else was in the room when you and your web-footed sidekick and this fat-faced Uranian came busting in, was there?"

"Nobody . . . that I could see," mused Star Pirate thoughtfully.

Branigan smirked and spread his hard hands. "Then there it is, smart guy! It had to be McGuire . . . take him away, boys."

Star and Phath and the yellow-skinned bartender stood in silence as the Patrol squad manacled a pale and muttering Scotty McGuire and led him away.

They said nothing because there was really nothing to say.

5. The Mystery Deepens

The medical examiner who performed the official autopsy on the body of Big Bill Barlow was a gaunt, gloomy-faced Mercurian with teak-dark skin and eyes like hot gold coins. He received Star Pirate and the Venusian in a cramped and dusty, airless little cubicle of an office. The desk was buried under a snowfall of papers and the windowpane so fogged by dust and grime that you could not have told by eye alone whether it was day or night outside. Star came to the point at once, as he had apparently interrupted the doctor during his lunch hour.

"Yep, strangled," grunted the medical examiner, munching juicily on a ham sandwich. "Powerful feller, the murderer--dang powerful. Feller's throat was literally crushed."

"By human hands?" inquired Star. The doctor, whose name was Hurgo, stared meditatively at a faded, ten-year-old calendar which hung on the wall, chewing on a succulent slice of pickle.

"Jovian might of done it," he said at last. "Heavy gravity planet like Jupiter makes 'em stronger than other fellers. But I doubt it. The victim--what's his name? Barlow?--was a big man, too; thick neck like a bull. And from the way the muscles of his throat were mashed and mangled --" here he paused to pick his teeth with a sliver of wood, while Phath looked sickly out of the bleared window and began to wish he had waited in the dirty lobby below--"mashed and mangled, I say . . . nope, not even a Jovian could have done it."

"With a strangling cord? A rope, maybe?" pressed Star Pirate keenly. The coroner blinked bland gold eyes at him, and glugged down a swig of cold black coffee into which he first poured a large and liberal slug of Mercurian brandy.

"You're think' mebbe this Barlow feller was garrotted, heh?" he guessed shrewdly. "Not a chance, young feller . . . it would have taken a woven-steel hawser and a power-winch to have done such a job on Barlow's throat. Believe me!"

When the two adventurers got downstairs, Phath took a deep breath of fresh air and felt the minor surge of sickness pass. He wondered--but only briefly--whatever in the name of thirty space-devils possessed a man, to make him wish to become a coroner and spend his time messing around with cadavers.

"Where now, chief?" he inquired somewhat more cheerfully.

"Now we find ourselves a lawyer," said the rangy redhead, "and post bail for Scotty McGuire."

The milky-skinned Venusian examined his comrade with an albino-pink gaze. "You don't figure Scotty did this guy Barlow in, then, right?"

"Of course not," scoffed Star. "Barlow was three times McGuire's weight, with hands like a couple of hams and biceps as thick as most men's thighs. Even dead drunk, he could have mopped the floor with three Scotty's. Oh, I've no doubt the wiry little Scotsman can hold

his own in a barroom brawl, but-- did you see his hands? Small as a woman's. It is not physically possible that he inflicted such wounds with those hands as were found on Barlow's throat . . . you remember what Dr. Hurgo said . . . 'mashed and mangled' . . ."

Phath looked sick, swallowed with difficulty, and suggested they change the subject. Star grinned to himself and restrained from making the quip he longed to make.

Three days later, their second task completed, they called the mechanic at the field, learned their ship was ready. Then, after a quick lunch at the Spaceport Cafe, they went to the field, where the Jolly Roger, newly outfitted with her sparkling fresh copper receptor coils, awaited them; they blasted off and headed south across the many miles and miles of thick, quaint jungles of curious trees which covered most of the surface of tropic Ganymede.

The queer, tall, nodding growths of pale, flabby balsa-solt fiber were not so much trees as giant stalks of vegetable which resembled celery as much as any other earthly analog. The fibrous trunks sucked up moisture from the rich soil and converted it to nutritious tissue which the Ganymedian colonists served at table, either baked in thin, chewy cutlets, or cubed in succulent stews and ragouts, or boiled into thick, creamy soups.

The flavor, a bit too bitter for Earthlings, was mostly favored only by the colonists, and the stuff was seldom shipped off-world.

Phath set the Jolly Roger down in a small, raw clearing crudely hacked from the weird forest of pallid, nodding stalks. Here stood a small shack of prefabricated plastic panels, and a couple of small outbuildings, one of them a shed with sheet-metal sides and roof which looked to be large enough to house the Sweet Sue, and, as later came out, did in fact serve as a hangar

for the battered, rusty little two-man tug when she was resting up between space-ventures.

In the rear of the plastic shack the two caught a glimpse of a sizeable patch of cultivated soil arranged in neatly hoed rows, where grew potatoes, onions, carrots, green peppers, what looked from this distance to be lima beans, lettuce, beets and tomatoes. There were also a couple of rows of ripe golden corn, a small but heavy-laden apple tree, and a patch devoted to watermelons and canteloupes.

"Guess they do all right for themselves here," observed Phath. As chef and general factotum of Star's secret base, he grew the same fruits and vegetables, but in hothouses and hydroponics tanks, as Haven's atmosphere, temperature and supply of sunlight were not as good as those to be found here on jungle-clad Gany-mede.

The two got out of the cabin of their craft and started to walk across the raw, muddy clearing towards the crude little shack, but came to a halt when a slim figure emerged onto the little porch and showed them the glistening, brassy prong of a proton needle. The weapon was held by a slender, tanned girl in her twenties with a curly mop of honey-blond hair, a dusting of freckles across her small nubbin of a nose, and clear steady gray eyes that did not waver as she confronted the two men. She was slim, with long legs, and wore a loose, dark red sweater and tan slacks. Even in these drab garments, her figure was enticing, thought Star to himself with an appreciative gleam in his emerald eyes.

"You can stop right there," the girl said stoutly, "and turn around. Go back to your ship, get in, and take off. Can't you leave Uncle Scotty alone? He's worn out with mourning Uncle Bill's death, and I worry about his health. If you Patrol officers have to pester him

with more of your eternal questions, call us on the televisior phone!"

"I'm not a Patrol officer, Miss Barlow," Star said, "I'm the man that arranged your uncle's bail. They call me . . . Star Pirate."

The blonde girl paled, gasped, swayed for a moment, staring. Then the proton needle sagged, savered, dropped, and she looked about to faint. Star raced to help her, but the lithe and nimble Phath got there first and eased her gently to the flooring of the porch.

6. The Ghost Strikes Again

The fiery liquid in Phath's hip-flask of strong Venusian brandy proved to be a potent restorative. A swig or two of the golden fluid set the slim girl coughing, and very soon she was herself again.

"You must forgive me, please!" she said, limpid blue eyes pleading. "But the last few days have been a hellish ordeal for Uncle Scotty and me, and to . . . suddenly realize we had a friend like Star Pirate . . . well, I--I--"

Star grinned that impish grin of his, and silenced her with a lifted hand. "No need to apologize, Miss Barlow," he said. "We're here to help."

"My name is Susan," she said with a wan smile. His green eyes sparkled.

"As in Sweet Sue, I suppose?" She nodded and sat up, thanking Phath for the brandy with a nod. "Uncle Scotty is resting, but I'll have to wake him pretty soon to have his lunch. The doctor said he must keep his strength up . . . you can talk to him then."

"Fair enough," Star said cheerfully. "And the first thing I'll want to know is--where are the other six gems your uncles discovered on that uncharted moon? Branigan says they were not on the person of either man, nor in their little craft, and

that McGuire refused to reveal their hiding place. I very much need to examine the gems for myself."

"Hid 'em in the only place no one'd think to look, Mr. Star Pirate," said a weak voice from the doorway leading to one of the other rooms. "Big Bill, he put the metal box right smack in the firing chamber of Sweet Sue's cyclotron!" They turned to see the thin little Scotsman leaning against the door. He gave them a shaky grin, then came faltering over to wring Star's hand in a grateful grip.

"Clever!" murmured Star Pirate, and Sue Barlow sat her uncle down and began serving him a hot, nourishing soup, with a thick chicken sandwich and a bowl of fresh chopped salad. "No one is likely to go poking around in the middle of the atomic motor which powered the little tug."

A little while later, having retrieved the queer alloy box from its secret hiding place, the red-headed space adventurer was examining the six shimmering black pearls with a variety of cunningly miniaturized instruments he had fetched with him from his ship.

"Find anything, chief?" inquired the Venusian when he was finished. Star shrugged.

"Nothing, really," he said, rather ruefully. "The pearls have no magnetic charge, are not radioactive--outside of their unexpected weight, there's nothing odd about them except their rarity. Mineralogy knows nothing of such stones . . . only the lost Asterites mined them, I guess."

"And are they really as rare and valuable as Uncle Scotty says they are?" demanded Sue Barlow, breathlessly.

"Worth a huge fortune, I'd say," grinned the Pirate. "Enough to send you to the classiest finishing-school back on Earth, and buy you all the pretty dresses and fine jewelry any girl's heart could desire."

The two adventurers were just leaving the little shack in the forest, when the televisior chimed. It was Branigan calling for Star Pirate, on the off-chance that he happened to be there. In the ground-glass view-screen, the Patrol officer's face was grim and heavy, his expression an odd mixture of sheepishness and truculence--a combination Star had never before seen in a human countenance.

"What's up, Branigan?"

"You can tell McGuire he's out of suspicion," muttered the officer in subdued tones. "That is, unless he's anywhere about Madame Ong's Cafe . . ."

"McGuire's right here in the cabin," said Star, "where he's been during the hour or so I've been here. What happened in Madame Ong's Cafe? Another ghost-murder?"

Branigan gave him a sour look. "Should have known you'd be onto it, you young devil! But it's quite true--black, ghostly shape throttled the life out of a dancing-wench in front of dozens of witnesses. Marks on the girl's throat are identical with those on Barlow, says the coroner. Happened about twenty minutes ago."

He rang off, leaving the Pirate staring with a baffled expression into the blank gray screen.

"The same black ghost or . . . or another?"

/. The Murderer--Unmasked!

The Jolly Roger shrieked like a meteor as it flashed through the misty skies of Ganymede. At the giant spaceport, the trim little craft rode down on a blazing pillar of rocket-fire as it settled into a landing-pit of blistered metal. Within moments, Star Pirate and his Venusian comrade strode into Madame Ong's Cafe and were met by Branigan.

Star looked around swiftly, sharp green eyes missing little. In the

case of this particular establishment, he correctly guessed that "cafe" was a polite euphemism for "house of joy," for the dancing-girls were slim and young and of seductive loveliness, and beyond the huge square stone-walled room of the cafe, in a number of small cubicles, discreetly veiled behind tinkling bead curtains, were dispensed pipes of the forbidden Saturnian drug quang, if his keen nostrils were any judge.

He examined the girl's body swiftly, discovering nothing to surprise him. She had been a lovely young creature, her dusky bronze skin and slanting amber eyes denoting an exotic mixture of the blood of several foreign worlds.

Madame Ong herself was a buttery-skinned Uranian, hugely fat and grotesquely painted with enough cosmetics to adorn half-a-dozen women. The abiq-plumes in her jewelled head-dress quivered and trembled in the sweet, smoky air as she shook with fear, recounting the horror she had seen.

"P-poor little Ydara! Been one of my girls for two years, now, come next dragon-bird festival! What a horrible way to die!" the madame moaned, fanning herself with a greasy pack of gambling cards.

"Just tell me everything you saw," urged Star.

"A cloud of black smoke, it was like, the murderous thing," quivered the fat Uranian woman. "You could see right through it, like--like a ghost! A black, murdering ghost . . . little Ydara, she had just finished her dance and was about to go upstairs with a customer--" she caught Branigan's grim, steely eye and flushed purple. "I--I mean, about to have a cup of wine with an old and valued patron," she said, in hurried, flustered tones. "When the dark shape settled about her, and part of it sort of . . . shaped itself into something like--like--"

"A--tentacle?" rapped Star Pirate keenly. The Uranian madame blinked

long, thick, and obviously artificial lashes at him with a grateful smirk on her painted features.

"Yes, kind sir--like a tentacle, which whipped about her slim and pretty neck, and--and--" She whipped out a bit of perfumed lace, buried her lace in its folds, and moaned, flapping one bejewelled hand at the dead body eloquently.

"Did you, or anyone else in the room, happen to notice where the black vaporous ghost came from?" inquired Star, green eyes flicking from face to face. More than a few of the cafe's patrons turned and pointed to a place high up on the far wall. Star took one long look.

"Just as I suspected--the grill of an air-circulator!" he crowed. "The walls of the room are solid stone, except for the ventilating ducts, and there are no windows. Quick, Phath, the equipment case!" From the vestibule beyond, the Venusian lugged into the big square room a small, compact case, and opened it to remove a cubicular mechanism of gleaming metal, with a long hose-like attachment, which he plugged into the nearest power-outlet. Meanwhile, Branigan eyed the scene in bewilderment.

"What in the name of thirty space-devils do you think you're doing, Pirate?" he demanded.

Star nodded at the machine. "What does that look like to you, Branigan?" he inquired in sweet tones. The Patrol officer studied it beligerantly.

"Like a suction-machine," he muttered. "What the devil do you plan to do, Pirate, try to suck the ghost out of the wall with a cursed vacuum-cleaner?"

Star grinned and winked mysteriously. Then he attached a large bulk of transparent metal to the front of the suction-pump, and told everybody to stand back--

Night had fallen on the jungle moon, as the Jolly Roger rode down

on a column of blazing atom-fire into the scorched and muddy clearing where the little cabin stood under the weird glory of the many moons aloft. Sue Barlow and Scotty McGuire came out to regard the two adventurers in surprise.

The blond girl stared at Star with wide, wondering eyes.

"We heard it on the newscast" she said breathlessly. "That you had discovered and unmasked the ghost-murderer--"

"Aye, and captured the black phantom, to boot!" crowed Scotty McGuire, reaching up to clap Star on one hard, muscular shoulder. "Come into the cabin, aye, and your Venusian friend, too. We'll share a bottle of good Uranian wine to celebrate, and you can tell us all about it!"

8. Phantom from the Past

Star sipped the hearty black wine and stared moodily into the flames which danced on the stone hearth of the little cabin. "It must have been the mysterious Asterites who first discovered the uncanny life-forms," he mused. "They are entities of what seems to be black vapor, but they are actually composed of minute particles of black dust. Somehow or other, they are alive."

"Daylight arouses them, but when kept in darkness they lie dormant, apparently forever. In their dormant stage, the particles condense into perfect spheres, like black pearls. Like the ones you and your partner discovered sealed in an airtight alloy casket, buried within a basalt sarcophagus where the light of day could never penetrate."

"Devils of space!" swore Scotty, his numerous freckles dark against paling skin, eyes haunted. "So, when Big Bill stuck one in his pocket to flourish it around at the Space-man's Rest--?"

Star nodded somberly. "He as good as signed his own death-warrant."

Fortunately, he sealed the other six away in the alloy casket and hid them away in the cyclotron. Shortly after he and you retired, the sphere disintegrated . . . came apart into a floating vaporous cloud--and struck. At whomever was closest!"

Scotty's faded blue eyes were haunted by a nameless dread.

"He--he tucked the black pearl under his pillow," whispered the scrawny little Scotsman.

Sue Barlow stared at Star Pirate.

"But . . . why did it--kill?"

Star stirred himself, and poured another sip of the fiery black wine into his cup. "If my old friend, Dr. Zoar, the Martian scientist, were here," he grinned; "he'd use a lot of long words to say what can be said briefly. If a thing is alive, it has to feed on--something."

Phath goggled at him. "Chief! You mean--?"

The redheaded adventurer nodded grimly. "The vapor-devil can solidify some of its substance into a flexible tendril which possesses enormous strength. It must feed on the raw life-force of its victims, which otherwise disperses into the ether at the instant of death."

"But then . . . where did it go?" asked the Scotsman.

"When I examined your room above the saloon, I noticed the window was open an inch. The vapor-beast drifted out of the window . . . but it didn't go far. Long pent in darkness, all those millions of years, the phantom-thing had only enough strength to float a few alleys away, to Madame Ong's Cafe. There it allowed itself to be sucked into the ventilation-system, and reverted for a time to its harmless, dormant state, until at length the lights of Madame Ong's establishment, shining through one of the air-grills, aroused its . . . appetite again."

Sue Barlow turned pale, shuddered, and bit her lip.

"After all those eons, it was . . . very hungry," said Star Pirate

in heavy tones. He then explained how he had employed the mechanism to suck the vaporous entity into the transparent bulb attached to the pump. An opaque black cloth was whisked over the bulb, as soon as Star made certain the pump had drawn all of the phantom-thing from the ventilation-system. Later, at Patrol headquarters, they removed the cloth--briefly--and saw the black pearl lying at the bottom of the glassy bulb, dormant, harmless--but only so long as it was deprived of the light which would otherwise release it to kill--and kill again!

They finished the bottle, and Scotty left the cabin only to return a few minutes later, lugging a rectangular box of queer, glimmering alloy. This he thrust into Star's hands.

"Here--take the cursed, murderin' things, Mr. Pirate! I never want to see 'em again! Even if they ain't worth all those millions of credits I figgered to retire on, and set the lass up in a nice finishin' school and all, at least I know, in yer hands, they'll never kill again!"

"You can be certain of that," swore Star Pirate grimly.

The letter came two weeks later. It read as follows:

Dear McGuire--

Too dangerous to be worth anything as jewels, the "black pearls" are invaluable as samples of a hitherto unknown form of life, and because of their connection with that mysterious lost race, the Asterites.

So--I sold the six remaining pearls, and the alloy box, to the System government's big research facility on Pallas. The scientists there fully understand the danger the vapor-beasts represent to human life, if handled carelessly, exposed to light, and allowed to escape. Believe me, they will experiment most gingerly with the six remaining creatures, and will employ every

conceivable precaution to see that they never harm a human being again.

Your friend,

Star Pirate

P.S. Enclosed is a check from the laboratory. It's not as big as what the jewellers on Mars might have paid for the pearls (if all they had really been was pearls), but it's still sizeable enough to enable you to retire from space, and for Sue to go to that good school and buy those pretty clothes. S.P.

And a check fluttered out of the envelope. Scotty snatched it from

midair and stared at it with goggling eyes. It was made out to himself and to Sue, and the amount was more than most meteor miners earn in a full lifetime at their trade.

"Devils of space--!" whispered the skinny little Scotsman, a huge grin beginning to spread over his freckled face. Sue looked at the check, too, and smiled.

But she was not as jubilant as he; her eyes were dreamy . . . as she thought of a tall, rangy, long-legged young adventurer whose mischievous green eyes sparkled under a curly mop of dark red hair . . .

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eda. "Our work here is finished."

He was threading his way out of the vast hall when suddenly one of the Callistan council members stood up and called his name.

"Mr. James," he said slowly,

"there is one question that hasn't been answered. Who is the Nebula?"

Jimmy paused at the door and winked at the girl. "The Nebula?" he said with a chuckle. "I'm sure I haven't the slightest idea."

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or by some unimaginable weapon, this extra-terrestrial race so desperate to guard themselves against even a potential threat from primitive earth life, had long ago perished without a trace. Its ancient defense station, defending nothing, was its last vestige.

Deeds felt good in my arms as we watched the video monitor holding the image of the asteroid in its cold gaze. Slowly it receded from the camera's field of vision and presently was lost in the rubble of the asteroid belt.



SAUCE FOR THE GANDER

by Frank Belknap Long

Which meant more to Carlston, the lure
of the stars--or the love of a woman?

When Carlston came downstairs to get a pack of cigarettes he had left on a table in the groundfloor bedroom he could hardly believe his eyes. Both of the beds had been pushed back into the curtained alcove where his wife kept the huge cylindrical vacuum cleaner that always reminded him of a jet propulsion tube, space mottled from base to summit, and the rest of the furniture now stood in the sun parlor.

He could see the familiar outlines of the bureau, the two bedside tables, and the tall standing lamp through the thin gauze drapes that

separated the two rooms. The largest rug had also been rolled up and removed, and a newly applied hardwood polish gave the floor an almost metallic sheen.

"Why?" Carlston asked, staring at his wife in consternation.

She had just clicked off the vacuum cleaner and was looping the wire around it. It stood on a small scatter rug she had postponed removing, because the ashes he had spilled on it required a double vacuuming. Her hair was in disarray and her face slightly begrimed from dusting. But in Carlston's eyes nothing so

trivial could mar a loveliness that never failed to seem breathtaking, and made sternness difficult.

"Why what, darling?" Cynthia asked, as if she didn't know.

"Making me feel as though I were in space already," Carlston said. "Can't you wait a few more days? I'll be gone soon enough."

"Darling, don't you see?" Cynthia said. "You have to become reconciled to losing me. Psychological factors are important. It will only be for seven or eight years. And we'll have a great deal to look forward to when you come back to me."

"I'm sure we will," Carlston said, with so much ironic bitterness in his voice that Cynthia could only stare at him in bewilderment. "With luck, I'll find that you've only been married and divorced two or three times. It would be a grave mistake to let anything so trivial mar our happiness."

"But that's silly talk, darling," Cynthia protested. "Of course I'll be married again, perhaps more than once. But if I happen to be married when you get back the Space Authority will grant me an instant annulment. You'll always be the only man in my life who really means anything to me."

It was a very long attempt at self-justification, Carlston knew--for Cynthia. Other women sometimes took days to reconcile their husbands to the inevitable. But Cynthia was usually well aware of what melting eyes and a warily reassuring embrace could accomplish.

She firmly believed--and there were times when Carlston almost found himself agreeing with her--that enduring faithfulness did not need to be made convincing in any other way. But this was not one of those times.

"Do you know what I'd like to do, right now?" he heard himself saying. "Go back upstairs and never come down again."

"Darling, no!" Cynthia's voice

was as alarmed as he'd hoped it would be.

"It would be so simple," he went on, relentlessly. "Just one small cyanide capsule--"

"But I love you. Nothing can ever change that."

"You'd be surprised," Carlston flung back at her. "Any one of the half-dozen male replacements you've been dating experimentally for the past fortnight could change it--just by walking into this room and kissing you lightly on the forehead. I'm sure he'd know that if he went any further in my presence he'd get himself killed. Even so--he'd end up crippled."

"But I promised you nothing like that would ever happen until you're light years from Earth," Cynthia reminded him. "Experimental dating is just a precaution, to make sure no needless time will be lost. It doesn't have to mean--"

"More often than not it does," Carlston said, feeling he was being unwise in driving the dagger in so deeply, since it was piercing them both. He was feeling the almost unbearable pain of it as he twisted it about. But he was unable to stop.

"What gave you the idea it will be easier for me in space?" he went on accusingly. "The loneliness, the utter desolation will make it infinitely harder for me to endure the kind of thoughts that will come to me. Just the thought of you in the arms of another man would be agonizing enough--if I didn't know what a kind, sincere, honest person you are. You couldn't cheat a man just because you loved someone else. It would be no different with him than it is with me now."

"But that just isn't so. A woman can keep the way she feels and what she does in completely separate compartments. I would be cheating him, if he knew. But he never will."

"Please try to understand, darling," she continued, after a pause. "It means so little, really. The

thing that torments you so much is of no consequence to a woman whose love for just one man remains steadfast. I could brush it off as easily as I could a fly that has alighted on me for a moment of happiness that is important to a fly, but not to me."

"Mistaking you for a honeycomb with a great many separate--" Carlston started to say, but stopped when he saw the look of anguish that had come into his wife's eyes.

"All right, I'm sorry," Carlston said. With a supreme effort he managed to ask, "Who will be arriving for dinner tonight? Did you invite anyone?"

"Just Ruth and Richard," Cynthia said. "I thought, since Ruth will be in space in just one week, the least we could do--"

"All right, I understand," Carlston said, cutting her short. "The least we can do is give Ruth a farewell party, with Richard standing by. I'm not jealous of him, because even with Ruth gone he'll remain too much of a stick-in-the-mud to interest you."

"That's unfair," Cynthia said. "He's dull, of course, and I could never understand what it was Ruth saw in him. She demands so much of a man, as a rule. But he's gentle and kind."

"I know, I know. Look, it's ten hours to dinner time," Carlston said. "You took the bed apart, but there's that big sofa we could roll back in here--"

"It wouldn't be psychologically wise, darling," Cynthia said. "You'll be in space in four more days. You've got to start getting reconciled to the change right now. You know what the shrinks say about making the trauma of a long separation less severe. The sooner you start building up defenses against it in your mind the better off you'll be."

"Are you thinking of me--or of yourself?"

"Both," Cynthia said. "Now go back upstairs and put that cool, wonderful mind of yours to work again--on charts of the unexplored planetary systems across the great curve of the universe. We've been so miraculously close that I often find myself talking--and thinking--in your dedicated way."

"Dedicated? I'm not so sure. If the Space Authority gave us a choice--"

"They don't, they can't," Cynthia said. "The penalty for thinking in any other way has to be made severe. Otherwise no one would go into space at all."

"They just might," Carlston said, "if only to escape from the way things are here. But that doesn't weigh at all with me--because of you."

"Go, darling, please. I'll call you when Ruth and Richard arrive. Wear that new leisure jacket I bought for you last month. It's stunning--it becomes you. I want Ruth to envy me the handsomest husband in New York."

It seemed the worst morning and afternoon Carlston had ever spent alone. And even if Cynthia had been standing at his side what she'd done to the bedroom would have cast so somber a shadow on his thoughts that her presence would have provided little solace.

He suddenly realized that thinking of it as the worst few hours couldn't be strictly justified. He'd spent hundreds of lonelier, more wretched hours in space, staring out of the navigational cage at a filmy kind of emptiness, oppressively darkened by gaseous material of undetermined origin, which blotted out even the diffuse radiance of distant, constantly changing star clusters. But that had been before he'd met and married Cynthia.

The Space Authority had allowed him to remain on Earth for five and

a half years, solely because he'd accomplished so much in the lonely years on Maxwell-Overdrive. It was the equivalent of a medal pinned on him amidst a wild burst of applause, by men who were little given to letting their emotions get out of hand.

There were times when he found himself remembering how he'd felt at the age of ten, when interstellar space exploration had seemed as remote from reality as a stepladder to the stars created out of morning mists by some Tolkien Lord of the Rings.

Then had come the Maxwell-Overdrive that had telescoped light years in an impossible way, if you went by what you'd been told by the astrophysicists before the third decade of the twenty-first century. But the astrophysicists had not only been proven wrong. Their credibility had been so badly shaken that their pronouncements were often greeted with derision or the kind of skepticism that could undermine respect to an unjustified extent.

He could still remember exactly how, as a child, just the sight of the moon and the wheeling planets on a night of stars had made him feel. A wave of pride in human accomplishment had swept over him, only to be swallowed up by the frustration that had gripped his elders for several full generations.

The moon, yes. Mars and the outer planets, even frozen Pluto, yes. We've gone that far with comparative ease. But that's as far as we'll ever go. We've left our footsteps whenever it matters under the Sun. Giant steps for mankind. But beyond the Sun? Surely our footsteps on the planet of a distant star would be a far greater glory. Children were not so much given to sharing adult aspirations on so exalted a plane. But he had been an unusual child.

How unusual was he as a man? Would a truly unusual man turn his back

on the stars, to go on embracing, night after night, just one frail woman? It was hard, at times, for Carlston to believe that.

Besides, the Space Authority would never permit it. They had refused to alter their decision with the kind of firm determination that was characteristic of them. They cloaked the mace in a most considerate way, extended every outward courtesy, made you feel that the pedestal of honor and high integrity which you occupied gave you the right to speak your mind. But speaking your mind did you no good at all. He would have to go out into space again, for a few years at least. Then perhaps he would be granted another reprieve.

Cynthia's voice, calling to him from the base of the stairs, put an end to his thoughts.

"Darling, Ruth and Richard are here! Come and join us. I've just been telling Ruth how radiant she looks tonight."

It took Carlston only a moment to put on the leisure jacket Cynthia had urged him to wear and descend to the sun room.

Cynthia, he told himself, could be totally lacking in empathy at times. If Ruth looked radiant it had to mean that leaving her husband would cause her no great pain, and that would hurt Richard terribly. It was surely cruel to belabor that point by complimenting his wife as Cynthia had done.

The compliment was not an exaggeration. Ruth not only looked radiant. She was wearing the most strikingly original and becoming evening gown Carlston had ever seen. It set off every aspect of her great beauty to perfection from her tumbled, red-gold hair and Modigliani throat to the shapely amplitude of her bosom and hips.

Her hips could have been abbreviated by an inch or two perhaps, but it seemed of very little consequence. Nothing else about her Carl-

ston would have liked to see abbreviated in any way, not even the evening gown. If it had been more revealing--it was revealing enough--it would have made Cynthia feel competitively ill at ease.

The instant he reached the middle of the living room, Ruth stepped forward and linked her arm with his. "I've got to talk to you, Walter. Right now--and alone. I'm sure Cynthia and Richard won't mind if we go off somewhere for a few minutes and--well, do nothing but talk. There are so many things I'd like to discuss with someone who is not only an old friend but who knows exactly what it means to be one of the damned. Not eternally, of course, but for seven or eight long years."

"That's a pretty strong way of putting it. Ruth," her husband admonished. "It sounds rather medieval as well. One of the damned--"

"Oh, let them have their talk," Cynthia said, patting his arm. "It will do them both good. Sometimes I think Walter could have a more understanding kind of wife. I know so little about interstellar exploration."

"That's not what she told me this morning," Carlston said, forcing himself to smile. "She said we'd become so miraculously close in the past few years she can share most of my thoughts."

"Not really," Cynthia said. "But I thought it would please him if I said that. I warn you, Ruth--he's a very difficult man to please. He has long, sharp claws and he can get angry and scratch. You've got to be careful."

They all laughed. But Ruth was quick to turn serious again. "Thoughts can be shared, yes," she said. "But shared experiences make that a great deal easier. We have so much to talk about."

"Don't keep us waiting too long," Cynthia said. "Richard has a lean and hungry look. And I imagine I look much the same way."

They talked on the balcony overlooking the small, neat garden which Cynthia had cultivated with pride for three summers in a row. She loved flowers and just remembering that about her brought a sudden catch to Carlston's throat.

"Walter, I've tremendous news," Ruth was saying. "You won't believe it, but it's true."

"You've--"

"Simply unbelievable news. The Space authority has relented, after all these years, and is going to permit two interstellar explorers of the opposite sex to travel in the TS 7's. Together, Walter, with all ridiculous prudishness thrust aside. They feel that it's only sensible--and necessary. It's not good for a man or a woman to be alone between the stars for five or ten or fifteen long years."

Ruth had drawn very close to him. Her breathing had quickened, and there was something in her voice which confirmed what he'd always suspected. She was a woman who knew exactly how to bring every aspect of her femininity to bear in a single look or gesture. Even the slight huskiness of her voice had taken on a seductively beguiling quality, which was like an aphrodisiac to male ears.

Carlston quickly widened the distance between them, fearing she was about to come wordlessly into his arms. Not that he wouldn't have welcomed that, if he could have allowed himself to forget Cynthia completely.

But he couldn't, not even for an instant. She had remained so present in his thoughts that she seemed almost to be standing in silence just beyond Ruth, her pallor heightened by the moonlight that was reflected back from the lawn in wavering beams.

It was as if she were waiting to see just how monstrous his disloyalty would become if he let himself go. It was unjust, of course--

because it had been Cynthia who had brushed aside the understandable concern of Ruth's husband and urged them to have this talk. What did she think he was--a man of steel, tempered by the fire mists of some far-distant galaxy where the human equation had ceased to operate? Didn't she know that there was nothing in the future that wasn't cruelly tormenting to him, and that if a woman like Ruth became the bringer of unbelievably liberating news--

Cynthia probably hadn't known about the news. But even so, she was taking the kind of risk which was at variance with what she had always assured him--until he was in space she would remain as devoted to him as he was to her. Surely she must have known that Ruth would not be in space for several days and that she could lose him in a single night if she subjected him to a dangerous kind of testing. Even if she had been just testing him, to confirm his unalterable devotion, her willingness to take such a risk did not become her. It went contrary to everything he wanted to believe about her.

"I imagine the choice of space partners--if I may use that term," Carlston heard himself saying, "will be entirely contingent on what the Space Authority considers wise. Correct me if I'm wrong. But I can picture it now, so easily. A young man in the prime of life companioned in space by some tight-lipped spinster old enough to be his maiden aunt. Or the other way around. I'm quite sure the choice will not be left to us."

"Oh, but you are mistaken," Ruth said quickly, drawing so close to him again that he was forced to take another step backwards. "The new decision makes the choice an individual one. We may pick our own partners--within reason. Of course there will be some screening. But if two interstellar explorers have

much the same general background and record of accomplishment and are otherwise congenial there will be no arbitrary, thumbs-down attitude on the part of the Authority."

Carlston felt a sudden need to keep her at a distance for a moment longer, if only to give himself time to consider how much weight could be attached to so startling a Space Authority reversal of policy.

"You mean 'thumbs up,'" he said, summoning a slight facetiousness to his aid.

"Thumps up?"

"Yes. You see, contrary to popular belief, when the ancient Romans wanted a gladiator to administer a coup de grace they turned their thumbs up, not down. And the free choice you mention could be the equivalent of a coup de grace, cynically devised by the Authority for reasons for their own. How can we know what they may have in mind? They may be simply trying to find out what would happen in a short-run series of experiments that may or may not work out. If the space companions should turn on each other, through the boredom and disillusionment which may be inseparable from the close confinement of two persons of the opposite sex in a navigational cage for a long number of years--"

"You think that could happen? Walter, I don't. With some people perhaps, but not with us. Never with us, Walter . . . darling..."

She came into his arms so quickly there was nothing he could do to stop her from kissing him full on the mouth, and running her hands up, down and across his shoulders until her palms seemed to heat up, and burn into his flesh. But it wasn't just a friction-produced kind of heat, couldn't have been. In conjunction with her kisses it did something to him that the physical alone could not have accomplished, despite his hair-trigger susceptibility in that respect. It conjured up visions of long, sensuous days

and nights in space. (A night feeling was so coded into man's genetic heritage that a seeming alternation of light and darkness never failed to take place between the stars, despite the absence of Earth's axis-spinning rotations.)

In another moment he found himself returning Ruth's embraces with a vehemence which surpassed the ardor she was lavishing on him. Her evening gown came close to ripping a little when he grasped it firmly by the hem. No Grecian goddess could have had thighs more rounded, and they made him feel that they were not only alone in space, but alone in time as well.

The rapturous obliteration of all earthbound ties made his senses reel. It was a fleshly garden of delight, with great blooms bursting and spilling their contents like exploding suns, until he seemed to be sinking down in a space-cradling kind of weightlessness, still ecstatic but content to remain supine until a bright new star cluster swam into view.

"So it's decided," she whispered, when she'd managed to regain her breath long enough to exalt in her triumph. "We'll put in our applications immediately."

"Yes, we must," Carlston breathed.

But then something happened to him he couldn't have anticipated. A vision of Cynthia, desolate and abandoned, a look of anguish in her eyes, came sweeping into his mind. It was a kind of madness, of course, an insane distortion. Cynthia would not be abandoned. The instant he was in space a dozen men, no longer denied the privilege of competing for her, would come flocking around her. No matter what she had promised him her loyalty would not outlast his departure by more than a few hours.

"No, by God, it mustn't happen!" he cried in hoarse protest. "I'll find some way--"

Ruth stiffened in his arms, a

look of utter consternation coming into her eyes. "But it is happening now. What has come over you? What are you talking about? You can't have changed your mind about me in half a minute. No one could change that fast."

"Please," he said, slowly but relentlessly entangling her arms. "You must try to understand. I was carried away for a moment. I forgot everything that-- Ruth, listen to me. I can't explain it. But Cynthia is the only woman in the world for me."

"The world? What world? Earth? You'll be leaving Earth for a very long time. So will I. Do you still want to go out into space alone?"

"I--I don't know," he heard himself muttering. "I'm not sure. I must have a little more time to think about it."

"Our applications must be in by tomorrow," Ruth said, her voice turning suddenly cold. "What do you want me to do? Select someone else? If that's the way it must be--"

"It may not be that way. But I'd like to be alone now, for just a few minutes. Go back inside and tell Cynthia and Richard I've some thinking to do. You can make them understand."

"All right. If you insist. But it may interest you to know that's one important difference between us. I don't give a snap of my little finger for Richard. I never have."

"But he loves you."

"Is that my fault? He'll find someone else to love quickly enough. So will Cynthia. Remember that. Dwell on it, let it sink in."

She swung about abruptly, her shoulders looking for the first time a little squarish and unfeminine, and left him standing alone in the moonlight.

He never quite knew what started him walking, particularly since the terrace ended so abruptly in a side-ward direction fifteen feet from where he had been standing. There

was no rail at that point and so tormented and preoccupied had he become that his last three steps carried him over the rail into empty space.

He fell straight down, for twenty feet and crashed to the garden-encircling pavement below the terrace with such violence that his right arm doubled up under him and broke like a brittle twig, with a distinctly audible snap as the impact shuddered up through him.

In the eyes of the Space Authority there was nothing to prevent a man with a broken limb that had healed with no loss of flexibility from crossing the gulfs between the stars, and after four weeks of inactivity Carlston found himself making some readjustments in his thinking for the second time.

Now two things had changed, however. Ruth was long gone, having chosen a somewhat older man who had remained a bachelor by choice to be her companion in space, and Carlston had given up all thought of remaining on Earth. He had become resigned to the inevitable, and if it cost him an effort at times to avoid reaching out and twining a strand of Cynthia's hair around his fingers in tender caressment, he managed to keep her from suspecting that his inner torment had come close to getting out of hand.

The accident had certainly not been his fault. But otherwise, he felt, he had much to atone for. He had taken another woman in his arms--or, at the very least, had responded fervently when she'd molded herself to him with all restraint cast aside--when only Cynthia had actually meant anything to him. And what was just as much to his discredit, he'd been guilty of letting himself believe that the Space Authority was capable of exercising its power of decision-making on a tyrannical plane. Nothing, of course, could have been further from the truth.

Interstellar exploration demanded a rare kind of fortitude and dedication which not all men and women possessed. If you happened to possess it any shrinking from what was demanded of you was unforgivable--an act of betrayal.

He was sitting now in the sun room with his arm still held in a slightly stiffish way, although the cast had been taken off eight days previously. He was quite sure that once he was in space the pseudo-stiffness would vanish, along with every other illusion he had ever entertained about himself.

He was letting his gaze rest on the meaningless pattern of light and shadow on the sill of a window that framed Cynthia's garden with a kind of two-dimensional flatness, giving it the look of a painting under glass, when she came so quietly into the room that she was bending over him before he became aware that he was no longer alone. For the first time since the accident she kissed him, grasping him by the shoulders with both hands and then drawing a little back.

"I've wanted to do that for more than a month," she said. "Desperately, but--I was afraid to. I told myself that if you went out into space with the memory of a caress blotting out everything else you might have another accident. And my ill-considered mistake might make it far less trivial than the three you had during your first few years in space."

There was something in Cynthia's expression which made Carlston sit up very straight.

"What are you talking about?" he said. "The three I had--"

"They were so trivial you probably have forgotten them," Cynthia said. "But the Space Authority has a record of them. And that means you've had four accidents so far. It's one too many. Oh, darling, don't you realize what it means, for both of us?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"The expenditure! Surely you know what an enormous sum it costs to send an interstellar explorer into space. The Authority just can't afford to spend that much on an explorer who is accident prone."

"Oh, my God!" Carlston exclaimed. "My memory was a little hazy when you mentioned my previous mishaps. But I can recall them now. They were so minor, as you say, that it never occurred to me that they would become a matter of permanent record. But all apart from that, I did forget the accident prone, disqualifying factor."

"The insurance companies a century ago wouldn't have forgotten," Cynthia said. "You can be certain of that. And the Space Authority is just as conservatively cautious. As I told you, four accidents are one too many. It's against the Security Code--one more than the absolute, permissible limit."

She paused an instant, her eyes shining. "The computer-tape message just arrived. It was delivered by one of those bald-headed, beyond-retirement-age little men they seem to pick to be the bearer of glad tidings. He looked like a shriveled gnome, with every last vestige of his virility thirty years in the past. But I came close to picking him up and covering his face with kisses. Darling, you'll never be sent out into space again."

For a moment Carlston felt like a man reborn, with every threatening shadow that had fallen across his dream of future happiness and fulfillment whipped away out of sight. Then one of the darkest of shadows returned and crouched in the otherwise sunlit room like some monstrous

beast with bared fangs.

"But this could be the end of almost everything for me," he heard himself saying. "Don't you see, Cynthia? The desire to participate, to be constructively engaged in the great, unfolding drama of man's conquest of the stars has always been--"

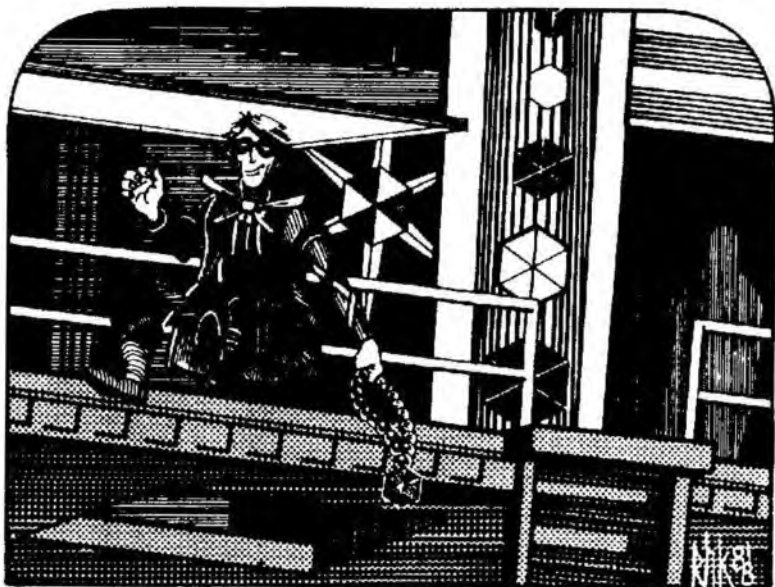
"Of supreme importance to you," Cynthia said, before he could go on. "I've always known that, darling. It means more to you than I do."

"That's not true!" Carlston said, in sudden, fierce protest. "But it's in a totally different category of experience. In one category you mean everything to me. But in another--"

"I understand, darling," Cynthia said. "Perhaps that's why our love is so special. There's a very old poem that goes to the very heart of it. 'I could not love you, dear, so much loved I not honor more.'"

She paused, smiled and went on quickly: "Did you think for a moment the Space Authority would ignore the achievements of a man like yourself? There are strict rules that cannot be set aside. As things stand, it would set a demoralizing example. But you have been made a lifetime member of the Authority. You will participate in the making of decisions on a very high level. And in the future, because of that, the decisions will be a great deal more enlightened. I am sure of that."

As she spoke the sunlight seemed to brighten again, dispelling all the shadows. But it wasn't half as startling as the quick, decisive way Carlston found himself grabbing hold of his wife and drawing her into his arms.



THE NEBULA AND THE NECKLACE

by Carl Jacobi

A daring thief, a dangerous plan, and
a system-wide war in the balance!

BULLETIN: The Star of Venus, newest and most luxurious liner of the Royal Renard lines, blasted off on its maiden voyage for Callisto today. Its passenger list included the celebrated names of Martin James, rich philanthropist, who goes to Callisto to survey the site for a new tuition-free university; Lucrezia Masters, tri-planetary famous authoress; and Hanford Dall, present of the System-wide Dall Newspaper Syndicate.

BULLETIN: Reports that Ebbitt Renard, millionaire owner of the Renard

Lines, is also aboard the Star of Venus, with his mysterious Necklace of Neptune, have been denied.

FLASH: Drome-Hangars--CP--An apparently unfounded rumor spread rapidly in this port that a workman had found under the gangway of the departed Star of Venus a wallet containing two pastel-blue cards bearing the design of the Constellation Orion. This symbol, it was recalled, was once used by Nebula, notorious cracksman who disappeared two years ago.

I

The Star of Venus was three days off Callisto. In a private lounge between the Main Ballroom and the Observation Promenade three passengers sat talking over aperitifs.

"Yes," Ebbit Renard said, biting off the end of a cheroot, "the Necklace of Neptune is aboard and with me. In spite of its great value and the publicity which has surrounded it, however, it's quite safe."

He was a big, powerful man with greenish eyes, a large head, completely bald, and a voice that sounded like the scraping of a bass viol.

Hanford Dall, who owned the leading newspapers on every planet in the System and who looked like an advertising model for fashion clothes, stroked his chin with a womanish hand.

"You may think it's safe," he said. "Personally I wouldn't trust jewels of that kind anywhere outside of the Bank-of-Earth."

"My dear Dall"--Ebbit Renard tilted back in his chair and blew smoke rings--"my vault in my private quarters in this liner's stern is better than the Bank-of-Earth. It's impregnable. Xarnay, the great Martian metallurgist, designed its door, and nothing short of the complete destruction of the ship would open it without the proper combination. Even the combination is based on the Illington method of calculus."

The third man had spoken little that evening. He was Martin James, the philanthropist. In his middle thirties, he wore large horn-rimmed spectacles, which gave him an owlish appearance--just the sort of look he wanted, in fact. He looked up now and drawled,

"There is a man who might have opened your vault and taken your jewels."

Renard scowled. "Who?"

"The Nebula."

The line-owner burst out laughing. "The Nebula's dead," he said. "Eve-

ryone knows that. But even if he were still alive, he couldn't get into my vault. I tell you the thing's impregnable."

A steward entered the room and announced that Mr. James was wanted on Deck Three. The philanthropist offered his apologies and walked stiffly out.

In the outer corridor, however, a change came over him. The air of bored complacency vanished; no longer were his eyes closed to lazy half slits; they were bright and alert now; and he walked with a springy step that told of reserve strength and boundless energy.

"I will play with fire," he chuckled to himself. "Bringing up the Nebula as a topic of conversation was a dangerous business. Still, it's been two years now . . ."

Two years since he had renounced forever his true name of Jimmy Starr and adopted the role of Martin James, crackpot philanthropist who seemed to delight in giving away his fortunes. But whereas Martin James was fairly well known throughout the System, Jimmy Starr had, under still another name, been the subject of talk and the quarry of I.P. men from Venus to Pluto.

For Martin James was Jimmy Starr, and Jimmy Star was the Nebula. Newspapers had once called the Nebula the most elusive cracksmen of all time. It was he who had entered the inner rooms of the Venus Gallery and made off with the Cosmic Lady, the greatest painting of the age. It was he who had stolen the space-time clock of a third dynasty Martian emperor, utilized that clock to open the Imperial vaults and then taken from those vaults nothing but a hand-carved twenty-second century chair which had struck his fancy.

At that time when his daring exploits had followed each other in swift succession, no safe, no vault constructed by human intelligence seemed capable of keeping him out. Little did the public know that the Nebula as Jimmy Starr had been train-

ed by a father who for years had made such a study his hobby. On his death Starr Senior had left his son a fortune which Jimmy could never hope to spend.

Touring the System in his own luxurious space-yacht, he had been appalled by the sordid conditions existent on the planets. He had viewed with disgust the overfed land-owners on Venus brutally manhandling the native Kamalis. On Mars where the wealthy representatives of the D.O.F.C.--Descendants of the First Colonists--had conducted him on a tour of their vast estates he had seen only the stinking hovels of the slave laborers.

There and then Jimmy had dedicated his life to philanthropy. He had followed that role in his own curious way, plaguing the rich, giving secret endowments to the poor, jesting at and eluding the police. Until the affair on Mars.

Then the girl had entered his life.

She had called herself Andromeda, and she alone had guessed his identity and sought his aid in the overthrow of a plot, the stakes of which were the very civilized life of Mars. But with the conclusion of that exploit, she had disappeared.

And so the career of the Nebula had come to an end. Without Andromeda the outwitting of authorities became flat and without flavor. Nor did Jimmy care to continue the life of a millionaire's wastrel son. He changed his name to Martin James and proceeded to give away his personal fortune wherever the giving seemed to do the most good.

He had reached Deck Three now. It was deserted, and he saw no sign of the steward who had preceded him. He lit a cigarette and strolled to the observation shield. Out there were a million rhinestones on a pillow of plush: stars and planets, all the glory of the universe. Idly as he smoked, he drew mental straight lines connecting Sirius with Procyon

and Betelgeuse, forming a nearly equilateral triangle. He marveled as always at the sight of Betelgeuse, Sirius and Regal, all of the first magnitude, forming a lozenge-shaped figure with Orion's belt in the center.

It was that view which had given him the name of the Nebula. For whenever the Nebula completed an exploit, he left behind a small pastel blue card with the design of the Constellation Orion in white.

"The Nebula," Jimmy muttered to himself. "It's been two years now. And two years since I've seen her."

He tossed his cigarette to the deck and lowered himself into a deck chair. Abruptly his every nerve became tense.

A voice had whispered his name!

He looked about him, puzzled. To right and to left the deck lay deserted under the soft greenish at-lights. There was no one in sight.

"Hello, Jimmy Starr. Hello, Nebula."

Jimmy forced himself to sit there quietly. His eyes had caught a wall panel and upon it the micro-speaker of an intership visiphone. But the screen was blank.

That voice again after all these months!

"Hello, Jimmy Starr. Andromeda calling . . ."

Quickly he reached over and switched on the transmitter. He said,

"In heaven's name, where are you?"

The girlish voice laughed melodiously. "I'm sorry I had to drop out of your life so completely, Jimmy, but believe me, there have been reasons. In a little while, if all goes well, we can be together again. Right now there is something you must do for me."

He thrilled to her words. It was the call-to-arms again.

"Jimmy, are you acquainted with Ebbit Renard's private quarters in the stern of the ship?"

"I know of them," he replied slowly. "I've never been in them."

"Then listen closely. The quarters consist of five large cabins, opening off a barred door at the end of Stern Deck C. The first cabin is a sitting room, the second, a library, the next two, bedrooms. It's the fifth room we're interested in. This cabin holds Renard's private vault, and that vault contains the celebrated Necklace of Neptune."

Jimmy was missing no detail. The girl who called herself Andromeda continued:

"Ebbit Renard is still in the lounge with the passengers you just left. He will stay there approximately forty-five minutes, when he must return to his rooms for medicine he takes at this hour every night. There are no servants in the cabins. Jimmy, I want that Necklace of Neptune. I must have it."

For a long moment he sat there without reply. Then he shook his head. "It isn't possible."

"Not possible? Why?"

"Because that vault simply can't be opened without the proper combination. I happen to know its type. It's a Hanley-Conver double enforced shell, and Renard has had the door re-designed by a great Martian metallurgist and has done something himself to the combination."

"It must be opened, Jimmy. I must have that necklace."

There was a click and the voice clipped off.

11

Jimmy sat there motionless, his brain in deep thought. The call-to-arms after two years! It had been marvelous to hear her voice again, to know that she was somewhere on this very ship. He took out his pen-knife, balanced the point on his open palm--a trick of his when he was wrestling with a problem.

It seemed a strange reason for bringing the Nebula back to life again, this left of a string of jewels. The Nebula had always directed his talents toward the unusual, the bizarre.

In a way, of course, the jewels were unusual. According to the newspapers, the necklace had been found in a sealed casket, floating in outer space. It had been discovered when a Venus-to-Ganymede freighter had halted to make emergency repairs. Spacesuit-clad workers on the vessel's hull had sighted the casket, circling the ship, a miniature satellite.

How that box had come into Ebbit Renard's hands was a mystery. And no less a mystery was the jewels' origin. The hieroglyphics on the casket were undecipherable.

And now that necklace was to be "taken" by the Nebula! Why? Everywhere on every planet it would be recognized instantly as the property of Ebbit Renard.

Behind him a cosmonometer chimed the hour, and Jimmy rose hesitatingly. Then he turned with a brisk step and passed through the companionway.

Two minutes later he was in his cabin, opening the smaller of two trunks. He touched a hidden spring and a secret compartment fell open, revealing an assortment of curious objects: a complete kit of burglar tools, including headphones and ultra sonic receiver, dalapolic drill and fulmination pellets compounded of the as yet little-known 5-atomic-5. The entire layout fitted into a volplex belt worn unseen under the coat.

He removed the hone-rimmed spectacles--they were only a blind to identify him with the crackpot phil-anthropist, Martin James--and took also from the trunk compartment a small but deadly heat-derringer and a black silk domino mask. These two articles he slipped into his pocket.

Then he was outside in the corri-

dor again, pacing toward the lift. His lean aquiline face was emotionless, but every fiber of his lithe body was tense now. The elevator carried him to the fifth level. The operator said politely.

"Liberty closes in half an hour, sir. Nothing else on this deck, you know."

"I know," said Jimmy Starr. He headed for the library entrance until he saw the cage descend. Then he wheeled and darted up a small spiral staircase and drew up, facing a door marked **No Entrance**.

Beyond that door lay the private quarters of the millionaire ship owner, Ebbit Renard. Jimmy gave the lock to the door but a glance. He selected a small plastic tool from the belt around his waist, balanced it a moment in hands graceful as any surgeon's and inserted it. A moment later the barrier swung open.

Even though he had been warned what to expect, the opulence of the furnishings dazzled him. The ceilings were inlaid mosaics, festooned with clusters of barkarite. The floors were covered by a thick Martian weaving, and the walls were panelled and carved from virgin Venusian seawood. Scattered about were rich tables, luxurious settees and gracious bric-a-brac.

The fifth cabin, she had said. Jimmy paused to slip the domino mask over his face. He paused a moment, deliberately forcing his muscles to relax, then passed quickly through the next three rooms with scarcely a glance. At the fifth door he halted. It was open.

Inside was a completely bare cabin. The entire left bulkhead formed the door of a massive vault. Staggered across the herculean steel panel were five huge dials, each with a smaller dial underneath it.

A bead of perspiration oozed out on Jimmy's forehead. He had less than an hour for a job that seemed impossible.

He set his lips and rolled up his sleeves. He dusted his fingertips with a few grains of greenish powder, a preparation that not only dried all skin moisture but increased the sensitivities of touch. Next he slipped the headphones over his ears and clamped their connection onto the panel just below the middle dial. Very slowly those long graceful hands began to move that dial back and forth.

A frown knotted his brow at the end of two minutes. "Might have known it was shielded," he muttered. "And thick too. Couldn't hear a thing."

He discarded the phones for a small metal tube with a magnetic contact at one end and a tiny infrared bulb at the other. He fastened the two wires to a small battery and again began to turn the dial, watching the crimson light as he did. But the filament did not fluctuate.

"Double quartzite lining," he said softly. "Xarnay, I'll have to hand it to you. You know your stuff."

For a quarter of an hour he knelt there, trying device after device, utilizing all the skill at his command. There was no response. His lips tightened, and his grey eyes narrowed. Once he swung about, listening. But the only sound was the distant vibration of the liner's powerful engines.

He lit a cigarette and began to pace the room, smoking rapidly. Unaware of his actions, he drew his pen-knife from his pocket and fell to balancing its open point on his palm. Of the hundreds of vaults and safety devices which had yielded to his touch in the past, this one topped them all. Renard seemed right in his boast that it was impregnable.

Abruptly Jimmy ground out his cigarette and swung back to the vault. He extracted from his belt a small jar, removed its cap and quickly donned rubber gloves. Then

he proceeded to smear the contents of the jar, a thick viscous paste, over a wide area surrounding the dials. He took out his watch and counted three minutes exactly while the compound dried to a glazed metallic sheen. Then he touched it with a lighted match and leaped back.

With a low roar the panel burst into a sheet of purple flame. As the terrific heat mounted, the panel became red, then glowing white. When a bluish glint entered the white incandescence, Jimmy hurled the liquid contents of a second jar hard upon it.

"Liquified palas oxide," he muttered aloud. "If this fails, I've failed."

The raiding heat from the panel subsided, but the whitish glow continued. Again he slipped on the headphones and adjusted their connection. Again he began to turn the dial. This time a smile of satisfaction turned his lips.

The heat had enlarged the pores of the inner shield and at the same time expanded the tumblers of the lock. The clicks as each succeeding ball fell into its correct slot were quite audible now.

Yet even then it required ten minutes to unlock each of the five dials, five minutes more to discover the hidden vernier that controlled the hydraulic mechanism of the heavy door. At length, however, the great barrier glided soundlessly open.

Jimmy gave a little chuckle of triumph. He stepped into the vault and sighted almost at once a small oblong casket about eighteen inches in length. Strange hieroglyphics adorned its cover and sides, and at two corners were carved protuberances that curiously resembled insulators. Inside was a small plush pallet, and upon that rested the Necklace of Neptune.

It was multicolored, and it was beautiful. A hundred pinpoints of light were refracted from its many

facets. Each jewel was a different size and shape, yet viewed as a whole the necklace was a delicate dream of fairy continuity.

For a long moment Jimmy stood there, looking down at it. Then he closed the casket and dropped it in the voluminous pocket of the volplex belt. He drew forth a small pastel blue card with the design of the Constellation Orion upon it--the signature of the Nebula--and placed it on the now empty shelf. Turning, he left the vault and swung the heavy door back into position.

For the first time he was conscious of his racing pulse. He wiped the surface of a chair arm to remove possible fingerprints and began to stride back through the five cabins. In the last room he suddenly froze.

The door leading to the outer corridor was opening. An instant later the huge figure of Ebbit Renard appeared over the threshold. Jimmy leaped behind a near settee and crouched low. Through a crevice in the settee's back he saw Renard hesitate a moment, then uncertainly love across to a chair and lower himself into it. He sat there, his round bald head tilted slightly forward, staring, it seemed, into space.

Cold sweat began to ooze from every pore of Jimmy's body. Discovery meant arrest, and arrest meant disgrace and imprisonment. The line-owner would be unrelenting in his pursuit of justice.

Silence filled the room. A mercury clock on the far wall pulsed rhythmically. And then suddenly the bass viol voice of Ebbit Renard spoke,

"You can show yourself now. I know you're there, and I have a gun in my pocket, covering you. If you do not speak in one minute, I'll fire through the settee."

Even as Renard finished speaking, Jimmy had his own weapon out and was firing at the electroliner suspended from the ceiling. Darkness

swooped down on the room as simultaneously Renard lunged from his chair. Before he could twist out of position, Jimmy caught a cruel blow on the jaw from his opponent's gun barrel.

He writhed away and sidestepped nimbly. A second blow sent him staggering. Renard was a clumsy fighter, and Jimmy knew he would need only time and opportunity to turn the tables; yet this time instinctively he disliked fighting anything but on the defensive. A chair crashed and fell against him. In an instant he had swiveled it before him. Then, weaving like an eel, he ran for the door, raced through it and slammed it shut behind him.

He vaulted down the spiral staircase, three steps at a time. Behind, he heard the door crash open and Renard's uncertain steps clumping in pursuit. Fourth . . . third levels. At Deck Two Jimmy raced down a hall and burst into his own stateroom. He whipped off the volplex belt and stuffed it in the hidden compartment of the trunk. The casket with its jewels went into a far corner. Off came mask, shirt, and tie. He whipped on a green satin lounging robe and stood there, waiting to regain his breath.

There was uproar in the corridor. Ebbit Renard's cellar voice was calling: "Officer of the guard! Officer of the guard!" An alarm bell rang; another sounded hollowly topside. More voices and hurried footsteps converged on the corridor.

Jimmy Star opened the door and leaned indolently against the frame.

"Something wrong?" he yawned.

No one answered him. Renard, surrounded by a crowd of passengers, was veiling excitedly at a uniformed steward.

"Sneak thief!" he was saying.

"Broke into my private quarters and attacked me. No, I don't know what he got away with. Do something, do you hear?"

The steward, trim and efficient,

wrote rapidly in a notebook. He asked several questions, dispatched an assistant to spread a dragnet over the ship. Jimmy Starr fell in with the crowd that followed the steward up the stairs to examine Renard's cabin. Renard had regained much of his composure, and he led the way through the four rooms in silence. But when his gaze fell upon the door of his vault, still glowing white from the palas oxide, his jaw fell slack. Like an automaton he paced forward, turned the dials and swung the door open. He rushed in, to reappear an instant later, green eyes glazed with bewilderment.

"It's gone!" he said huskily. "The Necklace of Neptune is gone!"

If the steward had been perfunctory before, the line-owner's statement electrified him into action. Within two minutes he had closed all deck ramps, isolating all levels, one from another. The vault door and the cabin were microphotographed and cordagraphed. And the passengers who had lingered were ordered back to their staterooms.

Jimmy was one of the last to leave. The stupefaction of Renard had done much to lift his spirits. Renard represented that class of wealthy overlords he had been fighting for so long. The man was the keystone of a huge organization whose tentacles reached far to crush all legitimate competition.

He returned to his cabin and carefully locked the door. Then he touched the spring of the trunk's hidden compartment and reached for the necklace. His hand clawed air.

The compartment was empty! The jewel casket was not there.

III

Morning of the next day found Jimmy Starr sitting tensely before the intership visiphone in his cabin. His breakfast, brought by the steward

a quarter of an hour before, was untouched, and his eyes told of a sleepless night.

He had not the slightest doubt but that it was Andromeda who had entered his cabin during his absence and taken the necklace. But what now? Would she reveal herself and explain the mystery? Would she . . . ?

The call bell on the visiphone tinkled. Jimmy sprang to the controls.

Three short words came out of the speaker:

"Watch yourself, Jimmy!"

He scowled. Watch himself against what? He had followed her directions in every detail. The ship's officers and Renard now knew that the Nebula wasn't dead, that he was alive and one of the passengers. But that was all they did know. What mystery lay behind that necklace? Was it of sufficient importance to bring the Nebula back to life after an absence of two years? It didn't seem fair, keeping him in the dark this way.

As if in answer to his thoughts, a knock sounded on the door. Jimmy paced forward and opened it. A man and a woman stood before him. The man, impeccably attired in morning dress, was Hanford Dall, the newspaper syndicate man. But it was the woman who held Jimmy's gaze. Tall, svelte, clad in a tight-fitting dress of unrelieved black that revealed every contour of her figure, she stood there, smiling quietly; and her smile and her black lustrous eyes sent a warm flush coursing through Jimmy's vitals. He recognized her instantly as Lucrezia Masters, author of Stellar Flame, which outspoken book had already topped the thirty million mark in sales.

It was Hanford Dall who spoke. "Good morning," he said in his soft womanish way. "Could we speak with you a moment?"

He entered without waiting for

a reply. He lowered himself into a chair and began drumming his fingers nervously on the table top.

"James," he said, using Jimmy's assumed name, "you know Miss Masters, the authoress. You two should have a lot in common. In fact that's . . . er . . . the reason we're here."

"What do you mean?" Jimmy said.

"You wrote a book a year ago, entitled Trailing the Fugitive. All about the scientific deductive means of capturing the modern criminal. By Saturn! it was a good piece of work too. Most estimable."

Jimmy nodded slowly. He had written that book under the James name shortly after he had ceased his career as the Nebula. In it he had put down all the errors made by police and I.P. men, as learned from his own experiences. He had, of course, kept his identity a secret.

"As you probably know," Dall continued, "Renard's famous Necklace of Neptune was stolen last night by a thief who calls himself the Nebula. We--Miss Masters and I--want you to do us a favor."

"What sort of a favor?" Jimmy asked guardedly.

Dall seemed searching for words. "By Saturn! your book was a ringer--ha, excuse the pun--and I know you must have great ability in the field of criminology."

"Now as a recognized philanthropist, you alone of all the first class passengers have the right to visit the second and third class decks. We want you to do down there and fraternize with the men. It shouldn't be an impossible task to spot a man who doesn't belong with the others."

"I see," Jimmy said sarcastically. "You simply want me to find Renard's jewels. Is that all?"

"By Saturn! I'll make it worth your while," Dall continued. "You get me that necklace, and the Hanford Dall Newspaper interests will underwrite the entire construction cost of the university you plan to erect

on Callisto."

Jimmy lit a Martian cheroot. He said,

"Why?"

Lucrezia Masters approached and took up the story. Her eyes met Jimmy's, and he could smell her Ven-
usian sultra perfume.

"Let us say," she said, "that I am writing a book which eventually will be published in serial form in all of Mr. Dall's newspapers. Let us say that this book will be based on a new concept--the revelation of the immediate future.

"Time-spanners have been used by our scientists for generations, of course. We have a general vague idea of what the centuries ahead hold in store for us. We know that Earth and Venus will eventually disintegrate, that our known universe will merge eons hence with another universe, traveling through space and time close to our own. We know those facts and accept them casually.

"But did it ever occur to you what would happen to civilization if each individual knew exactly what was going to happen to his life tomorrow? Think of the social, the political, the financial possibilities."

Jimmy did think of it for a long moment. He said,

"Well?"

Lucrezia Masters seated herself on the arm of his chair and brought her head close to his own.

"Ebbit Renard's Necklace of Neptune," she said, "is somewhere aboard this ship in the hands of a thief. Those jewels contain the formula for a future-reading device that will make such dreams a possibility. A machine, in other words, that will enable its operator to probe the mysteries of the immediate future. We want you to get us that formula."

Jimmy sat there quietly, his face masking the emotions that were struggling within him. The woman was lying, of course. Deliberately concocting a fantastic story to lure

him into a profitable alliance. And yet . . . suppose it were true? His brain reeled at the possibilities. A time-spanner capable of revealing the immediate future!

With such a device a man could chart his life almost at will. Insurance companies would disappear overnight. The System's inter-planet stock market with the master exchange on Earth would collapse. Gambling casinos, sports events, every kind of competition, financial or otherwise, would wither and die. Wars would be fought--or would not be fought--because of the absolute knowledge just what battles would be won, which would be lost.

He got up, paced back and forth the length of the room. When he returned to his chair, Lucrezia Masters moved close to his side, awaiting his reply tensely. Her heady perfume stole into his nostrils like an opiate.

"I'll have to think it over," he said abruptly. "Give me an hour, and I'll have your answer."

After the pair had gone, he looked across at the visiphone, half expecting the voice of Andromeda to call out again. But the speaker remained silent. He left the cabin and made his way to the promenade deck.

The more he thought about it, the more he believed that Lucrezia Masters was telling the truth. It was no wonder that Hanford Dall wanted the missing formula. With such a device his newspapers would be all-powerful. Yet it occurred to Jimmy that both Dall and the authoress must have a deeper motive than simply the revelation of future news.

He paced the complete length of the deck twice without arriving at any conclusion. One thing was certain, neither of the pair was to be trusted. Womanish though he was, Hanford Dall was a man who would override all obstacles to gain an end.

Jimmy was gazing abstractedly at the passenger cosmoscope when a hand touched his shoulder. He

turned to gaze into the moon face of Ebbitt Renard.

"Care to take a stroll, Mr. James?" the line-owner said in his deep voice. "I haven't got over that affair of last night yet, and I need something to clear the cobwebs from my brain."

Jimmy nodded and fell in with Renard's clumsy stride. They paced along the deck for some distance in silence.

"You know," Renard said suddenly, "it's queer how one changes his opinion. Secretly I've always held the highest regard for this thief, the Nebula, for example. Last night he proved himself a fool."

Jimmy felt his pulse beat faster. "What do you mean?"

Renard smiled. "Installed in my cabin was a device so simple a child would have guarded against it. It will lead me to the guilty person and convict him beyond the shadow of a doubt."

They had reached the end of the promenade, and Renard suddenly opened a small door and motioned Jimmy to enter. The room within was quite bare, save for a metal chair in the center. In front of the chair was an illuminated graph with an electric pointer.

There was a glitter in Renard's eyes now. He said,

"Sit in the chair, please, Mr. James."

Jimmy hesitated, then slowly stepped forward and took his place. The line-owner stepped to the wall, threw a switch, and a pencil ray of blue light beamed down from the ceiling. Before him Jimmy saw the electric pointer tremble, then begin to move across the graph.

"You might call this a dust analyzer," Renard said. "You know, of course, that there is no dust in outer space, as we know it, and that therefore any particles found in the interior of this ship must be composed of interior objects: the furnishings, the clothing of the

passengers. The man who entered my cabin last night left behind more than a tricky calling card. He left his identification in dust, microscopic particles captured on an ultra-sensitive plate.

"This graph has been correlated to that dust. It is now testing the potential dust from your own person to see if there is any relationship. Watch the pointer, Mr. James."

Muscles tense, every fiber of his body alert, Jimmy sat there, eyes fixed on the panel before him. He had the impulse to leap from the chair and lunge for the door. Renard's right hand, bulging significantly in his coat pocket, warned him such a move would be foolhardy.

At the 50 mark the needle moved several seconds over the graph without wavering. Then suddenly it swung upward on a wide arc and with a little click rested on the double zero.

Renard stepped across to the door.

"Guard," he said to the uniformed man outside. "This man is the Nebula. Arrest him!"

IV

The prison chambers of the Star of Venus were in the lower hold. Above, bracketed from the ceiling, massive serpentine tubes, coated with sulphur dioxide frost, pulsed rhythmically to the vibration of the liner's motors. An iron cot and a metal table completed the furnishings.

Jimmy sat on the cot--its springs were plastic to prevent attempted suicide--and contemplated the future. It was black. Once the liner berthed at Callisto, he would be taken to the Barcarong, that prison notorious throughout the System. There, he would wait three weeks before being given a trial--in reality a series of psychological tortures fiendishly conceived to make him "cleanse his soul."

Unanswerable questions pounded through his brain. Had the Necklace of Neptune been recovered? Had it been traced to Andromeda? Were Hanford Dall and Lucrezia Masters suspected? Jimmy thought of the many times he had eluded the police.

"A string of jewels," he muttered. "Gew-gaws, and to think I blundered blindly into a trap."

But they were more than jewels. Even if Lucrezia Masters' story were a fabrication, the necklace must be significant in some way or Andromeda would not have gone to such extremes to obtain it.

The hours snailed by. Then a step sounded, the door opened, and a guard entered, carrying a tray of food. He moved to a table, then cast a cautious glance over his shoulder. From his pocket he took a small metal cylinder and placed it on the table. He turned quickly and left the room.

Alert, Jimmy picked up the cylinder and examined it. It looked like a miniature television without a grid. One end was flat and perforated like a receiver. He placed it to his ear and listened, but there was no sound.

Some trick of Renard's? He tossed the cylinder on the cot and turned to the food. He ate without relish, knowing only he must keep up his strength.

But abruptly he became aware of a fairy voice far away. He dived for the cylinder and again placed it to his ear.

Andromeda's voice was speaking to him!

"Listen carefully, Jimmy, and don't attempt to reply. The guard has been fixed. The door to your cell is unlocked. Wait five minutes, then follow the corridor to the third ramp. Take this passageway to Deck A. Halfway down the deck are the life boat cubicles. Wait there."

The voice ceased. Jimmy sat there motionless; he could feel a pulse

beating in his temple. It was like the days of old, Andromeda acting when the situation demanded action. The stipulated five minutes seemed an eternity, but at length he got up, paced quietly to the door of his cell and put pressure against it. It yielded, and the corridor without was empty. Moving cautiously, a yard at a time, he followed the corridor to the ramp junction.

Voices drew him up short. Two guards came sauntering toward him, talking casually. Jimmy darted into a small alcove and pressed flat against the wall, holding his breath. The guards passed on, unseeing.

The third ramp, she had said. He swung into it and began to move upward, walking on the balls of his feet. The ramp merged into a trio of passageways, the middle one bearing a sign with the single letter, "A." Moments later he was on the deck, breathing deeply the better air of the revigators.

A few passengers were here, standing in groups, strolling past the observation shield. Jimmy thrust his hands into his pockets and began moving casually forward, feigning a nonchalance he didn't feel. Presently he saw a figure some distance ahead turn from the rail and move toward him.

"Andromeda!" The name burst from him, an escape valve to his emotions.

There she was, lovely and unchanged, dark eyes set in an oval face, black hair cascading down from under a pert blue traveling cap. She placed a warning hand on his arm.

"Quick, Jimmy! This way!"

They moved into the shadow of one of the cubicles.

"Jimmy, have you been seen? Were you followed?"

He shook his head. "But it's only a matter of time," he said. "There isn't a place on the entire ship . . ."

"I've taken care of that. Here. Into this life boat!"

They entered the cigar-shaped cylinder, and the girl eased shut the hermetic hatch. Groping in the darkness, she found the control board and shoved the starting lever over.

"Hang on!"

Jimmy felt a gathering surge of power beneath him; then a lurch threw him off balance as the life boat turned on its automatic swivel and slipped noiselessly into the airlock. There was a sudden plop as of a thousand bottles breaking under heat.

He swallowed hard to relieve the pressure and glanced out the port. Briefly, like a camera flash, he saw the mother ship, the Star of Venus, receding like an enormous shadow before him. Then it was gone, and he was staring into the velvet blackness of outer space.

A light clicked on, flooding the cabin with a soft glow. Andromeda sat in the pilot's hydraulic chair, calmly adjusting controls, as she studied the illuminated cosmoscope before her.

"They'll probably know in a few mintues that we've escaped," she said.

She hadn't changed. The same laughing eyes with their glint of determination. Jimmy shoved his hands deep in his pockets.

"In case you don't know it, I'm still pretty much in the dark..." he began.

One of the tubes on the instrument panel flickered, and she leaned forward to move a vernier.

"You'll want to know why after that affair on Mars I disappeared. I'm not quite sure I know myself, Jimmy. My brother was implicated in that plot, and although he was innocent, he decided to make a fresh start on another planet. I went with him. I didn't write because . . . well, because I thought you would want it that way."

"Want it that way!" repeated Jimmy. "Good Lord!"

"But I watched you and your new career of Martin James. My brother

entered the mining business, and he asked me to go to Callisto to represent him in a business deal there. I didn't know until after I had boarded the ship that you were one of the passengers."

"But the Necklace of Neptune . . .?" said Jimmy.

She was silent a moment. "I'm coming to that. Ebbit Renard discovered the significance of that necklace months ago. In some way Hanford Dall, the newspaper syndicate man, and Lucrezia Masters discovered the secret too. I happened to overhear Dall talking to Miss Masters on deck. They planned to steal the necklace when it was removed from the vault when the Star of Venus landed. Two and two make four, Jimmy. I simply enlisted your aid to head them off."

Slowly the pieces of the puzzle were beginning to take form in Jimmy's mind.

"But why?" he demanded.

"Why, Jimmy? Because if Dall and that Masters woman succeeded in getting the necklace they would have the formula for a time-spanner that would topple the supports of the entire Solar System. Think of it! The Dall newspapers on every planet printing tomorrow's news today. There would be no future, no hope, no thrill of expectancy. Those who had lived sordid lives would see only more sordid days stretching on ahead of them. Life would be flat, tragic, terrible. No, Jimmy--I--we--had to stop it!"

He nodded slowly. As always her keen brain opened new perspectives for him.

"And now what?" he said.

"Now we're going to throw that necklace back into space from where it came. You'll find it in the bottom compartment of that cabinet."

He paced across the little cabin, opened the cabinet and took out the casket. Under the soft glow of the bulkhead lights the hieroglyphics gleamed dully. Pushing back the

cover, he took out the necklace and began examining it with great care.

"You know," he said presently, "these stones look pretty solid to me. It doesn't seem much of a formula that could be hidden in an object so small."

The girl frowned; then her eyes flashed as she followed his train of thought.

"The casket!"

He carried the casket to a folding table. Andromeda set the automatic controls and moved to his side. With his knife Jimmy gently cut away the plush lining. Beneath this was a thin veneer of condor wood, fused with the side walls. He inserted the knife blade carefully and pried up this covering. A cry of satisfaction came to his lips.

A transparent glassite panel was there, containing a multitude of tiny dials. Beneath it, in a hermetic chamber, was a maze of wiring, queer hourglass-shaped tubes and coils. Three words were engraved on the panel.

Varsan Kleras mota

"The words are Martian," the girl said. "Time flows forever."

Jimmy nodded. "It must be the key, the rosetta stone to the hieroglyphics."

He poised a pencil over a paper and began to write slowly. He wrote words and combinations of words. Above each group of letters he traced one of the strange hieroglyphics. A quarter of an hour passed before he looked up.

"Listen to this. I, Zedra III of the Fourth Dynasty cast this evil secret to the gods. And I seal forever the tomb that holds its Base in the city of Konnivan. Mark 12, Lock 6. May time and happiness return."

Andromeda shook her head. "It doesn't make sense to me."

"But don't you see?" Jimmy's eyes were wide with excitement now.

"Zedra was an ancient King of Callisto. He realized the dangers to his people of such a time-spanner. The casket apparently contains only the operating controls. The larger mechanism is located--sealed is the word used--in the city of Konnivan."

"I never heard of Konnivan."

"It's a legendary city somewhere on the bottom of equatorial Callisto's Inner Sea. Volcanic fires beneath the planet's crust make such a sea possible, you know, and . . ."

The automatic visiscreen clicked on, interrupting him:

"News flash!" said the voice of the Telescaster. "Ebbit Renard, millionaire spaceship-line owner who will arrive shortly on Callisto, has just reported the theft of his celebrated Necklace of Neptune. The thief, who with the aid of an accomplice managed to escape, is said to be working under direct orders of a high official of the Government of Ganymede. Steps will be taken at once to have this official extradited and stand trial."

The screen clicked into silence and Jimmy rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Ganymede official," he repeated slowly. "Now what in thunder does that mean?"

Andromeda's eyes were opaque. For a long moment she was silent. "It doesn't seem to make sense, does it?" she said.

She returned to the pilot's seat and made some minor adjustment of a control. Abruptly she spun about and faced him.

"Jimmy, I think I understand. We're up against something big. Something monstrous. It's . . . it's war!"

"War?" He stared at her.

"Listen." She began to speak rapidly in a low tense voice. "Callisto and Ganymede have been at sword's points for months now. It has needed only a spark to set off hostilities. By placing the blame for the theft of those jewels on

a Ganymede official, Renard hopes to strain relationships between the two planets to the breaking point."

He shook his head. "With what motive?"

Her face was pale. "That's cleverly hidden, but it's diabolically clear. Renard operates one of the biggest ship companies in the System. He simply wants to sell more vessels for war purposes."

Slowly Jimmy turned and began to pace the cabin. There was a pulse beating in his temple now as the significance of it all smote him. Absently he drew out his pen knife, balanced its point on the palm of his hand.

"Yes," he said, "it all ties in. And Renard intended to use that time-spanner in his plan. With its aid he would know definitely which planet would be successful in the war." He drew in his breath in a low whistle.

"If we accept that, then it must follow Renard has the means of constructing a duplicate control device like the one in this jewel casket."

"And that would mean," continued Andromeda breathlessly, "that he is heading for the Base of the time-spanner in the city of . . . what did you call it?"

"Konnivan," replied Jimmy. "We've got to head him off."

V

Three days later, Earth time, the life boat hovered over the crimson Inner Sea of Callisto's equatorial zone, blasted her retarding rockets and dropped gently to the surface. A single control converted the life boat into a swift marine vehicle. Jimmy opened the hatch and went out on the little deck.

He found himself gazing into a strange world. The waves that slapped the craft's prow were blood-red, alive with billions of microscopic vermiforms. High above him great

flocks of Ularlees, half avian, half saurian, wheeled and soared, uttering strange mewling cries. He opened one of the Planetary Pilot Books which he had found below in the cabin and pointed out a passage to Andromeda.

KONNIVAN: An ancient legendary city of the Konns, mentioned several times in Callistan mythology. This metropolis was supposedly inundated in the twenty-third century and is said to lie somewhere on the floor of the Inner Sea. According to Jon Homrath, the Callistan scientist, the Inner Sea is made possible by internal volcanic fires beneath the satellite's crust and by the radio-active quality of the atmosphere induced by pondular radiation from the mother planet, Jupiter. At the turn of the century an expedition set out from Capital City with a large amount of undersea gear, hoping to find and explore Konnivan. The entire expedition disappeared, never to be heard from again.

"We've got one advantage over that expedition," Jimmy said. "Remember the directions given in the hieroglyphics on the necklace casket? Mark 12, Lock 6? We have only to find what they mean and go there."

But the process was not as simple as that. In the cabin on the life boat Jimmy struggled with the strange markings, trying to find an answer. As he worked, the telecaster on the visiscreen spoke at intervals.

Ebbit Renard had landed at Capital City and told again his story of the theft of the Neptune Necklace. The Government of Callisto, incensed, had demanded the arrest of the Ganymedian official who, according to Renard, was responsible. Ganymede had indignantly refused. Diplomatic relations between the two moons were approaching the breaking point.

And then out of a clear sky Jimmy had it. An old atlas, part of the life boat's library, gave him the

clue. Locks and marks were longitudinal and latitudinal inscriptions comparable but not paralleling the modern zeronizal map markings of the present day. He had only to figure out what constituted zero, and this he did after two attempts. Andromeda looked over his shoulder.

"According to that," she said slowly, "we're close to the place right now."

Through the red water they headed south by east. At intervals now low hummocks of land appeared above the surface of the sea. These hummocks were heavily covered by a dense blanket of vegetation, leprous grey in color; and in the giant pod-shaped trees flocks of purple Ularlees perched silently, watching them. The entire eastern sky was taken up by the enormous disc of Jupiter, saffron colored now but with its familiar brown bands.

Toward noon they entered a vast drift of milk-white londula blossoms, stretching on before them as far as the eye could see: cup-shaped floating flowers, each with a miniature head in its center, replete with soft eyes and enticing lips. But they were Loreleis, lying there in wait. Once when a low-flying kittle-bird swooped close to the surface of the water, a half dozen of those innocent-appearing heads shot upward on vine-like appendages to seize the creature with incredible speed. Followed a horrible combat as the heads fought with each other. The flowers gave off a thick perfume that crept down Jimmy's throat and in some way made him think of the perfume of Lucrezia Masters.

The air was thick and clammy, like an enormous hothouse. As they continued south that air began to take on a strange quality. It appeared porous at first, flecked with tiny spots and drifting streaks. Then the landscape, seen through it, became fantastically changed. Water and sky were reversed; the island hummocks hung like thick grey

clouds above them, pod-shaped trees pointing downward.

"Refract-zone," Jimmy explained. "Metallic salts in the atmosphere do something to the light wave-lengths. Like a mirage back on earth."

It was shortly before dusk when Jimmy sighted the hydro-car. Zooming through the red waves, the low elliptical craft passed them a long distance off, moving on a tangent. Quickly he manoeuvred the life boat into the lea of one of the hummock islands.

"That's Renard," Andromeda said shortly. "I'd know the design of his craft anywhere. Do you suppose he knows where the submerged city is?"

Jimmy didn't answer. Through binoculars he was watching the hydro-car disappear on the other side of the island. Then he swung the glasses westward and suddenly uttered a sharp exclamation.

Two enormous water-skippers were bounding over the water toward them, cavernous mouths open wide, three-jointed spider legs flexing up and down. They swung abreast of the hummock and came on at terrific speed.

"Quick! Into the trees!" yelled Jimmy. "There isn't time to screw down the hatch."

They raced across the spongy ground of the little island. Behind him it seemed to Jimmy he could hear the gasping inhalations of the two monsters' breath. They reached the outer wall of the pod-shaped growths, fought their way inward a few yards and threw themselves flat.

At the edge of the beach the two skippers drew up, uttering strange hissing growls. One of them swept one of its jointed legs forward, and a thick pod tree a foot from Jimmy's head was clipped off as by a mighty knife. For many moments while his heart stood still, he crouched there, one arm encircling Andromeda's waist.

But the skippers apparently were low in the evolutionary scale. Deprived of the sight of their quarry, they lost interest in the island. Presently they turned and went bounding off over the surface of the water again.

Andromeda sat up with a sigh of relief. "That was too close for comfort," she said.

Jimmy was silent. He was staring ahead where the pod trees thinned somewhat. Abruptly he was on his feet, plunging through the thick undergrowth, drawing the girl after him.

"What is it?" she demanded. "Where are you going?"

The trees fell away into an open glade. Before them was a large up-raised dais, formed of crystalline callite that caught the glow of Jupiter in the sky and refracted it in a thousand lambent needles of fire. Beyond the dais, half hidden by the encroaching pod trees, lay the rusting remnants of machinery: dredging screws, chain shovels, and fulmination lockers.

Jimmy strode forward. The middle of the dais was cut away in a rude circular opening, and into this cavern angled a flight of steps.

"It's the entrance to the ancient city of Konnivan," Jimmy said slowly. "It must have been buried by a volcanic eruption, and the expedition found it. But what became of them?"

"Jimmy, I don't like this place. There's . . . something in the air."

"Stay here," he said. "I'll be back in a moment."

He ran quickly to the life boat and returned with a powerful flash lamp. Then cautiously man and girl began to descend the debris-littered stairs. Down, down they went. The walls were formed of ancient masonry, carved in some places with the same hieroglyphics Jimmy had seen on the necklace casket; the air was thick and damp, smelling faintly of spices.

The passageway ended abruptly before a huge door which had been chiseled out of solid rock. Jimmy

grasped the heavy bar and swung it open. He thrust the flash lamp into the opening and then clicked it off again.

"Maybe you'd better go back," he said to the girl.

She laughed nervously, took the flash from his hands and switched it on. A low whisper of horror came to her lips.

A short narrow chamber stretched before them. Lying on the floor in various postures were twenty skeletons. Skeletons of Earthmen and Callistans. Their clothing had long since fallen to dust. Rusted remnants of blasters and heat pistols lay at their sides. In the center

. . . In the center squatted the calcified body of a huge sea slug. The Manthrus-econdivar! Its repulsive head still showed the gaping wounds made by the blasters.

"That's what happened to the expedition," Jimmy said. "They were trapped in here with this thing and fought to the death. They . . ."

His eyes dropped downward to a glittering bit of metal at his feet. He picked it up and turned it over and over in his hands. The thing was a small charm. It bore the crescent and circle design of the Hanford Dall Newspaper Syndicate.

Andromeda caught her breath. "Oh, Jimmy, they've got here ahead of us!"

He nodded, a feeling of dismay sweeping over him. And then as he stood there he saw that this room was in reality a water lock. Great water vents opened at intervals along the four walls, and at one side was an ancient valve control. A half-dozen water-suits, with their glass-ite helmets and oxygen tanks, lay in one corner, left there by the expedition.

In a moment Jimmy had selected two of them, tested them, and found them in working order. He voiced a single warning as they donned the suits.

"Look out for traps. If Dall

is here, he'll do anything to gain his end."

He opened the valve. With a rush and a roar the water surged in upon them, quickly flooding the chamber from ceiling to floor. Jimmy waited a moment to permit his eyes to adjust themselves. Then he pushed the contact lever that opened the final door.

As it swung open, he felt himself doubting the reality of it all. Across the threshold lay a scene fantastic. Bathed in a soft lemon radiance curious elliptical and cube-shaped buildings stretched on either side of a broad paved street. The segmented walls were pastel-hued, the colors blending softly, kaleidoscopically one into another. Great ensnarled tessellations of marine growth hung in gently waving festoons from the roofs. Moving slowly in and out were deep marine fish, all of them jet black in color.

Jimmy had tested the microphone in his helmet and found he could converse with Andromeda. He said,

"It's Konnivan all right. Remember we're looking for the time-spanner Base. If you see anything, call out."

A step at a time they began to move down the underwater street. Here was silence and desolation: the silence of a city buried under fathoms of water, the desolation of a metropolis whose citizenry had long since passed into the limbo.

Once Jimmy drew up and held a warning hand while a wriggling swarm of sea serpents--hydrophinae--swam past. Midway down the street a large building with a conical tower attracted him. They moved across to it, entered, and found themselves in another water lock. Jimmy nodded.

"Apparently," he said, "the ancient Konns lived here for a long time after the inundation took place. They constructed these locks which made living under water possible."

The girl nodded and turned toward the door again. Suddenly she gave

a low cry and pointed toward the street. There, walking slowly toward them, was a single watersuit-clad figure. Even at that distance in the half-light Jimmy recognized the man as Ebbitt Renard.

"Jimmy, what'll we do? He'll kill you if he finds you here."

He eased shut the door, moved to the water valve and swung it over. Instantly the sound of distant pumps was audible, and the water began to swirl out the vents. Minutes later they were standing in a dry chamber with only a few drops of moisture trickling down from the ceiling.

Hesitantly Jimmy removed his helmet and tested the air. It was clear. They took off their watersuits, leaving them on a rack in a corner and entered the door on the far wall. Once again amazement claimed them.

They stood at the end of a mighty columned council hall, from which galleries radiated at intervals of every few yards. The chamber was a great labyrinth, for the polished metal walls were set at angles and refracted the scene in a thousand false corridors. In the ceiling above were mosaics and murals, depicting scenes from the lives of that race which had lived here so long ago.

Jimmy chose one of the galleries at random, and with the girl at his side began to move down its length. Flanking the gallery were smaller rooms and alcoves, and these they saw were sumptuously furnished: golden chairs and tables, carved divans and rich tapestry.

But over everything hung a pall of silence.

"It's like a place of the dead," Andromeda said, suppressing a shudder.

For almost an hour they explored the building. If Renard had followed them, they saw no sign of him, nor in fact any other form of life. And yet, permeating these brooding halls and galleries, Jimmy felt an unseen

menace, as if some invisible horror lay in wait for them.

They were far toward the end of one of the smaller corridors when the sound of voices reached them. Jimmy sidled into a small alcove and stood still listening. There was a panel of lattice work along one wall and by standing on a divan he could see into the next room.

Two figures sat across a small table there, a man and a woman. Though both were garbed in the familiar blue of the Callistan middle class, the man in a tunic, the woman in a short skirt with almost transparent gauze blouse, it did not need a second glance for Jimmy to see that they were his companions of a few hours ago, Hanford Dall and Lucrezia Masters. The authoress was talking.

"We've been in this house of mirrors more than three hours now, and we've seen no trace of it. How do you know the time-spanner isn't in some other part of the city?"

Hanford Dall smiled. "Because this is the council building of the Konns and the only logical place for it. By Saturn! the damned thing must be in one of these infernal galleries. We've got to keep looking, that's all."

"Meanwhile what of Renard and the Nebula?"

"What about them?"

"Both of them will find this place sooner or later. And the Nebula's a wizard at opening things."

Dall scowled. He sat there a long time, brooding with his thoughts. Suddenly he cocked his head to the side as if listening, then, a glitter in his eyes, turned to the woman.

"Wait here for me. I'll be back in a moment."

Through the lattice work Jimmy saw Hanford Dall get to his feet and leave. Jimmy waited impatiently for his return. When the voice behind him spoke, it took him completely unawares.

"You can turn around slow, Mr. Starr or James, or whatever your name is. I've got you covered."

Even as he turned and saw the newspaperman's heat gun leveled at him, Jimmy realized his stupid blunder. Dall's small agate eyes were a mixture of triumph and perplexity. He paced forward warily, calling over his shoulder, "Lucrezia, come in here. I've caught something rather worth while."

He stepped to Jimmy's side and ran his hand over his clothing, searching for a weapon. Lucrezia Masters entered the room, took the situation in at a glance and moved toward Andromeda. As the girl jerked away, the authoress jerked her roughly. She found no gun and she stood back, hands on hips, sultry eyes blazing fiercely.

"So you're the Nebula, eh?" Dall said. "Master cracksman and escape artist. Well, by Saturn, I rather think you'll have a time slipping away this time."

Jimmy's brain was working like a millrace. Only too well he realized how completely escape was cut off. There was only one entrance to this council hall, through the water locks. Even granting that he could manage to trick or overpower Dall, there was still Ebbit Renard to deal with. He seized this last thought as an ace in the hole.

"Seems to be the gathering of the clan," he said quietly.

Hanford Dall studied him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you're going to have another visitor very shortly. The man who originally owned the Necklace of Neptune."

"Renard! Here!" Dall's face grew black as he swung about, listening. "Good of you to warn me, Nebula. We'll go where he can't find us. If you'll be good enough to step out that door, please . . ."

Resistance, Jimmy knew, would be futile now. With Andromeda at his side, he let himself be marched

down the galleries, deep into the bowels of the building. They climbed a short ramp, entered a higher level. Dall guided them through an open doorway into a small circular room completely bare of furnishings.

"I think you'll find this chamber a most interesting one," he said. "Lucrezia and I explored it only an hour ago, and we both agreed the Konns who built this structure knew quite a bit of science."

He went out, shutting the door after him. Jimmy swung about and paced the length of the room, examining the walls. He saw no opening, no window, but neither did he see anything to raise his fears.

Andromeda closed her eyes wearily. "I'm sorry I got you into this," she said slowly. "I did know what we'd be up against."

Jimmy made no reply. He had suddenly become aware of the music!

Faint and far-off, it sounded, a fairy melody that tinkled and trilled along the high octaves, gradually descending the scale. It was music full of lure and witchery, and he felt as if he could know no greater pleasure than to listen to it forever. Deeper and deeper it went, until the booming chords rumbled through the rock chamber with all the overtones of a cathedral organ. Andromeda's face wore a puzzled expression.

Still lower the music continued. Now a single note like the vibration of a mighty bass viol pulsed through the room. Then that note went beyond the hearing range, and with it came horror. Sub-sonic vibration below the auditory scale, grinding at every fiber of the human organism.

Jimmy flung himself to the floor, clamped his hands over his ears. "We've got . . . to get out!" he cried. But the door had no latch on the inside. Suddenly he whirled on the girl.

"Sing!" he cried. "For the love of heaven, sing!"

She stared at him dumbly.

He seized her arm, dragged her close to the door. "Sing," he repeated. "Anything, but as high as your voice will register."

It was madness, yet Jimmy was gambling on a last chance. Standing before the door, her eyes wide with pain, the girl sang in a quavering soprano voice. Higher and higher she trilled, and suddenly a great relief swept over them. Simultaneously the door slowly opened of its own accord.

Jimmy sprang across the threshold and drew the girl after him.

"I . . . I don't understand," she said.

"We fought sound with a sound," he explained. "Ultra-sonic against sub-sonic, or rather the nearest equivalent we had to ultra-sonic."

They were at the far end of the outer corridor now. Two smaller ramps angled off this gallery at opposite directions, but neither looked imposing. There was no sign of Hanford Dall or Lucrezia Masters.

Twenty feet forward a small flight of steps led upward. Above it was a small direction panel bearing the Konn hieroglyphic equivalents of the numerals 12 and 6.

Andromeda pointed. "Lock 12, Mark 6," she said. "Couldn't the same directions as given on the casket apply here?"

For answer he strode forward into the stair channel. They climbed up past two levels, found their way blocked by a massive door. Jimmy pulled it open and stared within.

"This is it!" he said shortly.

The room was not impressive. It was long and narrow, with bare walls and a polished floor. Only one object stood in it, a rectangular block of strindulated black carponium. On the near side of this block, midway down from the top, was a small panel, equipped with a single dial and a series of studs.

Andromeda was about to rush forward, but Jimmy held her back with a restraining hand.

"Wait!" he said. "It's too easy. There must be a trap somewhere."

He took off his shoe and cast it out before him. It fell with a dull thud, and nothing happened. The floor remained solid. He led the way across the threshold cautiously, a step at a time. Not until they had reached a point half way to the carponium block did Jimmy relax his tension. Then . . .

There was a series of fast clicks above him, and swift as a shadow a wall of transparent glassite dropped down before them. He wheeled.

"Back!" he cried. But it was too late. Ten feet in back of them a second wall fell into position. They were prisoners!

And now as he stared in dismay through the forward wall, Jimmy saw a familiar figure enter a doorway on the far side of the room and stride clumsily toward them. Ebbitt Renard! The man's moon face was wreathed in a smile of triumph. He began to speak, and his voice reached them clearly through the glassite wall.

"We meet again, Mr. James. I don't mind telling you that this time I've been waiting for you. As the Nebula, you've established quite a reputation as a cracksman. And as a cracksman, you're going to help me."

Jimmy made no reply.

"You will note," Renard went on, "that you are caught between two walls. The ancient Konns fashioned that trap as a guard to the secret this room contains. No amount of effort on your part will raise those walls, and you will remain there until I touch the control."

The nails of Jimmy's hands were biting into his palms. "What do you want?" he said quietly.

"I want you to give me directions to open that cabinet of stone. We both know that is in it, Mr. James, the Base for the time-spanner. I might be able to blast it open, I suppose, although carponium is pretty

indestructible, but I'm afraid such an action might injure the Base. I have a duplicate operating unit like the one in the jewel casket." He paused.

"No doubt you have guessed my motive in obtaining the spanner. But that's beside the point. I am now going over to that panel, and I will describe it to you in detail. You will then give me directions what to do."

Almost jauntily he turned, without waiting an answer, paced across to the cabinet of stone and halted before it.

"There is a single dial with the markings from zero to a hundred. The needle trembles but does not fluctuate as I move my hand before it. There are five studs below, three of them with readings to ten, one to fifteen. On either side is a small contact switch, pretty badly corroded. And below, center, is something that looks like a short rod with a lump of hardened clay at the end."

Still Jimmy made no reply. He glanced at Andromeda, and the girl's lips were set in defiance.

"Stubborn, eh?" Renard said. "Very well, I can wait." He leaned against the carponium cabinet and smoked his cheroot. Jimmy made fists of his hands.

"If only I could get at him," he muttered aloud. "If . . ."

Andromeda gave a short cry. "The walls! They're moving!"

He looked at the floor, and a shock ran through him. Almost imperceptibly the glassite walls were edging inward, decreasing the size of their prison. He turned and said huskily,

"All right, Renard. You win. Turn the dial to zero to start."

Smiling triumphantly, Renard bent over the panel.

"Zero," he said. "Now what?"

"Now turn it very slowly and see if you can feel a tumbler fall into position."

Renard turned the dial slowly from left to right, then looked over his shoulder with a scowl. "Didn't feel a thing. Hurry, damn you. I haven't got all day."

Jimmy gritted his teeth. He was playing for time. But from all sides the situation seemed closed against him. He said,

"Try setting your dial at the fifty mark. Now close the two contact switches, making sure the contacts are clean." He watched as Renard followed his instructions. "Now . . ."

Jimmy looked upward and saw it then. For a moment his heart skipped a beat as the full significance of it surged upon him.

High above in the ceiling ornamental gargoyles perched at intervals of every few yards. They were greenish gold in color, formed of Callistean telcrite. As Renard threw over the two contact switches, Jimmy saw the eyes of those gargoyles light up. And there was something else on the ceiling. In the center, just under the apex of the roof, was a shadow, a composite shadow cast by the light beams emitting from the gargoyles' eyes. Renard touched one of the studs on the panel, and those gargoyle eyes grew brighter, darkening that shadow perceptibly.

Pulse racing, Jimmy kept his eyes trained above him.

"Turn stud one a quarter around," he ordered. "Turn stud two half around." Then as the shadow dimmed, he added quickly, "turn stud two back a quarter turn."

He continued to call out directions while he studied the shadow. When it had reached what seemed to be its darkest coloring, he ordered Renard back to the main dial.

And now excitement began to surge within him. As the line-owner slowly moved the dial, that shadow began to change into a three-dimensional entity. The magic eyes from the flanking gargoyles glowed and concentrated their light upon it. A head took form, ugly and repulsive;

a feathered body swelled disproportionately; long sharp talons developed. Renard spoke aloud the passing numerals on the dial in his cellar voice,

"Sixty . . . sixty-two . . . sixty-four . . . sixty-six . . ."

At sixty-eight the shadow became a gargoyle like its companions, complete in every detail. At seventy it wavered and trembled, and the forked tail began to lash back and forth. Seventy-five and the thing, loathsome and alive, hung there, evil eyes riveted on Renard.

"An electro-telepathic machine," Jimmy whispered to the girl. "Concentrated thought-waves given delayed animation." To Renard he said, "Hold it at seventy-five. Are there any more controls?"

The line-owner shook his bald head. "Just this lump of hardened clay." He glanced at his watch. "Damn you, quit stalling."

"Pull it out slowly," Jimmy ordered.

Renard seized the heavy ball and pulled it with both hands. There was a whirl of internal machinery, and the entire panel slid downward; simultaneously a flat shelf swung outward. In the center of this shell rested a strange and complicated mechanism.

The time-spanner!

Renard uttered a cry of triumph as his eyes fell upon it. He ran to the far side of the room and returned with a small box which contained the operating-control, duplicate of the one in the jewel box. The line-owner placed the box next to the spanner and feverishly began to make adjustments.

He was oblivious now to Jimmy and Andromeda on the other side of the glassite wall. He didn't see the two figures who entered a door on the far side of the room and stopped short, staring at him. Lucrezia Masters leveled a small blue-nosed heat pistol, but Hanford Dall pulled her hand down.

It was a strange tableau now.

By the carponium cabinet Renard's fingers were fumbling frantically with the operating-control. And suddenly he stood back with an exclamation.

A milky white curtain of light had spewed up from the time-spanner, to form a wavering screen above it. On that screen a scene slowly took shape. Jimmy saw towers, domes and buildings come into view with stereoscopic clarity, and a moment later he recognized the skyline of Capital City.

But it was a city gone mad. Workmen were frantically erecting ray gun shields over the outer walls. Armored troops were parading down the streets and avenues. High in the sky above the metropolis stratoships and cruisers circled restlessly back and forth.

The scene focused to a newspaper office, and Jimmy read the headlines. It was war!

Renard was almost beside himself now. Hands trembling, he seized the control and moved it another notch. The scene blurred, and in frantic haste he turned again to the clay ball and yanked it still farther outward.

Then it happened! Up above in the ceiling the great center gar-goyle ceased its restless movements. It poised motionless a moment, then dropped like a plummet.

Shadow or animate life, mirage or delayed telepathic image--it descended straight toward the machine which had conceived it--the time-spanner. It struck with a blinding flash of light and the roar of a thousand thunders. The walls of the room shook and swayed; an entire section of the floor was rent asunder to leave a gaping hole; and the carponium cabinet seemed to fall apart, section by section, slowly disintegrating.

The glassite walls too which had held Andromeda and Jimmy prisoners were shattered by the concussion. Jimmy sprang over the shards of bro-

ken glass, and the girl followed.

Of the three persons--Renard, Hanford Dall, and Lucrezia Masters--there was no sign. Where the carponium cabinet and the time-spanner had been, there was only a pile of debris and a choking cloud of dust.

Jimmy paced cautiously to the outer edge of the ragged hole in the floor. Here the newspaper man and the authoress had stood only a moment before. The hole revealed the level below, but down there all was hidden by a mound of broken masonry and stonework.

"That ends it," Jimmy said slowly to Andromeda. "Come." He took her arm. "Let's get out of here."

Three days later the Callistan Council of Interplanetary Affairs in Capital City held an emergency session. In the blue gallery, reserved for outstanding visitors, were the two ambassadors from Ganymede, the famed philanthropist Martin James, and a dark-haired young woman.

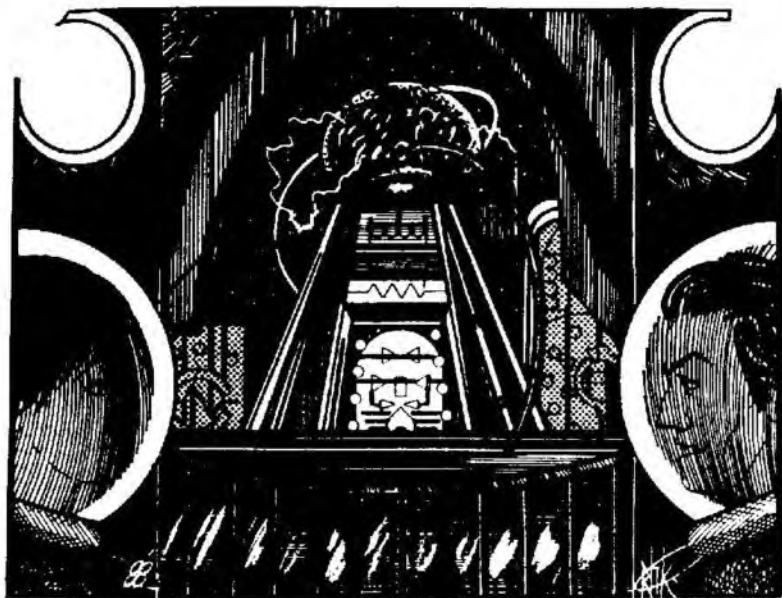
It required just eighteen minutes for Martin James to explain the plot attempt of the late Ebbit Renard to force a war between the two Jovian satellites, and to describe the workings of the time-spanner.

"Although," he concluded, "I did see into the future by means of the spanner and viewed therein a state of war between Callisto and Ganymede, I am convinced that there exists in our cosmos a condition of more than one future. In other words, what I saw not necessarily will happen, but only might happen. If we removed the cause--in this case the disagreement between the two planets--we bring into creation an entirely different effect."

The Council went to work. A quarter of an hour later the two ambassadors from Ganymede were shaking hands with the Callistan ministers and smiling broadly.

"Let's go," Jimmy said to Androm-

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BRAIN-SLAVES OF THE ASTEROID BELT

by Pierre Comtois

Fearless space miners uncover
an age-old threat to earth!

"Hey, skipper!" called out Luke McMuna, the Balerafon II's navigation officer.

"What is it, Luke?" I asked, crossing the control deck to his post.

"Not sure," he said. "I mean, I know what I've got, but I'm not sure what it means." He handed the earphones over to me, and I placed one of them to my ear. A series of high-low frequency patterns registered in my brain, trying hard to mean something to me, but failing. I shrugged and gave Luke back

his 'phones. "You know I can't usually make anything out of this stuff except the standard signals; you said you knew what they were but not what they meant. Tell me what I just heard and maybe I'll fill you in on what it means."

Luke gave me a skeptical look but gave me what I wanted anyway. "Well, skipper, we just picked up these signals a few minutes ago, at exactly the same time we entered the asteroid belt."

The asteroid belt was a navigator's nightmare of chunks of ice

and rock circling the solar system between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, creating a moving obstacle right in the path of the best trade routes between the two planets. The Holy Roman Empire Bureau for the Regulation of Space Commerce strictly prohibits civilian ships from cruising anywhere near the belt, instructing them to make a detour above the plane of the ecliptic, avoiding the dangerous zone. Of course, Space Cargoes, Inc. would never have become number one if I never took any chances. So I routinely took the Balerafun II slowly through the fields of rock, effectively cutting our travel time in half, making it possible for Ruben and I to shave twenty percent off the price of our cargoes on arrival in Mars Central.

"I zeroed in on the readings," continued Luke, "and found that it's coming from one of the bigger chunks out there."

"Is it a distress signal?" I hoped it wasn't. The time I'd have to spend checking it out would cut deep into my profits.

"Like none I've ever heard before; no, it's not a distress call, skipper--I'm sure of that." He leaned forward and threw the Pulsar Search switch, watching the screen in front of him for a few seconds.

"It's not a distress call--that's for sure."

I breathed easy, but my curiosity had been aroused; just what was it that was sending these signals out here? Then Luke answered my unspoken question.

"It's coming from one big chunk of ice and rock, bearing two-two-zero. . . . Now this is nuts."

"What?"

"The asteroid isn't tumbling like all the others; it's keeping absolutely still. It's been that way for the last few minutes."

"That's impossible. Luke, check your instruments."

He did as he was ordered and came up blank. There was an asteroid

out there acting in a way no asteroid ever did before. In a way that no asteroid could possibly do. In a second, I calculated the advantages of making some sort of important find against the disadvantages of lost time and came up even.

"What's all the excitement over here?" broke in the element that tipped the odds for investigation.

It was Dolores Benetto, Ruben's daughter. Dede to everyone else, and Deeds to me. For the dozenth time, I cursed my partner for forcing me to take her along for the run. She had been attending advanced language studies on Ganymede Station, but when she graduated Ruben wanted her back at the office as soon as possible to start handling our foreign language accounts from Earth. I held out as long as I could, of course, but in the end Ruben's senior partnership won out. That was one of the reasons I made the interplanetary runs and he sat at the office counting the money; he had the connections for the loans we needed and all I had was the Balerafun II and my pilot's skill. And although Deeds and I have been more or less engaged for the past couple of years, it still didn't mean a thing to my crew; they felt having any woman on board ship was unlucky. And now this happens; maybe there was something to it after all.

I turned to face her and said, "Something funny on one of the asteroids. We're going to have to check it out."

She looked at me with those doe eyes that made me putty in her presence when Ruben first introduced her to me. She asked, "When do we go down?" She smiled, the dimples appearing on cue, and kind of tossed her long, brown hair in that careless fashion that dared me to say she wasn't going.

"Would it mean anything to you if I told you that it might be too dangerous for a woman down there?"

"Alexander King, if you don't

let me go with you, I'll make life for you so miserable . . ."

"Okay, okay, you can come." I already knew what that threat meant, and tried to console myself that I'd never have her aboard ship again. "But you stay close to me and do exactly as you're told. Got that?"

She saluted smartly. "Aye aye, skipper," and bounced away to check the pressure suits.

I felt more than saw Luke looking at me, a grin playing at the edges of his mouth. "All right, mister, back to work!"

I tongued the viewer switch on the inside of my helmet and watched the tiny television screen as it was lowered from over my head to stop just before my right eye. I closed my left and said, "Okay, Luke, run that piece by me again." In a space of time too short for the brain to register, a picture appeared on the tiny screen before me, showing the rough surface of the asteroid from which the signals had emanated. Slowly, the camera panned across its face until it bisected a great and regular trough that stretched off the screen to either side. The first time I saw the thing, I drew a blank. Then all the excitement of my boyhood returned as the thought struck me that I was looking upon a man-made object. An object obviously hidden from prying eyes in the asteroid belt, an area where to come across it by accident was a one in a million chance.

I tried to control my mounting excitement with the reminder that the Empire had strict laws against any unauthorized excursions into the asteroid belt. To hide secret projects? I had to consider the thought; after all, the only other explanation was that the thing was extra-human, and that was almost completely impossible. Never in the entire history of man in space had there ever been any evidence for other than human occupation of

the universe. And if this was some new, spectacular find, it could be the single greatest event in the history of man since the victory of the Spanish Armada and the defeat of the rising tide of Protestant rebellion in the sixteenth century.

Now I watched again, as the camera pulled back until the entire length of the trench was visible. From end to end, it measured at least five miles, and at one end was situated a featureless blockhouse of enormous proportions.

"Clint," I called to the ship's engineering officer over my microphone, "tell me again what you think about this thing?"

"I haven't changed my mind, skipper," he answered. "I'm sure this is a space catapult of a design similar to those I once studied in early Earth space exploration efforts. They were used to sling the raw ore mined on the moon back into Earth orbit for collection by ships from the earth's surface. Only in this case, from its configuration and the paucity of any sort of ore on this piece of rock, I can only conclude that it's a weapon of some sort. Until I get more information, I stand on that opinion."

"Thanks," I said, but I still didn't like it. I tongued the off switch and the camera swung away, clearing my vision for another scan of the terrain immediately in front of me.

The blockhouse and trench stood on a relatively small piece of rock that stuck out of a larger field of ice like a small island. Not knowing what was in the blockhouse, I ordered the landing party placed at the end of the track farthest from the blockhouse.

The Balerafon II stood glistening against the glare of stars and ice-encrusted asteroids that moved slowly overhead, enhancing the feeling that we stood on a piece of floating jet-sam on the ocean of space. I looked back at the trench and saw Junior

as he reached the summit of its opposite side, straightened, and waved to me in signal. I waved back and faced Clint and Deeds.

"Clint, you stay up here and walk parallel with Junior and me. Don't get ahead of me and don't fall behind. Keep your eyes open for anything out of the ordinary." Then I turned to Deeds. I couldn't see her face through the polarized face shield of her helmet, but I could easily picture the soft, white oval of her face framed in the brown hair that was now pulled tightly back into a hairnet. "And you," I said as sternly as I could, more to impress the men than Deeds, "follow me and do everything I say, got that?"

Her helmet nodded yes while her voice drifted through the ether into my earphones, "Aye, skipper!" For a moment, I thought she was going to salute me as well, but was relieved to see that she didn't. If our little exchange was too formal to fool the men, a salute from her would have been just too much.

"Wait up her," I ordered her as I turned and hunkered down at the rim of the trench. Slipping my legs over the side, I shoved myself off and slid slowly along the almost perpendicular decline of the wall to the bottom. The lack of any real gravity on so small a body of rock made the descent minutes long, but when my feet finally bumped bottom I realized that it had not been long enough. Despite appearances, the desolation of the asteroid and the installation on it gave me an uneasy feeling that overwhelmed any desire for a momentous discovery. I physically shook the feeling off and craned my neck upward toward Deeds. "All right, come on down. And take it easy."

In a few minutes, her lithe form touched down, the circle of my arms catching her in their embrace. She lingered there a little longer than she needed to and finally disengaged.

"Where to now, Alex?" her voice crackled into my receivers.

I shook the image of Deeds from my mind and gestured toward the center of the trough.

"We'll head out to the middle of the trench there, and walk on toward the blockhouse, real slow." I took a slow step in that direction and sauntered buoyantly over to where I had pointed, Deeds right behind me. There was no need to look out for her; she was more at home in a pressure suit than half my crew.

I wasn't too surprised to find the trough completely barren of dust or detritus--not much activity way out here, and whatever kept the asteroids aligned with the Earth kept it away from collisions with other asteroids as well.

"Say, Clint," I thought aloud, "do you suppose there could be some sort of gyroscopic mechanism inside this piece of rock that keeps..." I had looked up instinctively to the man I was addressing and noticed that Clint wasn't listening to a word I said. His mind was on other matters, and so was Junior's. Both their gazes rested, I noticed, on Deeds, whose pressure suit hugged her curves in all the right places. I tongued my mike to full frequency and repeated my sentence.

The piercing resonance of the transmission went right through their ears and halted them in their tracks; they got the message.

"You're right, skipper, I thought of that. I just thought it was too elementary to mention. But I catch your drift." He looked at Deeds. "I copy."

"Me too," chimed in Junior.

It was all no secret to Deeds, who merely chuckled softly over the transmission line.

Together, in parallel formation, we all moved forward toward the blockhouse that loomed gigantically ahead, with myself slightly in the van. Deeds surprised me by obeying orders and keeping to my right and

rear; I guess she was as awed as the rest of us.

At last we arrived at the base of the wall of the cubed structure where, to our utter confusion, we couldn't find a single means of entry. I ordered Clint and Junior to draw their hand weapons and circle around the building in a more thorough search of ingress, but in a few minutes they returned to the edges of the trench and shrugged their shoulders. No more needed to be said. I thought a moment and decided to risk damage to any possible artifact hidden on the other side of those blank walls by forcing entry. It was worth the gamble if we found something important; if we didn't, we'd be no worse off than if we hadn't tried at all.

"Clint, go back to the ship and get out the industrial blaster. Bring it along this trench; it'll be easier on the treads."

"We're going to blast our way in?" he asked, the engineer in him getting its hackles up.

"Yeah, it's the only way we can do it. . . . Relax, Clint, we'll take it easy."

"How do you take it easy with a Continental Hammer?" he asked rhetorically as he leaped off in the direction of the ship.

We waited there at the base of the blockhouse with Junior waiting above, his laser pistol still drawn, none of us in the mood for conversation. Then my receiver began to pick up the slight electronic interference generated by the big blaster. As I saw Clint bringing it along the trench, I picked out a spot on the wall's surface where I wanted him to start the beam. The Continental Hammer was a proven industrial product of Ford's Heavy Interplanetary Machines Division, designed to cut down to size the toughest of ores on any planet. We used it primarily to cut our cargo to manageable size for the Balerafon II's hold. In utter silence, eerie for a machine

so big, Clint brought the Hammer in close to the wall and waited for my instructions.

I took a piece of colored chalk from my utility belt and marked off a segment of wall big enough for the Hammer itself to fit through if need be. I could tell Clint didn't approve of the dimensions I had indicated, but he didn't say anything as he revved up the Hammer's generators. We stood back as the nozzle began to glow, and when it reached a bright white, Clint let the high-intensity laser beam have its head. It was the work of minutes for its cannon to carve out the opening I had outlined and then to slice the piece of wall to rubble. Clint cut the engines, but left the powerful searchlights on as they pushed back the darkness from inside the blockhouse.

I moved past the hulk of the Hammer and led the way inside the building, perhaps the first human being ever to come in contact with evidence of extra-solar intelligence. But it was Clint who spoke first.

"I don't think I like this, skipper."

I shook off the first moment's bewilderment at the sight of so much strange-looking machinery packed into the confines of the blockhouse. Machinery seemingly of gargantuan proportions, as if made for giants. All of it still throbbing with electronic life as its vibrations traveled through my feet and into my body. Directly in front of me stood what could only have been a huge catapult mechanism. Deceptively primitive in shape, it looked no more menacing than the old catapults of medieval times, yet it still conveyed an air of menace about it that seemed to intimidate both Junior and Deeds for the moment.

"What don't you like, Clint?" I knew I somehow didn't like any of this.

"See those casements over there?"

"What about them?"

"Those are receptacles of some kind," he said, "and by their shapes, I'd say they were meant to be placed in front of that catapult." He inclined his head toward the machine in the center of the room. "If you notice, they're a perfect fit for the trench we just came down on."

"If this is some sort of weapon to be used against the Earth, how was it we got in here with so little trouble? Where are the operators? All this stuff in here is still operating--with the looks of permanence about it." Clint didn't answer. And I wasn't sure I wanted him to.

"Look, there's a doorway over there," said Deeds, pointing over to the rear of the building. It was the first time she had spoken since we entered the blockhouse, and I had begun to worry about her.

But there was a doorway where she pointed, over to the side of the catapult machine and wide enough to haul heavy equipment through it with no trouble.

"Let's have a look, people," I said at last, "and have your hand lasers ready for anything." I took my pistol in hand even as my words were sent along the electronic pulses of my radio. The others followed suit, and we moved ahead cautiously.

I took the lead and reached the door first. I saw right away that it was an airlock not unlike those the Empire used and once again wondered whether the builders of the complex had been human after all. That question became even more poignant after I entered the airlock and noted that my atmospheric readouts were registering at Earth-type levels. It could only mean that the builders of the blockhouse breathed the same air as humans. But any further thoughts along those lines were abruptly terminated as the surface beneath my feet shuddered slightly and the whole airlock began to sink into the flooring. In seconds, the double doors opened up and I was bathed in the glow of a light that shone intermittently

from behind a bulkhead far up ahead. The atmosphere was still Earth-type, and so I removed my helmet, not without a bit of relief. Slowly, the airlock ascended back to the ground floor, and I called ahead as to its safety.

In a few minutes, my small exploring party had assembled again before the airlock and we all quietly moved forward in the direction of the pulsing light. I led the way with no small amount of reluctance; but having come this far, there was no doubt we would see the affair through. I felt the nearness of Deeds' body as she tried to stay close to me without seeming to convey her fear to the men. But she needn't have worried about that; there was plenty to go around.

I had my laser pistol raised in readiness as I rounded the bulk of strange machines that crowded the floor of the sub-level, all of it throbbing with electronic power that told of mighty energies harnessed for some mysterious purpose. Then, suddenly, that purpose was made quite plain. I stepped into that vast, ultimate chamber and stood confronted by a sight I can safely say no space traveller from Earth had ever seen before. The bright, pulsing light that had led us into the chamber was almost a single, constant presence there, its fluctuations hardly noticeable in its painful brightness. But it was its source that halted me in my tracks, brought a gasp of amazement from Clint and Junior, and forced Deeds to cling openly to my arm.

In the sharp light that seemed to become almost audible in its throbs, like some invisible heart, a long row of perhaps twenty bodies suspended upright in glassite receptacles were ranged along the base of a pedestal over which hovered what could only have been an enormous brain. I say a brain, not because the form was shaped or colored like that of a human brain with its folds of grey matter and blood vessels, but

because of the intricate network of filaments that twined about one another in bewildering array. The source of the powerful beats of light was apparent in the giant arcs of electrical power that surged from one neuron to another; the level of mental activity was indicated in the sheer number and constant speed of the synaptic sparks, each representative of a particle of thought in the human brain.

"It's a brain. A giant, mutated brain." Clint said it almost matter-of-factly, but the look in his eyes told a different story.

"But is it human?" I asked him.

Clint stirred after a few moments and said, "No . . . no, it's not. It's been stripped of all tissue, leaving only the neuronic fibres to carry on the basic mental activity. Higher thought patterns must be completely impossible in this state, reducing the brain to an instinctive level."

"But why?"

I saw his eyes follow the fine strings of wire that trailed from the lobotomized skulls of the encased human shapes and disappeared into the glare at the base of the neuron cluster.

"Somehow, its higher thought processes have been sacrificed in order for it to assimilate itself more easily to the mental activity of the bodies there."

Junior had moved in a little closer than the rest of us and finally spoke out. "Skipper, I don't think these bodies are even human."

Together, we all approached to confirm his opinion. He was both right and wrong.

"These are human beings, but like none the Earth has seen for thousands of years." I stepped back involuntarily, the others unconsciously following.

"Those are Neanderthals."

But it was all I was able to say as a deep booming sound echoed all along the empty corridors between

the towering machinery and hit us like a plasmic piledriver. In seconds I was flat on my stomach, an invisible force pinning me to the floor with such strength that I was barely able to breathe.

Slowly, I forced open my eyes against the waves I felt trying to keep them shut. There was no way I could move my head from the position it held; but I didn't need to, I could see all I wanted to. Right alongside me lay Clint, his face away from me, but obviously as helpless as I was. And farther away, ahead of the rest of us, lay Junior. He was dead.

From the neck ring of his pressure suit a mess of blood and viscera sprayed out for a dozen yards into the deeper reaches of the chamber, his body squeezed from his suit like toothpaste from a tube. I would have shut my eyes if it didn't mean such a fight to get them open again. Instead, I noticed that one of Junior's feet was still whole, his leg flattened only above the knee, as if the force that held us was just enough to keep us in place and outside a proscribed area, certain death.

Suddenly, the sweat began to stream from the pores of my body. Deeds! Where was she? Frantically I dredged up the last memories I had of her position. Was she, too, far back, or over towards Junior? Then relief mixed with bewilderment washed over me as I saw her standing just inside my peripheral vision. Why hadn't she been flattened, immobilized, like the rest of us?

I tried to speak, but only a vague shadow of my usual voice managed to squeak out. "Deeds, are you all right?"

It was a moment before she overcame her own bewilderment to answer. "Oh, Alex! Yes, yes, I'm all right! But what about you?" She rushed to my side, bent, and tried to get me up, but failed. "Oh, Alex, Alex . . . what's happened? How can I

help you and . . . and . . ."

I could see that the sight of Junior was unhinging her nerves and felt there was only one thing I could do.

"Deeds. Deeds, look at me!" She did. "Now listen to me. You said you'd do everything I ordered, didn't you?" She nodded slowly, tears frozen on her pale cheeks. "Look, I think whatever's keeping us pinned here has to do with that brain there. You've got to destroy it. Use your laser pistol . . . Deeds! Are you listening?"

She shook herself and straightened. "Yes, I know what you want me to do." She picked up her blaster and held it out in both hands at arm's length. She sighted carefully along the barrel and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. She tried again.

Nothing.

"Check the safety," I said. "Check the power source."

She did both things, and still nothing. Finally, she flung the pistol from her and began to move closer to the brain.

I didn't need to watch her go all the way to guess what she had in mind. "Deeds! Wait! Don't go any closer! It's too dangerous!"

"I have to, Alex," she called from over her shoulder. "I'm not leaving here without you, and I can't get you free. It's the only way. I have to find some way to deactivate that thing, even if I have to pull it apart with my own hands."

"Deeds, no . . .!" But she didn't listen.

She didn't rush at the thing, but moved toward it with deliberate steps, plenty of time for the thing to activate its other defenses. It seemed that with every step Deeds took, new sounds erupted from the heaps of machinery ranged on both sides of the big room, but nothing more happened. It was as if electronic processes were begun and just as suddenly halted or broke down.

For some strange reason, none of the defense systems affected her. It was maddening to lie where I was, completely helpless as the girl I loved braved dangers never dreamed of by human beings. But of course, I had no choice.

At last she moved abreast of the row of Neanderthals and looked at the wires streaming from their craniums. Vaguely, her hands moved to her head and her fingers gently massaged her temples as if some invisible tendrils of thought were trying to insinuate themselves into her mind. It was the last, desperate attempt by the brain to stop the danger to its existence posed by the slender figure before it.

Then Deeds' hands left her head and she turned purposefully toward the row of Neanderthals; a look of determination crossed her face, as if the fleeting touch of the brain had left her with the knowledge of what to do. She approached the first wired man and yanked out the bundle of wires that grew from his glassite case. Immediately, his temples still wired to the case, but no longer to the huge brain, the caveman shuddered and began to turn swiftly blue; in seconds, his body withered and crumpled. But by that time, Deeds had done the same to almost half the Neanderthals, and in the same amount of time she finished her grisly business. With the shrunken carcasses of the twenty cavemen dried and dead, the pulses in the giant brain became visibly weaker. Slowly, the electric arcs of energy faded and slowed, more and more of the filaments grew dark and cold, and the throbs of light dimmed gradually, their pace slackening. Finally, all its remaining processes seemed to pause in their mutual deterioration.

I held my breath, still pinned to the floor, watching the defiant form of Deeds as she was limned in that ghostly light. It was a moment frozen in my mind forever.

Suddenly, there was one single

pulse of light that flashed painfully in our eyes, piercing our own brains to the core.

I think I lost consciousness then for a few minutes, because the next thing I knew I was sitting up and trying to get my feet under me. Nearby, Clint was swaying, a bit unsure of his footing. Then there was the scent of roses and a puff of warm breath on my cheek and I realized Deeds had come back to help me up. She came in handy as I said, "What happened?" But in the same instant, I knew.

My head seemed to be filled with scrambled, alien thoughts; and just when I thought I had pinned them down, they scattered again. I looked up and saw an expression on Deeds' face that spoke of the same perplexity. Clint stumbled over to where Deeds was propping me up and tried to say something I couldn't make out. I was scared. With that last big pulse, the giant brain had done something to us. Maybe induced some sort of brain damage on the three of us as its last-ditch defense. But then, as the three of us came close together, it dawned on us that it wasn't anything of the sort, but something much more miraculous.

Somehow that last pulse had imprinted on our brains all the primitive information it possessed. But it was still too much for any one of us to hold; and so, it parceled it out to each of us. Coming within a closer proximity, we were able to pool our portions through some kind of telepathy and make sense of the asteroid's puzzle.

The asteroid had been designed by an alien race eons before in the dim recesses of history, at a time when Neanderthal man was the only evidence of intelligent life in the solar system. But the aliens could estimate the creature's evolutionary potential. They foresaw a time when those primitive beings could become a threat to their empire. And so, against that possibility, they had

built a completely automated military station far from Earth and so well hidden that it would have only one chance in a million of ever being discovered. Envisioned as a sort of "trip wire," the station would be occupied by a facsimile of one of their own brains and attached to those of a number of captured Neanderthals. Thus connected, the sentinel brain could recognize the approach of those it had been created to defend against.

But because of one small error, all those millennia of planning and waiting had been wasted. The aliens had hooked up their sentinel brain with only male Neanderthal brains and so effectively negated any chance of the brain's being able to stop Deeds! Being female, she was, of course, close enough to the male for the brain to recognize and attempt to protect itself against her, but being female she was subtly different enough from the male to be on a different wavelength. And so she had been able to pass through the alien gauntlet unharmed and to detach the sentinel brain from its only contact with the outside world.

Once we had regained full mobility, we tried as best we could to gather and respectfully dispose of Junior's remains. Overcome as we all were by the death of our comrade, curiosity still made us explore the rest of the blockhouse's interior. Actually not much was left to see. Some sort of self-destruct mechanism triggered in the brain's final energy burst had reduced all the machinery to heaps of slag, as if it had all imploded.

The final irony was revealed by a giant star-chart that had occupied one wall. Most of the constellations were familiar enough to us, but the spot designated as the home planet of this alien civilization was, on our maps, altogether blank! Whether through an all-consuming supernova



Lin Carter's "Star Pirate" would have been at home in the old Planet Stories or Thrilling Wonder pulps, but the best story of the issue has to go to Richard L. Tierney's "The Other Place," a fine yarn in the old "sense of wonder" style. Great stuff!

Daniel Cobbett
Riverdale, MD

By far the best thing in this issue was Richard L. Tierney's marvellously imaginative "The Other Place." I went through the whole thing wondering exactly what he'd come up with next! Riveting stuff!

I found "Corsairs of the Cosmos" a pleasant diversionary tale, but couldn't help feeling that more information should have been made available for those people (myself included) who haven't been around long enough to learn all about such characters as Star Pirate, etc., etc. Never mind, it read well enough, I guess . . .

I'm afraid I didn't much like Kuttner's "Eyes of Thar." I can't place my finger on it, but it lacked the "umpf" that all of your previous tales have had in some form or another.

I did like "Rescue Mission 2030



A.D."--short and very, very sweet.

As for Will Murray's article/essay --the introduction of such a piece in Astro-Adventures spoilt it for me. It was altogether too "serious" . . . ho hum.

I do like the name of the letter column; where'd you drag it up? "Ethergrams"--it's new, strange, different--wonderful!

I look forward to the next issue.

Alex Bardy
London, England

My favorite Astro-Adventures #2 was definitely Henry Kuttner's "The Eyes of Thar," though I did not understand how the hero could spend even as short a time as he did in Zha without coming back to find years gone by on Mars. When did Kuttner marry C. L. Moore? Reads a lot like her "The Bright Illusion" and/or her Northwest Smith stories.

A very Lovecraftian issue all around, between Tierney's "The Other Place" with its post-human beetle culture and the ominous, superhuman Gardener, and Will Murray's proof that Captain Future knew and tangled with the Old Ones.

Lin Carter's Star Pirate adventure was an enjoyable read as well.

Charles Garotalo
Wayne, NJ

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