

NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

BI-MONTHLY

2/-

NUMBER 8



RUSSELL



TUBB



BOUNDS



JAMES

ALL OVER THE WORLD . . .

People are enjoying NEBULA. Here are a very few of the hundreds of unsolicited testimonials received from abroad:

KOREA

There are few pleasures available here in Korea and reading your excellent magazine is one of the greatest...I feel that it is now up with the best produced on this side of the Atlantic—and Pacific too!

Peter M. Evans, U.S. Army

EIRE

I haven't read Science-Fiction for very long, but you can be sure I'll continue while the first-rate material you offer in NEBULA is available.

James Reilly, Cork

AUSTRALIA

Future improvement of NEBULA will be difficult in view of the high standard now obtained.

G. R. Bennett, Turner

CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.

I congratulate you on the excellent magazine you publish, it is easily the best on the market today...I have enjoyed every story ...all are above the average of today's offerings and I subscribe to twenty-two current publications.

Harry Petzwall

JAPAN

I received your interesting magazine, NEBULA, today. After I finish this letter I want to read the Temple story as I like this author very much.

Tetsu Yano, Kobe

NEW ZEALAND

Please send me all the available back issues of NEBULA. I have just seen the latest number and it has completely revised my hitherto poor opinion of British Science-Fiction magazines. In short, NEBULA is tops!

Ken Bailey, Wellington

These are the opinions of foreign readers—it's even more popular in Britain! EVERYONE joins in saying

. . . NEBULA STANDS SUPREME!

NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 2

Editor: PETER HAMILTON

No. 4

Novel:

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They were about to venture closer to the Sun than any-one had ever done before—when catastrophe intervened!

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Look here . . .

In response to requests from a large number of readers, this issue of NEBULA is something of an experiment, containing rather longer stories than I have been in the habit of printing in former issues. Many readers feel that they like to "get their teeth into" a few long stories, while others prefer the variety both in plot and style provided by a greater number of short stories in a magazine. This issue is to test overall reader reaction to the longer-story policy, next time we'll go back to the former set-up of a larger collection of varied short stories, until I can gauge your preference. You can be sure that whatever that preference is, I'll act upon it.

The lead novel this time is by E. R. JAMES, who has not appeared in NEBULA since its first issue. I'm sure, when you have read "Blaze of Glory," you will be as anxious as I am for a return performance—soon! ERIC FRANK RUSSELL, coming back for the third time by unanimous reader request, gives us a yarn designed to appeal more to those who enjoy "Space-Opera" than to the lover of orthodox science-fiction. However, his masterly style makes "Fly Away Peter" well worthwhile for everyone.

An addition to his family and a first appearance in the American magazine market seem to be acting on E. C. (Ted) Tubb to make his writing even better than usual. Although some readers may think "Episode" tends to be rather gruesome in parts, I'm sure you will agree with me when I say that this story is only another

proof of the fact that Mr. Tubb definitely has what it takes to be a master in-the-making where science-fiction writing is concerned. This novelette is balanced by a light-hearted short story by SYDNEY J. BOUNDS with a remarkably similar setting. Mr. Bounds tells me that he has a novel in hard-covers appearing soon—good work Syd!

The only newcomer to our pages this time (another first-ever appearance) is KEN POTTER, who has long been a leading light in British junior fandom. His "Wind Along The Waste" although short should whet our appetites for much more of this young author's stories. Don't you agree?

My friend KEN SLATER who is well known to you all, recently wrote me with the information that from May, the Operation Fantast Handbook, a mine of useful information for everyone interested in science-fiction and fandom, (usually revised and published in pocket-book format each year) will now be revised and published in loose-leaf sections. The first section to appear will contain information on British fan-clubs and SF societies, and to ensure that this directory is as complete and accurate as possible, it will assist those compiling this section if you write to DENIS COWEN at 42, Silverwood Road, Kettering, Northants giving details of the address, membership fees, frequency of meetings, etc. of the club or association to which you belong. Of course, it would save a great deal of confusion if you

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Fly Away Peter

To build a new world free from war and fear will be a difficult business. Here is how one group went about it.

Illustrated by Harry Turner

WESTERHOLT, a bulky, gray-haired man, came swiftly to the point. "I need the help of a private investigator. I chose your name at random from the classified directory. My wealth is considerable and if you can get results you will be rewarded most generously." His hard, calculating eyes gained a sudden glint. "But I will not pay a bad penny to the inefficient."

"All the money in the world isn't enough to purchase the impossible," declared Paul Herald. "Detail the task you have in mind and I'll tell you whether I'm willing to take it on. If it's nonsensical, unreasonable or outside the law, nothing doing."

"I want you to find my son."

"He has disappeared?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"He has been gone four months," Westerholt informed.

"Have you reported this to the police?"

"I have." He sighed resignedly. "It has done no good. I enjoy considerable influence in official quarters but it has not proved enough to get real action. The police regard me as an old fusspot."

"They would not do so without good reason," Herald ventured.

"I am grimly aware of their reasons. Firstly, Peter is thirty-two years old. At that age a man is not a child. He can go where he pleases with or without his father's knowledge and consent."

"And secondly?"

"According to them, I have no real cause to suspect foul play."

"Meaning that you do have cause in your opinion?"

"I don't know what to think. Sometimes I fear the worst. The police say that paternal pessimism is not enough. They are not inclined to move in the matter."

"And he's thirty-two," mused Herald. "Had he a girl friend?"

"None with whom he was serious."

"Some people don't have to be serious. All they need is abandon."

Westerholt viewed that remark with obvious distaste.

"What I mean is this," Herald went on, "was he involved in an affair of the heart with somebody of whom you strongly disapproved? If so, he's probably run off with her."

"Peter wouldn't do that. Not in any circumstances. He was anything but romantic." He pondered moodily before he said, "I wanted an intelligent son. I wanted a boy who'd take over the brokerage side of my extensive business interests and prove a credit to his father."

"Well, what did you get?"

"Brains—of another kind."

"In what way?"

"He has a most disconcerting indifference to money and the power of money. He has brains that prefer to exercise themselves in laboratories." Leaning sideways, he took a framed photograph from a bureau, handed it across. "That is Peter. You'd better have a copy."

Examining it, Herald saw sharp, intellectual features, highly intelligent eyes. He readjusted his ideas forthwith. A

fair judge of character, he decided that Peter had not vanished because some shapely little doozey had persuaded him that the best things in life are free. Peter looked eminently sane and with a recognisable touch of his father's hard-headedness in his younger face. Evidently there was more to this affair than appeared on the surface.

Herald asked, "What did he do for fun?"

"He worked."

"You mean he actually enjoyed working? The son of a millionaire?"

"Yes. The Westerholts have always been restless, fidgety. But I do wish that Peter's energies had been—."

"What sort of work did he do?" Herald chipped in.

"He was a gas-turbine expert with the Atlantic Power Company." Westerholt paused, added with emphasis that contained a touch of pride, "He gained that post entirely on his own merits. I had nothing whatever to do with it."

"A scientific wizard, eh?" Herald eyed the photograph with rising respect.

"Unfortunately."

"Why do you say that?"

"I think he'd have done far better along the financial lines I wished him to go."

"But he didn't think so?"

"No," said Westerholt. "He did not."

"You had arguments about it?"

"A few."

"Heated ones?"

Frowning heavily, Westerholt demanded, "What are you getting at?"

"I'm striving to earn your money," said Herald.

The other relaxed, brooded a little while, responded with, "They were slightly acrimonious. No more than that. They ended with each of us standing on his dignity and agreeing to differ."

"When was the last occasion?"

"About five months ago."

"That would be a month before he disappeared?"

"Yes," agreed Westerholt, sadly.

"And you never saw him again?"

"I did. Between the dates of our last argument and his vanishing I saw him at least half a dozen times."

"He said nothing to indicate his intention of walking out on you?"

"Nothing whatever. Looking backward I now realize that he was more than usually affectionate, almost as if he knew he was going and for keeps. However, I am not infallible. I may be imagining things."

Herald nodded, said, "On the other hand, an event can sharpen the memory. Have you any theory about this matter?"

"Peter went without warning," Westerholt informed. "Nobody does anything about it. Everyone behaves as though a missing human was of less consequence than a lost dog. The police aren't interested. They view me as an old worry-guts wealthy enough to soothe with meaningless words and pointless assurances." He gazed steadily at his listener. "Therefore I wonder whether the government has conscripted him for some special top-secret task and the police have been told to ignore me."

"You're big," Herald pointed out. "You are plenty big enough to be told in confidence or, at least, be given a comforting hint."

"That is your opinion and mine. The authorities may think differently. You know how touchy they are about scientific matters."

"Darn!" said Herald. "If your theory is correct I may have to bust the national security set-up to prove that Peter is still in one piece."

"I am not in the habit of dispensing large sums of money for nothing," remarked Westerholt, with a touch of acidity.

"Your notion may be wrong, anyway. This is a free country. Peter is entitled to gallivant anywhere he likes without a family passport signed by his father."

"True," conceded the other. "But being his father I know him only too well. He would not depart the way he has done except for the most serious reasons."

"One more question," said Herald. He hesitated, reluctant to proceed, then went determinedly on. "I hate to put it but I've got to."

"What is it?"

"Your fortune, I believe, is one of the largest in the country. Who benefits if Peter is found in the river?"

"His three younger sisters." Westerholt gave it without the slightest change of expression. "He has no mother. She died two years ago. My estate will be divided equally among

my surviving children. The share of each will be more than adequate. None are of the kind who would plot to gain at the expense of another."

"I didn't assume it," said Herald. "Seeing that you are still with us."

"A singularly unpleasant remark," opined Westerholt.

"Sometimes I find myself involved in singularly unpleasant jobs," Herald gave back. "They make me think. They compel me to consider all possibilities, even the nasty ones."

"I suppose so."

"Did Peter leave any papers, any kind of correspondence? If so, may I have a look?"

"His room is upstairs. I have searched through it time and again, found nothing informative." Westerholt led the way to the door. "But perhaps you may discover something I overlooked. I'll take you there."

The room proved to be a well-lit, sumptuously furnished study. Books lined one wall. A large roll-top desk stood against the opposite wall. It held an electric typewriter, a couple of letter files, carbons, paper-clips, a lot of the rubbish that such desks invariably accumulate.

Herald examined the letters first, reading them slowly and carefully, grunting at intervals as he came across portions of untranslatable jargon. They consisted for the most part of innocuous discussions on scientific matters. Some of them ran right out of academic words and turned with a sort of profound desperation to long, complicated strings of mathematics seemingly designed to prove a point completely beyond demonstration by any other means.

"These aren't dirty poems in Chinese," said Herald, knitting his brows over a half-page equation. "They mean something to those who know pi from a square root."

"They mean nothing of especial significance," Westerholt assured.

"How do you know that? Do *you* understand this stuff.?"

"No, I do not. But I thought much as you have done. So I engaged a mathematician from the University to come and look them over."

"What did he say?"

"That Peter and some of his correspondents are debating

interesting but abstruse theories concerning gravitational fields.”

“Humph!” Herald tidied the letters back into their files.

Lugging open a drawer he extracted a printed pamphlet entitled: *Characteristics of Alloy Creep During High Temperature Rotation*. The author was Peter Westerholt. This literary effort was rich in technical language, incorporated several complicated graphs and several pages of mathematics.

Dipping in the drawer he took out another titled: *Crystalline Analysis of Exhausted Vanes*. Not by Peter this time. By Richard Sadler.

“This Sadler fellow is garrulous,” said Herald, waving the pamphlet. “In those files are ten or a dozen letters from him. Know who he is?”

“A friend of Peter’s.”

“Another scientific expert?”

“Yes.”

“Then he’s the one to question concerning Peter’s whereabouts.”

“Obviously.” Westerholt gazed defeatedly at the desk. “I thought of that weeks ago. I learned nothing.”

“Why not? Doesn’t Sadler know anything? Or did he refuse to talk?”

“I haven’t been able to find him. He has gone away.”

Herald dropped the booklet into a drawer, stared at him wide-eyed. “For heaven’s sake! Are you telling me that *two* of them have disappeared?”

“Not exactly. The circumstances weren’t the same. Both worked for the Atlantic Power Company. Peter left without warning, without a word of explanation, and did not so much as bother to collect the salary owing to him. Sadler departed two months later after giving formal notice.”

“Did he state a reason?”

“Yes. He had accepted a better post.”

“With whom?”

“He did not say. He kept that information to himself.”

“Fishy, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know.” Westerholt began to look tired. “I am a large employer myself. Sometimes we bosses are suspected of operating a mutual agreement designed to keep valuable workers fastened down in one place. So if a man intends going over to a competitor he doesn’t always say so.”

“You have not tried to trace him?”

"I am about to try."

"How?"

"I have hired you for that purpose."

"Serves me right," said Herald. "Ask an obvious question and I get an obvious answer."

He sought through the rest of the desk, found nothing worthy of comment. So he tried the books, taking them out one by one and shaking them in the vain hope of finding anything from a wad of money to a suicide's farewell. Westerholt observed this performance with weary resignation.

Defeated, Herald had a last look around, asked, "Where did he sleep?"

"His bedroom is next door."

"I'd like to see it."

"Come along."

The bedroom was three times the size of Herald's own and more luxuriously furnished. He waded through the carpet, gazed with disgust at a picture on the wall. It was seductive, curvaceous—and represented a winged automobile.

"Some people can't take their minds off one subject," he remarked.

"What subject?" asked Westerholt, mystified.

"Super-gadgets." Briskly Herald examined the room from end to end, found it bare of clues. He rubbed his chin, showed gloomy dissatisfaction. "If he departed of his own free will he first removed or destroyed everything that might provide a lead. That in itself is significant but don't ask me of what." He eyed the other speculatively. "Did he have any other place where he studied or worked?"

"So far as I know there is only his laboratory at the plant."

"I'm wondering whether you know far enough. Fellows of his type sometimes experiment in secret. In that case he may have rented a room anywhere between here and Seringapatam. If so, it will take some finding. It's such complications that make cases like these anything but easy to break."

Westerholt said, pointedly: "Easy or not, the sooner you get results the better I'll like it. And the sooner I pay up the better you'll like it."

"Incontrovertible logic," agreed Herald, showing no great confidence. "I can find nothing here so I'll be on my way."

"Phone me the moment you discover anything worthwhile," Westerholt ordered.

Mr Jugend of the Atlantic Power Company had fresh features, an ample paunch and looked like the official greeter at What Cheer, Ind. He indicated a chair, lowered himself into another.

He started off with "I am bound to say that during the whole period of his employment Mr Peter Westerholt received scrupulously fair treatment."

"Nobody is making allegations to the contrary," said Herald.

Ignoring that, Jugend went on, "Therefore we are none too pleased with the abrupt manner in which Mr Westerholt left our service."

"He won't be overjoyed himself if he's been dumped in a ditch by a hit-and-run driver," Herald observed.

"Oh, now!" objected Jugend, ready to faint at the sight of blood. "Not that! Surely not *that*!"

"It happens," said Herald, airily. "I once watched a crack pot come on at seventy-five against the red light when—"

"Spare me the details." His expression suggested that he wanted to get out and fast. "What is it you wish to know concerning Mr Westerholt?"

"Have you any idea of why he went and where he went?"

"None whatsoever. We are completely mystified and—"

"What was his status as an employee?" continued Herald.

"A most valuable officer of the company. It is largely because of that—"

"Did he trample over anyone's corns?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Did he get anyone fired? Did he dunk anyone into trouble? Did he mess up anyone's promotion?"

"Decidedly not. He and Mr Sadler had the research department practically to themselves. We find it most disheartening that after all our—"

"You said practically," Herald chipped in. "Who else was there?"

"Their technical assistants, of course. Younger men, very intellegent, highly qualified. Fortunately they have chosen to remain with us but we fail to understand why Mr Westerholt—"

"Look," interjected Herald, firmly. "Don't keep picking on me. I don't know why Peter Westerholt walked out on you and at the present stage I can't make a useful guess. But it's my business to find out. That's why I'm here."

"Quite, quite, quite," repeated Jugend, sounding like a

slipping gramophone needle. "I merely wish to emphasise that we think it poor reward for—"

"I think it poor reward, too. I haven't earned a red cent yet. I'd like to see these assistants you've mentioned."

Ceasing his complaints, Jugend switched his desk intercom and summoned the pair. When they arrived he introduced them.

"Mr Edwards and Mr Small."

Mr Edwards had black hair, black eyes and manifestly could calculate the number of beans in five. The absurdly named Mr Small towered well above the six-foot level. He had cold blue eyes, crew-cut hair, heavy jaw, muscular physique and looked more like a heavyweight boxer than a scientist.

Gazing up at the latter, Herald gnawed a tag from a fingernail, decided that Mr Small could have strangled Peter with one hand and looked frigidly capable of doing it.

He said: "I'm seeking Mr Westerholt. Can you help me?"

"A fat lot," rumbled Mr Small from way up there. "He left—and that is that."

"You cannot suggest his motive?"

"Sorry."

"He didn't drop a hint even by implication?"

"Not while I was around," said Small.

Herald switched attention to Edwards.

"I did not enjoy Mr Westerholt's confidence," informed Edwards. "Or not to the extent of being advised of his future plans."

"It wouldn't be that you've been told not to say anything, would it?" Herald probed.

"It could be, even if it isn't," smiled Edwards.

"Anything is possible," added Small. "Without that simple basic there would be no science."

"Thanks for the lecture." Herald watched them go out. He had a strong feeling that both knew far more than they cared to tell. And, having no official status, he was in no position to drag it out of them.

Spreading plump hands Jugend said, "Extraordinary! Inexplicable, completely inexplicable! Don't you agree?"

Herald opined carelessly, "So far as I'm concerned Peter has been taken for a ride in a flying saucer."

Then he sensed in the back of his neck a queer feeling of being stared at. Twisting round in his seat, he met the eyes of Small looking at him through the closing but still half-open door.

For a tense second they weighed each other up with grim, calculating penetration.

Then Small said, "Pardon me, I couldn't help hearing that remark. Surely you don't believe in flying saucers?"

"Do you?" Herald riposted.

Small grinned, shrugged. "As I said before, anything is possible. However, being what I am, a truth is that which is demonstrably true. I will accept a flying saucer when I see one."

He closed the door, the last glimpse of his eyes showing them holding a strange defiance.

"Baffling!" complained Jugend, determined to gripe to the last. "I don't know what the world is coming to."

The desk sergeant glanced at the card and chortled. "Haw-haw!"

"It isn't funny," said Herald.

"It is for me," said the sergeant. "A private investigator. That's a fancy name for a keyhole seeker of divorce evidence."

"Not in my case. I take on jobs more worth handling, including those the police can't or won't touch."

"Let's be having no sauce from you," the sergeant ordered. He propped the card in better position to be sneered at. "What d'you want, anyway?"

"A chat with the officer handling the Westerholt case."

"Never heard of it."

"It's on your files nevertheless. Dated about four months back. The old man put in a complaint that his son is missing."

"Have you found the body?"

"No, I'm looking for it. That's why I've come along."

"You've got a nerve," decided the sergeant. "You wait there. I'll find out whether anyone will see you."

He went away, returned in a short time, said "Keoghan will have a word with you. This way."

Keoghan, a brawny specimen, sat four-square behind his desk, asked with courtesy, "What can I do for you, Mr Herald?"

"I'm hired to find Peter Westerholt. His father says the police refuse to take action."

"He's right. Like to know why?"

"It would help."

"There is not the slightest evidence of foul play. On the

contrary, everything suggests that Peter took off under his own steam, whether his father approved or not. Our laws being what they are, a grown man is fully entitled to dump his relatives and get out."

"I know," admitted Herald, lugubriously. "It looks the same way to me."

"Then what have you got to worry about?"

"Money."

"Haven't we all?" Keoghan asked.

"The said money must be earned by pandering to the old man's fancies. So his grief is also mine."

"What grief?"

"He fears the worst. He refrains from saying so outright but I can sense his unspoken belief that his son is either dead or in danger."

"Has he any rational reason for such apprehensions?"

"Only that he's convinced Peter wouldn't disappear without so much as a wave of the hand." He paused, added, "Plus the fact that he's a scientist of no mean calibre."

"What has that to do with it?"

"Old Westerholt thinks that Peter may have been drafted for some top priority job, a risky one, a dangerous one, and that you've been told to mind your own business."

"Me?" exclaimed Keoghan, openly surprised.

"The police."

"Nonsense."

Herald continued patiently, "He assumes that if that were true you would not admit it. So it's possible that I'm on a wild goose chase. On the other hand, there's a remote possibility that I'm not, in which case I may end up with something genuinely nasty."

"Well?"

"Let's suppose Old Westerholt's shot in the dark is dead centre on the target. Let's suppose you *have* been ordered to take no action. In that event, I'm wasting my time." He studied the other, finished, "All I want to know is this: *am* I wasting my time?"

"Not from that angle," said Keoghan.

"Thanks," said Herald.

"But you're expending futile minutes in every other direction," Keoghan opined. "Ten to one you'll put in lots of work only to find Peter happily married to his own choice rather than

his father's choice. You won't be able to do a thing about it. A man may wed whom he likes and it's legal."

"So I've heard." Herald gave a wry smile. "I may try it myself someday—when I find someone who thinks me prettier than I do myself."

"You'll be a long time waiting," said Keoghan.

The receptionist at the Bureau of Missing Persons was wide-eyed, sweet and breathlessly obliging. But she did not fool Herald one little bit. Her air of helpful innocence concealed a pertinacity that struck him as decidedly out of the ordinary.

"You wish to see Mr Kassim?" she asked, studying his card.

"I do."

"About what?"

"That he will learn in due course."

"I am supposed to state the caller's business, Mr Herald. It will be necessary for me to tell him yours."

"Who says so?" inquired Herald, admiring her looks but in no way swayed by them.

"It is customary," she evaded.

"This is where we start changing customs," Herald informed.

"Please ask Mr Kassim whether he will see me."

"But if I do he will immediately ask what it is about."

"Tell him you don't know."

"He expects me to know."

"Then, my dear, he is going to be gravely disappointed in you. But fear not, for I will defend your efficiency should he see fit to question it." He leaned against the counter, favoured her with a friendly smile that held a good deal of toughness. "Go give him my card and tell him I'm mysterious. It will pique his curiosity."

"But—"

"Either you take it in or I jump this barrier and take it in myself," he interjected. "Please yourself which."

She went away, patently mortified. After a couple of minutes she returned, spoke with injured dignity.

"Mr Kassim will see you now."

Kassim was a thin-featured individual who had the gratified mournfulness of an undertaker left a thousand by the man just buried. He slouched behind his desk, examined the visitor with the air of considering a subject for embalment.



"You have a character on your books," said Herald. "Name of Peter Westerholt."

"Have we? What is the date of entry?"

"About four months ago."

"This year, eh? A moment, please." He pressed his desk-stud, spoke toward the door. "Bring me the current file, Miss Winsome."

"Most appropriate," approved Herald.

"What is?"

"The surname, Miss Winsome."

"Really? Ah, yes, I suppose so. To tell you the truth I have never given it a thought."

Miss Winsome brought the file, hung around in the manner of one awaiting further instructions.

"That will be all, thank you," Herald told her.

She departed visibly huffed. Herald derived strange satisfaction from thwarting her but did not know why. It wasn't his habit to stall personable young women. He was working purely

by instinct. Something deep down inside, perhaps his judgement of character, insisted that Miss Winsome was not nosey by nature and that therefore her inquisitiveness had a hidden motive. He was fed up with being the victim of hidden motives.

Kassim thumbed through the pages with the solemn air of one seeking a suicide amid the obits, finally exclaimed. "Yes, here he is. Peter Westerholt, dark hair, pale complexion, medium height, slight build, no special identifying marks on body. Thirty-two and not married. A gas-turbine specialist last in the employ of the Atlantic Power Company."

"Have you heard anything more about him?"

"Nothing at all. If we had, his father would have been informed at once."

"Curious, isn't it?"

"Dear me, no. Disappearances are common, very common. Most of them turn up in their own good time."

"You think he will do so ultimately?"

"It is highly probable," said Kassim. He gestured to the file. "In this country alone people vanish at the rate of about eight thousand a year. The great majority are nothing more than creatures of whims. Restlessness, dissatisfaction, boredom, worry, domestic troubles and so forth persuade them to haul up their roots and run away from it all."

"What about the remaining minority?"

"They are suicides, not yet found, embezzlers in hiding, persons suffering from loss of memory, bigamists who've decided that one is enough and two too much, undiscovered or unidentified victims of murders or fatal accidents."

"In which category do you put Peter?" asked Herald interestedly.

"Very possibly a case of lost memory," Kassim hazarded. "He is a professional brain-worker, a clever and studious type. That kind of person often overdoes it. The brain becomes exhausted, demands a vacation and enforces one." He pushed the file aside, added, "Such people usually are discovered doing manual work for a change. If I'm right, Mr Westerholt will get over it and be amazed to find himself bricklaying somewhere miles away and under an assumed name dug up from heaven knows where."

"Some folk think it's love," Herald told him. "A daughter-in-law the old man wouldn't accept."

"Could be. Such things have happened. In this case I

don't think it likely. The missing man doesn't strike me as the kind likely to be precipitate with his emotions. He is a scientist. That kind are not impetuous in matters of romance."

"I agree with you there." Herald brooded awhile, feeling momentarily held up. Like all such tasks in real life, this one obviously would be accomplished only by means of steady, determined plodding rather than by any spectacular flash of genius. The latter worked only in books. Gazing at the file, he said, "May I have a look at that?"

Kassim hesitated, not liking such irregularity. Then it occurred to him that there were no witnesses and that Westerholt Senior was a power in the land. He pushed it towards the other.

Opening at the first page, Herald found the subjects listed in alphabetical order, learned that Arthur Allcott, forty-seven, scenic artist of Baltimore, had vanished a fortnight ahead of Myrtle Armitage, twenty-eight, housewife of Jamaica, L.I. Each entry bore a brief description of the missing person together with a brief resume of the circumstances in which he or she had gone.

He turned to the next page. The top entry informed that Sadek Azanian, twenty-nine, assistant lecturer in mathematics at Austin University, had disappeared four months ago and within two days of Peter Westerholt's vanishing. Sadek was described as dark-haired, swarthy-complexioned, with hooked nose, slender figure, a naturalised citizen of Armenian origin born in Smyrna.

Startled, he read it through again, slid the file back to Kassim, shot to his feet. "Holy smoke! I think I've got something good. Maybe you've given me twenty leads. I'll be back before long."

Leaving the other looking completely baffled, he hurried out, paused at the counter to say to Miss Winsome, "Make a date with me, dear, in cherry-blossom time and I'll tell you the whole long story."

He did not wait for her retort, if any. He went through the door fast, fell into his car, drove furiously to the Westerholt mansion, made it in less than two hours.

"Sorry to trouble you again," he told Westerholt Senior. "I'd like another look at those letters."

"Have you discovered something?" The hard eyes bored into him, imperative and anxious.

"Not yet. I don't profess to work *that* fast. I've come to

the point of playing a hunch. Maybe it will win some information and maybe it won't. There's nothing to do but try."

"In other words, you're beginning to believe that Peter's prolonged absence has some significance?" asked Westerholt shrewdly.

"Perhaps," Herald admitted, not liking to be cornered. "But at present it's no more than a mere perhaps."

"All right." Westerholt registered disappointment. "Come upstairs."

He remained in quiet attendance and offered no further comment while Herald searched the study for the second time and made careful note of all the names and addresses on correspondence.

When Herald left it was growing dark and too late for more action. Stars twinkled in the sky. A pale moon leered down as if mocking his impatience. His mind was on the boil as he drove home and he did not know that the secret he sought was gleaming right overhead.

Mr Kassim arrived at the Bureau at precisely nine o'clock the following morning. That deprived the waiting Herald and the tardy Miss Winsome of the opportunity to glower at each other.

Wearing the gloomily pleased expression of one who has just succeeded in identifying a mysterious corpse, Kassim offered, "My word, you're an early bird, Mr Herald."

"I have to be." Taking a chair, he poked his notebook across the desk. "Do me another favour, will you?"

"What is it this time?"

"There are twenty-nine names in that book. Five of them lack addresses and almost all are without personal descriptions."

"Well?"

"Are any of them on your lists?"

"You mean are they missing?"

"Yes."

"Since what date?"

"Let's say since the first of this year."

He called for the files, started the job while Herald patiently looked on. Miss Winsome did not remain this time. She departed with the air of one who does not have to wait to be told. The atmosphere around her was somewhat icy.

Within two minutes Kassim said, "This Sadek Azanianian is—"

"I know of that one," Herald interrupted. "It was spotting him that made me look up this lot. Put a tick against him and let's see who else."

Half an hour later Kassim remarked, "Raoul Perrichon of Toulon is not within our jurisdiction. You will have to consult the French authorities concerning him."

"Sorry. Pass him by along with any other foreigners."

Continuing with his task, Kassim reached the end, gave back the notebook. "I have marked those shown on our registers. There are eleven."

"Jumping Judas!"

"It surprises you?" asked Kassim, not excited himself.

"More than that. It dumbfounds me."

"May I enquire why?"

"You may—and I'll tell you." Herald licked dry lips, went on, "According to you, people in this country disappear at the average rate of eight thousand per annum."

"That is correct. But the majority reappear eventually."

"Never mind. Eight thousand out of one fifty millions is roughly point four-ohs-five per cent. A tiny fraction. A very tiny fraction. But eleven out of twenty-nine is almost forty per cent. That is a whale of a difference."

"So it would appear," agreed Kassim. "However, I fail to see the significance of it."

"So do I." He stood up, wiping his forehead although he was not perspiring. "I feel like somebody who has shoved his hand through a trapdoor and grabbed a long, furry tail—and doesn't know what kind of animal is at the other end."

He thanked Kassim and took his leave. He was far too preoccupied to notice Miss Winsome as he went out, much less to swap scowls with her. But she saw him, noting his manner, expression, every detail.

All the way to the office his mind kept repeating, "Forty per cent! Forty per cent!"

The man who entered Herald's office immediately after lunch was in his early thirties, athletic, impeccably dressed, briskly efficient. He came in with official confidence, handed over a

card, placed his hat on the desk, sat down and waited expectantly. The card bore an embossed eagle and read:

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF SECURITY

DANIEL MASON

"Can I help you, Mr Mason?" asked Herald.

"You can indeed. But I fear it must be at some sacrifice to yourself."

"In what way?"

"I regret to say I have not come in the capacity of a client." Mason regarded him levelly. "We have reason to believe that you have been commissioned to find Peter Westerholt."

Herald offered no comment.

"You must cease the search forthwith," said Mason.

"Why?"

"Sorry, but I cannot give you reserved information."

"You mean the abandonment is a governmental order?"

"Precisely."

"So Peter is engaged on official business?"

"You may draw your own conclusions."

"All right." Herald leaned forward, not a little annoyed. "If I am permitted to draw such conclusions why didn't you permit his father to do likewise and thus save us all this bother?"

Politely apologetic, Mason said, "For two reasons. Firstly, we give nothing away until we have to. It now becomes necessary to reveal a minimum of information because you are taking things too far."

"And the other reason?"

"Westerholt's father, being a man of considerable eminence, would not be satisfied with the bare statement that his son is serving his country in some undetailed fashion. He thinks possession of a great fortune gives him the right to know everything. It doesn't."

"I see." Herald relaxed feeling decidedly sour. "So now I must tell him I'm throwing up the case. He will want to know why. Am I supposed to give him the truth? Am I supposed to tell him it's an order from the Department of Security?"

"Mr Herald, we forbid you to do that. He is not entitled to the information."

"Then what shall I tell him?"

"Offer a reasonable excuse. No progress or real prospects of any. Pressure of other business."

"That won't do my reputation any good. Neither will it stop him from hiring someone else."

"If he does, we'll take care of the matter," Mason assured. He reclaimed his hat and card, went to the door, paused there, added with courtesy, "I'm genuinely sorry to deprive you of this work, Mr Herald. But duty is duty."

Long after he had gone Herald sat and pulled ugly faces at the wall. It was a habit when his mind was working overtime. Finally his toiling wits remembered a wartime friend in Washington. More than once they had jumped out the same plane together. He picked up the phone, called long-distance, was switched through half a dozen departments before he heard the old, familiar voice.

"Rod, you relic!" he growled into the phone. "This is Frogface. How's the falling hair?" He continued with chitchat a couple of minutes, then asked, "What do you know about a smoothie named Daniel Mason, an operative for the Department of Security?"

"An operative for the *what?*" inquired the other.

"Department of Security."

"There's no such thing."

Herald took a deep breath and said, "There's got to be. I saw his official card with my own eyes."

"I've seen Santa Claus with mine. In a departmental store. And he wasn't my old man either."

"Look here, Rod, this country doesn't sit around doing nothing while all sorts of fancy foreigners—"

"This country is well able to look after itself," the other interrupted. "To which end it maintains the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Military Intelligence Service, the Counter-Espionage Service and a dozen more outfits none of which is known as the Department of Security. Somebody has handed you a ripe tomato."

"Somebody's got a deuce of a nerve," complained Herald. "Impersonating a government officer. He ordered me to throw up a case. What d'you think of that?"

"The answer is obvious," responded his listener. "You are making progress and getting someone worried. You had better watch out. Next time they may try a method more positive and final than that of kidding you along. I look forward to being the chief beneficiary under your will."

Herald grunted and cut off. He consulted his notebook again. Twenty-nine names. The book told him that eleven of these were missing. What else did it tell him?

That eighteen were *not* missing—yet.

The next logical step was to press those eighteen for information before they vanished in their turn.

The first name was that of Carson Coulter, thirty-four, thin-haired, gimlet-eyed. A physicist who resembled an unwrinkled unwinking vulture made respectable by an expensive suit and an aura of cultured competence.

Building a church and steeple with long, sensitive fingers, he lay back in his chair, fixed blinkless eyes on his visitor. "How can I assist you, Mr Herald."

"You knew Peter Westerholt?"

"Slightly. Only slightly."

"But you corresponded with him."

"During a brief period," Coulter admitted. "We enjoyed what might be termed a mathematical debate. It was rather inconclusive, I fear."

"Meaning it got you nowhere?"

Coulter smiled. "Mr Herald, it is a little difficult to arrive somewhere when pursuing an idea through realms of pure theory."

"I suppose you are right." Herald fastened shrewd attention on the other as he continued, "Do you know Sadek Azanian?"

"Not personally. I have heard of him. At least, the name seems familiar."

"How about Raymond Taylor?"

"That sounds familiar too." Coulter frowned as though trying to recall where he had heard it. "I have exchanged so many letters with so many people over so many years that—"

"It doesn't matter," Herald chipped in. "Does Joseph P. Garrison mean anything to you?"

"My goodness, yes! Who hasn't heard of Garrison?"

"I haven't. In some respects my education has been sadly neglected."

A trifle incredulously, Coulter informed, "At last year's International Scientific Convention a major disturbance was caused by Garrison. It was reported in most newspapers at the time. He started the ructions by sermonising the audience to the effect that a scientist has no right to abandon all moral considerations the moment he enters the laboratory."

"A reddish politico, eh?"

"Not at all," denied Coulter with surprising heat. "The question of morality in science has nothing to do with politics much as politicians may dislike the fact. The worst that could be said of Garrison is that he's an impracticable idealist."

"But he is a leading scientist?"

"Oh, yes, most decidedly."

"Yet you call him impracticable. That's contradictory, isn't it?"

Coulter was unable to conceal the impression of being cornered in a manner he was anxious to escape.

"It might appear to be but it isn't. Like many another intelligent man he resents the way in which results of arduous research are repeatedly seized and misapplied by irresponsible fools. He is impracticable only in his refusal to accept the grim fact that a scientific minority can do nothing about it." Coulter sighed but failed to make it sound genuine. "Unfortunately we must deal with the world as we find it. We must take it as it is, for better or for worse. It is not within our province to try to alter it in any political or economic sense."

"Whom do you mean by 'our'?" Herald asked.

The other had iron nerves. He did not bat an eyelid. But he was compelled to make a significant pause before lamely answering, "I am speaking of scientists in general, of course."

"I understand." Concealing his scepticism, Herald perused the notebook, tried again. "Do you know anything about Wolf Hoffman?"

"Sorry."

"Or Eldon Grace?"

"Sorry."

He went through the list with no better luck, decided that

Coulter had become wary and was refusing to say more. So he shoved the notebook into a pocket, took his hat, prepared to go.

"I am grateful for your time, Mr Coulter. Let's hope you'll still be around next Christmas."

The other paused, holding the door partway open while he stared into Herald's eyes as if trying to see right through them and detect what was within the mind behind.

"That is a singular remark. Is there any reason why I should not be?"

"I think there is, Mr Coulter," responded Herald. "Yes, I think there is."

And with that he departed wearing the false air of knowing plenty when in sorry fact he still knew next to nothing. He wasn't even sure that he had given Coulter genuine cause for apprehension or why any such cause should exist.

He was hitting out blindly, in the dark, hoping to scare somebody into striking back. That at least would compel the mysterious opposition to show its hand.

He paid six more calls, gained four interviews that left him no better informed. His sole gain was a considerable strengthening of suspicion that certain people had something to conceal.

Going home, he spent half the night studying the unsatisfactory evidence. He finished not one whit the wiser. It strained the imagination to try to conceive what might be mutually hidden by a select group of highly reputable scientists, or why it should involve the disappearance of some of them.

His only certainty lay in the fact that he was following a real trail. He could smell it as clearly as a hound scents the track of a fox. The trouble was that the fox was proving a good deal too foxy.

In the morning he boosted his telephone bill by putting in a few cross-country calls. As a result of those he made another mark in his notebook and said, "Twelve."

It set him prowling round and round the office with the restlessness of a caged animal. From time to time he looked out of the window and examined the road, paying special attention to slow-moving pedestrians, loungers and parked cars. But he failed to detect anyone keeping watch on his office or preparing to move in on him.

He had tossed out plenty of ground-bait, especially in the

direction of Coulter, the false Daniel Mason and other secretly uneasy characters and it shouldn't be long before some fish made a snap.

How soon? How much longer? Out there amid the world's teeming millions were some who did not want him to learn too much. When would they take action to ensure that he didn't?

For two hours he watched and waited but nothing happened. He gave up in disgust, locked the office, parked his car in a garage, wandered downtown on foot.

He strolled along in the casual manner of one hopelessly bored by inactivity. A line of half-smoked butts marked his erratic path. The office, he was thinking, should have been the ideal place in which to hold him down and pull out his teeth.

But if they—whoever 'they' might be—had any such intentions they must be sharp-witted above the average. They had shown themselves suspicious of so easy a mark and credited him with intelligence equal to their own. Yes, with the aid of someone such as Keoghan he could have made the place a veritable trap in anticipation of their move. It wouldn't have worked only because they in turn were thinking a move ahead.

Therefore that meant that his only chance of trapping the trappers lay in some unexpected, spur of the moment move impossible for them to anticipate. With luck he might achieve that even yet. And he did.

He wandered on, now and again pausing to stare into store windows. Once he entered a phone booth, pretended to make a call while he watched his back trail surreptitiously.

At easy pace he mooched four miles, reached Chinatown, went down a narrow street, entered a tiny restaurant, took a seat near the window and sat there looking out. By this time his eyes had acquired an anticipatory gleam. The solitary waiter came for his order.

"Coffee," said Herald. "And I'd like a word with B.S."

The coffee came. He sipped it meditatively, kept his attention on the street, smiled to himself. The opposition would have to be familiar with his life story to be suspicious of the present situation. They'd have to know it back to the days when the arrest of a killer had prevented a tong war.

In short time a plump, dapper Chinese emerged from the kitchen at back, passed his table without a glance, went to the door

and stood looking out in apparent enjoyment of fresh air. He completely ignored the solitary customer.

"Brilliant Soo, my porty brother," murmured Herald, without noticeable movement of lips, "I am being followed by at least three men. They leapfrog each other from time to time in an effort to deceive me but I have known of them for the last mile." He paused, played with his cup. "The tall, blond one I wish to interview without interference. The other two are nuisances."

Satisfied with his ration of oxygen, Brilliant Soo returned to the kitchen. He made no remark, gave no indication of having heard. Herald lingered over his coffee. Eventually the waiter came and took his cup away. It was a signal.

Returning to the street, Herald glanced one way then the other. Four young Chinese lounged in the opposite doorway chatting and laughing and seemingly unconscious of his existence. Turning to the right, he walked rapidly along the street, crossed a vacant lot, dived into a dirty, odorous alley, backed against a door and waited.

It didn't take long. With every appearance of casual unconcern Mr Small ambled past the end of the alley, shot a swift glance into it, failed to see the hidden quarry. He swivelled on one heel, hastened into the alley. His hands were in his pockets and that made him easy meat. Herald stepped from the door recess and smacked him squarely on the jaw.

Mr Small let out a surprised yelp, slammed against the wall, straightened up just as Herald hit him again. He went down with a thud, knocked out. Bending over him, Herald pawed at his pocket, feeling for his wallet and any informative data that might be therein.

Out of sight around the end of the alley feet pounded across the lot in response to Small's yelp. The noise stopped suddenly, was replaced by scuffling sounds and several oaths.

Herald found the wallet, felt inside the remaining pockets, had a look outside towards the lot. Six figures were milling wildly around. They were his two other followers and the four young Chinese. He grinned to himself, put the unconscious Mr Small's hands together in an attitude of prayer. There was an egg forming on the victim's crew-cut pate and a bruise on his lower jaw but otherwise he was all right.

Continuing up the alley, Herald wended his way to the restaurant, said, "Thanks, boy—my turn next time."

He took a taxi to the office, opened the wallet on his desk and looked through it. It held eighty dollars in tens, fives and ones, several cards bearing the name of George Jeremy Small, a hastily scribbled note confirming an appointment next evening and signed with the initials C.C.

"Carson Coulter?" he wondered.

There were also a number of postage stamps, two stubs from used theatre tickets, a pilot certificate, a snapshot of Small and another man standing alongside a sports plane. Finally a post-card sized photograph of a group of twenty people.

He examined this last item with excited interest. Five of the twenty he recognised. Small stood on the left. Coulter was on the right with two others he had interviewed yesterday. There were six girls in the group and the one nearest the centre was Miss Winsome. Of that there wasn't the slightest shadow of doubt.

A few pieces of the puzzle fell into place. Not enough of them to reveal what the ultimate picture might be like, but sufficient to show there was a picture of some sort and that it wasn't just a crazy jumble.

If for unknown, unguessable reasons a section of the population wanted to indulge systematic disappearances without attracting attention a necessary technique would be to plant observers in strategic places where unwelcome noseyss could be detected and dealt with. They'd have somebody on the wire service to keep watch for new stories linking one vanishing with another. Perhaps somebody in or attached to the police, listening for rumours. Somebody in the Bureau of Missing Persons in any large city where the post became available.

So the sweet Miss Winsome was a watchdog. Probably the very one who had caused the suave Daniel Mason to put on an act that had been good even though not quite good enough. Evidently Miss Winsome's connections and antecedents would be worth looking into.

The weird, elusive chain of circumstances between the missing Peter Westerholt and his correspondents now had a rather solid appearance. At least, the photo in the filched wallet provided visible evidence of linkage between five people formerly not associated with each other. Herald wished now that he had taken a closer look at the pair embroiled with that Chinese quartet. One of them might have been Mason or one of these characters in the photo.

All the same, he now *knew* he was feeling his way along a chain extending through the darkness of mystery, though still without the vaguest notion of what might be fastened at the other end. Something sharp-toothed and tigerish perhaps. But *something*.

Making a parcel of the wallet complete with contents intact, he addressed it to Mr Small, took it out, returned it to its owner by registered post. He spent the next two hours at the library searching through directories and books of reference. This gained him Miss Winsome's address and a quantity of academic data concerning the twenty-nine named in his book.

He had already tidied his tiny office and removed from it anything likely to be required in the near future. After today's events it would be best to keep away from that place, leaving the opposition to hunt assiduously for him as he'd had to do for them. The disappearing act was a game at which two could play. The others could worry over a vanishing, just for a change.

That meant he must also leave his flat for a while since undoubtedly it was as vulnerable as his office. But in his flat were clothes, money, luggage, other items he must have before he could stay away for any length of time. It would be best to go there right away, collect the stuff and be gone while the going was good. Once installed elsewhere he could leave them to keep futile watch on office and flat while he devised a way to put pressure on their weakest reed, namely, Miss Winsome.

Getting the car from the garage, he drove at sedate pace to his apartment building, tramped up three flights of stairs, approached his own door with cautious silence, put an ear to the key hole. A stranger came down from the floor above, paused on the landing, stared at him suspiciously.

"That's a trick likely to get you into trouble, listening at doors," growled the stranger.

"It's my own place."

The other registered disbelief. "Then why the blazes don't you go in?"

"Because I can please my damn self," said Herald belligerently.

"Is that so?" The other squared his shoulders, came closer, his manner challenging. "Last time we had a listener around here he robbed four unoccupied flats." He looked Herald over

slowly from feet to head. "I've half a mind to call the police."

"You've dreamed up the robberies," said Herald. "I live here and I know. But go call the police if it'll make you happy."

With that, he made the biggest mistake of his life and stepped out of the Westerholt case once and for all. He turned his back on the other and inserted his key in the door.

Before the key could turn in the lock the door whisked open, two pairs of hands snatched him forward while at the same time the man behind gave him a violent shove in the back. Taken by surprise and completely off balance, Herald shot in head first, went down, buried his face in the carpet. He heard the door slam shut as he made a frantic roll sidewise and got onto his back in readiness to throw himself erect. At that point he saw Mr Small's face immediately overhead.

Still on his back, he swung a thick arm in optimistic hope of adding a split lip to the other's damage but Mr Small was not to be caught a second time.

A pair of strong hands grabbed his rising wrist, forced it to floor level. Another pair did likewise with the other arm. Somebody who did not weigh less than two hundred pounds sat on his legs. Herald made a desperate heave that shifted the leg-squatter a couple of inches, whereupon yet another weight dumped itself across his thighs. There were at least six men in the room.

Mr Small's face came back within range and he said with politeness quite devoid of sarcasm, "I am truly sorry about this, Mr Herald." His hand appeared bearing a small wire cage stuffed with cotton wool. He clapped the cage over Herald's nose and mouth.

Jerking madly on the floor and striving to shake his head from side to side, Herald fought to free himself or at least let go a bellow hearable six blocks away. But the hands and weights held him down, the cotton wool muffled him. A sweet taste like that of saccharine came on the tip of his tongue. Vapour made coldness in his straining lungs. His senses whirled. His mind spun in a cloudy maelstrom torn with flashes of light and filled with harsh noises. His bodily contortions lessened then ceased as he drifted far, far into the unknown.

"That's that!" remarked Mr Small. Stepping over the body, he placed the wire cage in a box. "I would rather have used more finesse. Crude methods like these go against the grain with me. We could have arranged a much smoother job if he hadn't been

progressing so swiftly. That's the trouble with fidgets—they create urgencies.”

“Time waits for no man,” philosophised another. “It’ll be all right if we can get him away without being noticed.”

The one who had intercepted the victim at the door said, “I’ll whistle if the coast is clear.” He went out.

Kneeling beside Herald, Mr Small made careful search of his clothes, frowned to himself. “No wallet. He has disposed of it somewhere.”

“If he left it with those Hip Sing playmates of his you are going to have a tough time getting it back,” observed an onlooker.

“If, if, if,” snorted Mr Small. “If I had known that the Hip Sings owed him a favour I wouldn’t have walked so blithely into trouble.” He rubbed his jaw, eyed the body, went on, “I don’t think he’d throw away that wallet with a carefree laugh. Either he would keep it or return it. A couple of you had better search his office without delay.”

“What if it’s not there?”

“My guess will be that he has dumped it in the mails. I’ll know by morning, one way or the other.” He became hurried as a thin whistle sounded outside. “All right, fellows, let’s smuggle him out of this good and fast.”

Together they whisked Herald from the apartment, down the stairs and into a long black car which swiftly fled the scene.

Nobody had witnessed the incident. Not a soul. The annual quota of vanishers had been upped by one, namely, Paul Herald, and he had no kith or kin to complain about his going.

Herald came to in a jolting coffin or a boxlike container with a sinister resemblance to a coffin. A circle of ventilating pin-holes pierced the top immediately above his nose. No light came through and nothing could be seen.

He stretched himself to the limit, felt one end of the box against his head while his feet pressed on the other. The surface on which he reposed was soft and wobbly. He investigated with his numb hands. Air-filled. A pneumatic mattress.

Various sensations told him that he was being borne at high speed over a surface that left much to be desired. Evidently not a main route. Perhaps a potholed dirt road somewhere in the mountains.

This went on for more than an hour while vainly he pondered his ultimate fate and fought down repeated attacks of claustrophobia. Then the coffin ceased to vibrate. There was a brief period of silence followed by the sound of steel grating on steel. The box began to move backward, upending slightly.

Herald bawled mightily through the ventilation holes, reasoning that if the sudden uproar inconvenienced his captors they would have to open the box to quieten him. And the moment it did open, he wrathfully decided, they would close it again over his dead body. He bellowed again, going red in the face with vocal effort.

Nobody took the slightest notice. The box tilted at an angle of forty-five degrees so that now he was half-standing, half-lying. In that position it lifted some twenty feet, sank back six, clanked on a metal floor, went horizontal once more.

For a few moments he heard the murmur of voices holding underbreath conferences a few yards away. The sounds ceased. Nearer to him came a loud metallic clank like that of vault doors being shut.

Next instant his entire body pressed itself into the pneumatic mattress. His bowels sank against his spine, drawing his abdomen flat. It was the same sensation as he would have got when lying on the floor of a high-speed elevator; the feeling of shooting up, up, up in a crazy attempt to knock a hole in the sky.

There was no deafening noise. No drone of propellers, no roar of engines, no thunder of rockets. Only a faint but steady hiss that gradually decreased in intensity while pressure lessened with it. Eventually the outer sound changed to a very low, persistent whine which accompanied Herald's feeling of dreamily floating on the surface of a summer stream. It lulled him to sleep. He closed his eyes and snored.

Sudden sound and cessation of movement brought him awake with the realisation that he had been slumbering an unknown length of time. His box was still, its lid slowly sliding to one side and letting through an oblong of brilliant light. He tensed himself, bunched his fists. The lid came free. He sat up, stiff at every joint, yearning for mayhem but too blinded by light to pick a suitable victim.

Somebody put a hand under his arm, helped him erect. He stepped out of the box blinking owlishly and chewing his bottom lip with vexation. Finally he got a face into focus. He did not know its owner from Adam but he swiped at it on general prin-

principles. The sole advantage of being among enemies is that it doesn't matter whom you hit or how hard.

The face jerked aside just sufficiently to let the fist go by, and a suave voice chided, "Now, now, Mr Herald, let's not behave like hooligans."

Herald blinked a few more times, got his full vision back, found himself facing four men, all complete strangers to him. Giving him no opportunity to ask questions, they pulled his box through a metal door, closed the door behind them. He heard the click of a multiple lock, stared around, knew he was in a metal cabin.

The place had a sleeping bunk, a peculiar kind of toilet, a washbasin that functioned only for a couple of minutes at six-hour intervals signalled by a gong. During those times water flowed like treacle and had the smeariness of thick oil. If it is was water. Possibly it was not. Perhaps it was some colourless, odourless, innocuous substitute with molecular chains as long as his arm. Anyway, it served its purpose.

A rack of books was fastened to one wall, each tome with its own individual securing clip. A light switch projected alongside the bunk. There was no porthole, no way of seeing outside. He was like a rat in a sparsely furnished metal trap.

He never knew how long he spent in that cabin. It behaved just as the box had done, pressing releasing, swirling once in a while through days that stretched into weeks. And whenever he put an ear to the wall he could hear a dull, unvarying moan conducted through the metal.

Meals came to him at regular intervals and those who brought them rejected all conversational overtures. Between times he lay on the bunk and read, or concocted various fanciful explanations of his predicament, speculated about his fate, plotted methods of avoiding it, cursed Mason, the Atlantic Power Company, the entire Westerholt family and the impulse that had made him take up private investigation as a profession, fumed, stamped around and ached for action.

The days and weeks drifted past until he lost count of them. It began to seem as if he'd been incarcerated for a large slice of his lifetime, as if he had roamed free and unhampered in some previous existence

All things come to an end. The time arrived when they took away his breakfast tray and warned him to strap down. He lay on the bunk, had another experience of gyrations and pressures.

Then someone opened the door and said with the convivial air of inviting him to party, "All right, Mr Herald, this is it!"

Herald walked down an aluminium ramp, reached bottom, stared around. Three men joined him, watched his features with amused interest.

He was standing ankle-deep in feathery blue-green grass. The atmosphere was warm and humid, held a mist that hid the sun. To his left a forest of gargantuan trees soared through suspended moisture. To his right a high and ragged darkening of the mist indicated a faraway range of mountains. Before him stood a long, low building of rock blocks roofed with timber and topped with radar antenna.

He turned around and it was the thing now facing him that got him most, the object from which he had just emerged. An enormous disc of dull-gray metal three feet thick at the rim, thirty or more in the middle, one hundred and fifty to two hundred in diameter.

Even as he stared at it half a dozen smaller copies—about one-fifth the size—passed overhead and in complete silence. They emerged from the mist like shining ghosts, vanished back into it, bound on some mysterious errand between places unknown.

More people were descending the ramp by now. His face retained its stupefaction while he looked at them. One was a tall, smart platinum blonde, pleased and eager, hugging a hat-box in one hand. She was followed by a plump, middle-aged woman herding three wide-eyed children. Then came seven men, three young girls who seemed like sisters, an elderly woman, ten more children, eight women and nine men. The entire bunch had the manner of those commencing an overdue vacation.

"No," said Herald. "It can't be true. It can't be true."

One of the nearby trio nudged him, led him to the stone building, conducted him into a small office. He handed a bunch of papers to the occupant, a dignified, white-haired man who at once started to consult the documents, meanwhile murmuring audibly.

"Paul Herald, single, in good health. Ex-detective on the Narcotic Squad, ex-paratrooper of the second world war, now a private inquiry agent. Employed by James Farman Westerholt to trace the whereabouts of his son Peter." He glanced up, made

a gesture. "Please be seated, Mr Herald. My name is McShane. I shall not detain you any longer than is necessary."

"And after that—what?" asked Herald, taking a chair.

"We'll permit you to go anywhere you please."

"It will please me to go home," said Herald.

"You are home."

"That's strange," informed Herald. "It doesn't look the same to me." He leaned forward, frowned at McShane "Cut out the smooth talk and tell me something. *Where am I?*"

"On Venus."

"You're not fooling me, are you?"

McShane gave a wry smile. "It is not my habit to fool people."

"Then what is at the bottom of all this?"

"Nothing sinister, Mr Herald. Quite the contrary, in fact." He commenced reciting with the air of one who has told the tale a thousand times and expects to tell it a thousand more. "During the last world war a small group of scientists stumbled more or less by accident upon a new and previously unsuspected source of power. They realised that the secret of interplanetary flight was well-nigh solved. They kept the information from officialdom and proceeded to develop their discovery on the sly."

"Why?" Herald demanded.

McShane looked at him. His old eyes held a determined glint. His voice became harsh.

"Because many of us are sick and tired of seeing scientific progress misapplied to the detriment of humanity. Many of us think it is high time that scientists retained control of their own discoveries and ceased handing them over to the stupid, the selfish, the ruthless and the bellicose. Therefore this new power is not going to be converted into a redoubtable weapon for the further torment of the human race." He motioned in the general direction of outer space. "The imbeciles over there have been denied the use of it and rightly so."

"You won't get away with it for ever," Herald opined. "Someday they'll find it. Someday a scientific Judas will sell you for thirty pieces of silver. Or one of your contraptions will crash, be captured and copied."

"Eight have made forced landings to date," informed McShane. "Three were repaired and removed before anyone could lay hands on them. Five were destroyed beyond recognition. Local papers reported mysterious explosions and that's as

far as they got. Public scepticism is our strongest ally. Humanity thinks itself so supremely clever that it refuses to believe it can be outwitted even by a portion of itself."

"Where does all this get us?" asked Herald, impatiently.

"Here, right here," McShane retorted. "We are creating a new world devoid of earthly antagonisms, with one economy, one culture, one language. We do not hope or expect to establish absolute security for the individual. There is no real security in life anywhere: it is an everlasting battle against natural odds. But at least we shall have peace within ourselves as a species; peace in which to build strength for greater, more worthwhile conflicts."

"Peace until Earth finds out," said Herald. "Then there'll be trouble. Every Venusian a traitor to his country. That's the way they'll define it."

"Not for a long time—and then it will be too late," declared McShane with impressive confidence. "Get it into your head that we are superbly organised across the whole world. Our machines are repeatedly seen and nobody believes in them, nobody can pursue or capture one. People disappear by the thousands and nobody cares. By the time Earth wakes up we shall be too strong to overcome at this vast distance even with devices identical with our own. To date we have brought six hundred thousand hand-picked immigrants across the void. The number increases every year and nobody can stop us."

"And what about me? Am I sentenced to life imprisonment in this would-be Utopia for committing no crime?"

"You are one of about two hundred who were brought here by force because they had learned too much or looked like doing so. All the others came voluntarily. Once here, we do not differentiate between willing and unwilling arrivals. The world is equally yours with the sole reservation that you cannot escape it and return to Earth."

He pointed to a strangely proportioned calendar hanging on the wall. It bore a verse in gilt letters.

*Home, home! Where is that land
Beyond the bounds of Earth? The old hungering cry
Aches in the soul, drives us from all we planned,
And sets our sails to seek another sky.*

"Thousands here and thousands more to come, gladly, joyously, full of new hope," said McShane. "If you want to call it life imprisonment you're hopelessly outvoted."

"So I'm stuck with this place?"

"It's yours as much as anyone else's. Go out and find where you're needed. You will have no difficulty in fitting in. This is a rich world lacking only in people."

"Of the right kind."

"You'll be of the right kind if you constantly remember two things," McShane told him.

"Such as what?"

"Escape is impossible unless you can learn to control and navigate a flying saucer and also can manage to seize one. It takes a pilot two years of intensive training to qualify. What is the good of anyone capturing a saucer if he doesn't know how to use it?"

"Not so darned much," Herald ruefully admitted.

"Secondly, bear in mind that we are striving to build something genuinely worthy of the effort, a higher civilisation devoid of races, nationalities, competing ideologies. Consult your conscience before seeking a way to wreck it." McShane stood up, indicating that the interview was at an end. "As one who came involuntarily you've had the explanation to which you are entitled. I hope you'll nurse no resentment and will develop charity toward all."

"That remains to be seen," declared Herald "It depends on how much I find that I like."

With which he departed for a look at this brave new world.

He had been there six months before he encountered the quarry. Daytimes he was driving an articulated truck brought across piecemeal and assembled on Venus. Evenings he spent studying electrical engineering, playing cards with newfound friends, going walks and exploring the immediate locality.

Meeting a flying freighter that had arrived that afternoon, Herald helped unload goods manufactured in faraway factories that never would have credited their ultimate destination. He was heaving onto his truck a flat crate containing half a dozen diamond-toothed circular saws when a young, dark-haired, ascetic individual strolled by.

"Hah!" exclaimed Herald with glum satisfaction. "The cause of all the trouble."

"Me?" The other stopped, surveyed him in surprise. "Am I supposed to know you?"

"You are. Guess who says so?"

"I've no idea."

"Your loving father."

Peter Westerholt registered interest. "What do you mean?"

"Your father hired me to find you. Look what it's bought me."

"Your presence here suggests that you had a little too much success," said Peter, smiling.

"I did. First it was fly away Peter. Then it was fly away Paul. What happens if your old man refuses to accept those facts?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that my own disappearance whets his appetite, causes him to buy more and possibly better talent to take up the chase."

"He won't." Peter Westerholt seemed quite confident. "The Earth organisation has persuaded him to drop me in disgust. I've crossed the Iron Curtain, see? Earth has provided its own cover-up tactic. Anyone who disappears and thereby arouses too much interest is presumed to have crossed the Iron Curtain. Where is Professor Mikhael Semovitch? Where is Professor Bruno Pontecorvo? Answer, across the Iron Curtain." He laughed heartily. "The pretext is better than any we could have invented ourselves."

"I suppose so."

"But I'm genuinely sorry you became involved," assured Peter Westerholt. "Perhaps a day will come when you'll decide that it was all for the best."

"Maybe." Herald watched him walk away, gave the crate a violent shove that slid it deep into the truck. Completing the loading, he drove off, dumped the stuff in a huge, rock-built warehouse, handed a bunch of manifests to the chief storekeeper.

From there he went to the canteen for lunch, was joined at the table by Feldman, a plump pessimist who had never been satisfied from birth. Feldman was another forced conscript who once had been in the hills when something came down from the sky. He had seen too much, turned to run, been picked up and removed before he could talk.

Feldman whispered in conspiratorial tones, "There are two hundred of us jailed here for nothing. Even if we get together in a bunch we can do little to help ourselves because there's not

a saucer-pilot among the lot of us.’

“So what?”

“But a couple of the boys know how to construct a radio transmitter.”

“Eh?” Herald jerked in his seat. “Are you telling me that somebody’s building one?”

“Yes, Paul. They’re going to tell Earth what’s going on. But they need some stuff. They need three hundred yards of heavy gauge copper wire for a start. You get into stores at least twice a day. You could toss that wire on your truck and it would never be missed. How about it?”

“I’ll see. I’ll make no promises, mind you, but I’ll see.” Herald tried to appear deceitfully casual. “Who are these radio experts?”

“Jardine and Keyes. I don’t know much about the technique myself, but they say it’s possible to reach the Earth with directional spark signals. They’ve stolen valves and other items already. They are working the trick in a little hut amid the trees on top of Sunset Hill. Nobody ever goes there.”

“I’ll let you know what I can do.”

He worked all afternoon in a preoccupied manner, finished, went a stroll on the river bank in the cool of the evening. Eastward there sounded a clatter of machinery where willing hands were working overtime to block the flow, create a reservoir and power-station that would spread light a hundred miles around. To his right, under big tarpaulins, were tons of parts that would be assembled into transformers and huge turbo-alternators. All these, all the cables, all the cement, lugged across thirty to sixty million miles of space.

He passed a rock garden outside which a buxom woman was hoeing a garden with the doubtful help of four chattering children. They had roses and columbine and shy forget-me-not. There were many things they had not got, some they would never have.

Please God, they would never have a blast-cellar in which to cower before the savagery of their own kind.

Going to the warehouse, he confiscated a big axe, shouldered it, trudged into a cathedral of mighty trees and climbed the slope behind. It took him four hours to find the hut.

Well hidden, the small log edifice was deserted when he arrived at a little after midnight. He smashed its door with one fierce blow, found inside a mass of radio parts, a clumsy water-wheel, a crude but effective generator. It was a crying shame to ruin all this patient handiwork but there are times when one must be cruel to be kind. With no compunctions he destroyed the lot, fired the hut, watched it burn down.

Tomorrow morning he would see McShane, suggest that Feldman, Jardine and Keyes be moved to posts devoid of opportunities for further mischief. The three would hate him for that. When they learned of it, so might many of the two hundred.

In a world consecrated to peace he would be the first to have earned undying animosity. Well, his broad back could bear the load. Science was building a dream with brains and travail. He saw no reason to let anyone bust it.

A woman was growing roses.

He wasn't going to let her water them with tears.

Shouldering the axe again, he tramped heavy-footed through the trees and the mist, descending steep slopes alongside enormous trunks.

He whistled tunefully as he marched back into the new life.

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

THE NEXT ISSUE

Loneliness has always been one of the greatest fears of the human race and can be the cause of many curious phenomena. Space-conscious humanity, faced with the possibility of a completely lifeless Universe, may well feel greater loneliness than ever before—and react accordingly.

This is the fascinating theme of a new story by American **ROBERT DONALD LOCKE** to appear for the first time in the next edition of **NEBULA**.

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Episode

Unlike the blasé planet-conquering heroes of fiction, these men found only pain and terror in space.

Illustrated by Bob Clothier

IN the murmuring silence of the control room the click of moving pieces sounded strangely loud.

"Check!"

Captain John Hargraves leaned back in his chair, stretched long legs before him. "Now let's see you get out of that one, Doc."

Across the painted table serving as a board the tall, thin, saturnine-faced doctor smiled behind a shielding hand. Casually he moved a Bishop.

"Checkmate!" He yawned with studied negligence. "Well?"

"Impossible!" Hargraves glowered down at the board, feeling the sick rebellion of a man who has fallen into an obvious trap, his mind spinning as he tried to see a way out.

He was saved by an interruption.

Something went ping-g-g. A sound as of a slamming door echoed through the ship and an alarm rang briefly, to die in silence as the internal air pressure regained normal density. Hargraves leapt to his feet, sending chair and chessmen flying in wild disarray.

"Meteor," he snapped to the startled doctor. "Sounded as though it was in the generator room." Swiftly he walked up the hull, the centrifugal force of the spinning ship making every direction from the longitudinal axis 'down', and sliding open a door, ran down the narrow corridor between the laboratory and the galley. At the end of the passage he came into violent contact with a heavy object and staggered back, gasping with pain.

"Take it easy, skipper," grunted the man he had run against. "Everything's under control. Baylis's sealed the hole and is welding it now."

"Where was it, Carter?"

"Generator room."

"Damage?"

"Just a small hole in the hull. The meteor was a tiny one, couldn't have been more than a few grams, and we lost hardly any air."

"Good." Hargraves sighed with relief. Meteors were tricky things and even a small one could tear the entire side out of a ship. Big ones were rare and could be picked up on the radar screens but most of them were small, more like grains of nickel iron than masses of rock, and they could neither be detected nor avoided. It had been sheer bad luck that they had been hit at all.

Gold was setting up the men when Hargraves returned and he looked at the captain.

"Okay?"

"Just a small hole drilled through the hull, Doc. Nothing to worry about." John stared at the chessboard. "Still want to play the deciding game?"

"What deciding game? We just played it and I won."

"Oh, no, you didn't. I'd just seen the way out of that set-up when the alarm went."

Gold opened his mouth to protest, then shrugged instead. "Don't you ever admit defeat, John?"

"Not if I can help it." Hargraves grinned. "All right, Doc, you won. Set 'em up again and this time I really will beat you."

Before sitting down he ran a practised eye over the ranked instruments on the control panel. He frowned, sensing rather than seeing something wrong. On one dial a hand had moved, climbing from where it had rested against a pin, and he checked it against other instruments.

"Anything wrong, John?"

"I'm not sure," he said slowly. "The radiation meter is climbing. Look."

Gold joined him at the panel and together they stared at the dial. It was a simple instrument, geared to a Geiger counter it recorded the intensity of external radiation penetrating the ship. Normally it's hand was at zero but now it was moving slowly towards a thin red line.

"The meteor?" suggested Gold.

"I don't know," said Hargraves grimly. "But I'm going to find out."

Gold ran after him as he left the control room.

The generator compartment was empty but for one man. He turned as they entered and gestured with the portable welder in his hand towards a shiny patch against the smooth metal of the hull.

"Just finished, captain. We're all right again now."

"Good." Hargraves stared round the equipment-filled room. "Were you on duty when it hit?"

"Yes."

"Did you check for other damage?"

"Of course." Baylis set down the welder and wiped his hands down the sides of his legs. "The meteor was only a small one and it probably exploded during penetration of the hull. I doubt if it ever got within the ship, just fused the metal to a point where the air pressure did the rest." He stared at the grim face of the captain. "Why? Anything wrong?"

"The radiation meter is climbing," said John quietly. He stared about the room. "It *could* have penetrated, exploded within the ship and done some unsuspected damage. Check everything." He crouched down, his eyes narrowed as he examined the smooth finish of a squat machine.

Gold found it. He squatted beside a small, humped machine and called to the captain as his finger explored a jagged hole close down by the retaining bolts. They crowded round, examining the hole, and Hargraves whitened as he saw it.

"How long will it take to strip this, Baylis?"

"Two hours more or less. De Hartz generators aren't meant to be taken apart, you know."

"I know, but this is serious. I think the shield is down. Get Brock to help, Carter too if you want him, but hurry, this is urgent."

He waited in the control room while the engineers sweated

over the task of dismantling the mechanism, staring at the climbing needle of the radiation meter, and when Carter came to report that the generator was ready for inspection he seemed to have aged five years during the two hours.

Tensely he stared at the exposed wiring and tubes.

"Any chance of repairing this, Baylis?"

"None. The meteor must have exploded right in the centre. Plenty of heat too, when it did, by the look of it. Those windings are fused solid, the tubes ruined and the condensers and transistors thrown all to hell."

"Can you rig up another somehow? We've plenty of spares."

"Not for a De Hartz we haven't. These things are hand machined and tuned at Tycho by trial and error. It could take up to a week to tune one end and, as for the machine work, I'd rather turn out a complete set of fuel injectors."

"No hope then?"

"Not a one."

Hargraves sighed. He had known it from the first but sometimes the truth is too hard to face.

"Right, Baylis." He looked at the tense face of the engineer. "All hands forward in five minutes. Emergency meeting right away."

The five men which comprised the crew of the Third Expedition taxed the capacity of the control room to straining point. Hargraves waited until they had settled themselves in some degree of comfort, ranged around the entire circumference of the hull, their heads towards the centre, and made it brief and clear.

"We have had an accident. The De Hartz generator has been totally destroyed and we are exposed to the free radiations of outer space. I have called this meeting so that you will all know the position. Suggestions are welcome."

They didn't answer for a while, each man busy with his own thoughts, and all thinking of the one thing. Without the invention of the De Hartz generator space flight would have been impossible. Fundamentally it was no more than a complex radio transmitter, broadcasting an intricate pattern of waves which heterodyned, cancelling out the dangerous radiations of outer space. In effect it did for the ship what the Heaviside layer did for Earth, without it men couldn't venture into space—and live.

Brock asked the first question.

"How far to Mars, captain?"

"Fifteen days."

"As long as that?" Brock pursed his lips, it was a long time to be without shielding. "Can we speed up a little?"

"No. We are at the tail end of the trip. We need to lose speed, not gain it, and firing the main drive now would get us to the orbit of Mars too soon. We'd have to decelerate again, manoeuvre for position, we'd use plenty of fuel but wouldn't save more than a few hours." He didn't think it worth while to add that they didn't have surplus fuel for such expenditure.

"What can we expect, captain?"

Hargraves looked his surprise at the question then, as he saw the speaker, smiled.

"Didn't they teach you that at the Academy, Carter? We're going to suffer from radiation burns similar to those experienced by the first x-ray workers and the pioneers on the early Moon flights. It won't be nice, but we can take it, we've got to." He glanced at Gold. "Anything you want to add, Doc?"

"I don't think so. There is just one thing, though. It won't be much use your hoping to have children after this. You'll probably all be sterile, but even if you're not, your offspring would not be—human."

"Just what did happen on those early flights?" Carter was insistant and Gold sighed.

"We don't really know, not many of those first pilots were able to tell us much. The radiations didn't kill them, they were not exposed for more than a few days, but they did affect the neuron paths of the brain. Pilots became confused, uncertain, their reflexes slowed and they made mistakes. The same thing happened to the men manning the space stations, but in their case it was mostly burns and radiant poisoning. The De Hartz stopped all that, of course."

"I remember reading something about hallucinations or something. Will we get them?"

"I doubt it," said Gold casually. "Don't let it worry you though, you can get them just as easily from a case of Scotch."

Carter reddened at the general laugh, seemed about to speak again, then fell silent, biting his lips. Hargraves stared at the men,

"Any further questions? No? Then for final instructions. Doctor Gold will issue salve and anti-radiation shots." He forced himself to smile with false confidence. "We'll be landing on Mars within fifteen days and the Heaviside layer of the planet will protect us until we are contacted by Expedition Four."

He hesiated. "One other thing. If at any time any of you

imagine that his eyes or ears are playing tricks report to the doctor. At once, remember. That is all."

They filed from the control room, joking among themselves, and Hargraves stared morosely at the radiation meter. The thin hand had just passed the red line and for a moment he had a mad desire to smash the instrument telling of the invisible death permeating the ship. He resisted it, knowing it was born of frustration at his own helplessness, the same primitive urge which made a man smash a photograph when he couldn't hurt the person it represented.

He turned as Gold entered the room.

The doctor carried a small basin in which lay a hypodermic. Setting it down he picked up the instrument and glanced at the meter.

"Getting bad, John. We'll be feeling the effects soon."

Hargraves grunted as he rolled up his sleeve, wincing a little at the thrust of the needle. "You think that this stuff will do any good?"

"I don't know." Gold shrugged as he dropped the hypodermic back into the basin. "This is a new product of General Atomics, mainly designed to safeguard their workers. As far as I know we're the first to use it."

"That makes me very happy," Hargraves sneered. "You sit on your fat rear the whole trip without so much as a scratch to keep you busy, and now, when you could really earn your keep, you spring the 'I don't know' touch."

Gold refused to be annoyed.

"My time is coming, John. Just wait until the broken bones appear after you make your belly-flop landing, then we'll see who earns his keep." They both laughed. Gold glanced towards the forgotten chessmen. "Play some more?"

"No thanks." Hargraves rubbed his sore arm. "I want to check the course and make up the log." He yawned. "Then I'm going to get some sleep. I'm tired."

After the saturnine doctor had gone Hargraves sat for a long time deep in thought before he moved to the ranked instruments on the control panel. His skin itched faintly as if a horde of insects were crawling over his flesh. Savagely he swallowed a handful of salt pills, glared balefully at the radiation meter, and set to work.

It was a long time before he finally made his way to his bunk.

He awoke to a discomfort so intense that it was torture.

Every square inch of his skin burned and itched and the muscles of his arms and hands trembled as he fought the desire to scratch. Hastily he entered the laboratory. Gold looked up from where he sat, watching the distillation of some fluid, and before he could speak the doctor had thrust a thermometer in his mouth and was loading a hypodermic from a capsule of vivid blue fluid.

"I thought that you'd be here soon," he said calmly. "All the others were here hours ago. Itchy, aren't you?"

"God, yes!" Hargraves swore, then, unable to stand the discomfort any longer, began to claw frantically at his exposed flesh. The skin scaled away beneath his finger nails, leaving ugly red welts lined with minute drops of blood. Scratching brought only momentary relief, followed by an intense burning sensation, relieved only by further scratching.

"Stop that!" Gold threw across a pair of surgical scissors. "Cut your nails. Cut them good and short. One scratch could expose you to a blood infection which might be fatal." He picked up the hypodermic. "Here. This should ease the pain."

Slowly he injected the contents of the big syringe, pumping fully twenty CCs of the vivid blue fluid into Hargraves veins. He gasped as liquid fire raced along his arm and through his body, then sagged as the pain and the itching died.

"Synthetic radioactive bismuth. The idea is that it permeates the body with radioactive material, the radiations acting as a sort of personal De Hartz shield."

"Does it?"

"To a degree. It works fine for a while but it's a one shot only treatment. Too much and the cure is worse than the disease." Gold reached for a pot of salve and slammed it down before the captain. "Rub this in, use plenty, you'd better strip first."

"What is it?"

"Just a palliative. I mixed it up while you were asleep. Something to soothe the skin and act as an antiseptic."

Hargraves grunted as he stripped, scooped up a handful of the thick ointment, and rubbed it on his chest. He was a man with thick body hair and, as he rubbed the ointment into his skin, it came away with the slightest of tugs leaving him as bald as an egg. Gold chuckled at his look of surprise.

"What did you expect? It's one of the first signs of radiant poisoning. The follicles are dead now, and we'll all be without any hair at all soon." He rubbed his hand over his own bald head. "I've lost mine already."



"You've been bald for years, you old coot," said Hargraves impatiently. He stared at the doctor. "How are the others taking it?"

"Well enough. Carter scratched his eyes though, tore the skin pretty deep, the rest had better sense."

"Serious?"

"Not yet, he'll be all right unless an infection sets in."

"I see." Hargraves stared thoughtfully at the thin doctor. "There's no need to lie to you, Doc," he said abruptly. "You are an old hand at this game, as old as me, and you know what the others don't. Can you do anything about it?"

"How do you mean?"

"We've a pile on board. Would it be possible to breed a

chemical to work the same as the radioactive bismuth? Something to act as a barrier until we planetfall?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure I'm sure," said Gold tiredly. He stared thoughtfully at his hands. "You can't expect me to pull a rabbit out a hat like that. The pile is designed for just one job, to act as a super 'fire' to expand the fuel, not as a working tool. Even with all the resources of the big laboratories we still haven't been able to make a personal shield against the free radiations of space and I can't now. No, John. We'll just have to sit and wait it out. There's nothing else we can do."

"We've another fourteen days in space," reminded Hargraves grimly "You know what that means."

"I know."

Gold didn't look up as Hargraves left the laboratory.

Ten days later Hargraves watched as Gold treated Carter's eye.

It was the first time he had seen it without a shielding bandage and the sight sickened him, used as he was to the injuries to which men are subject. The eye itself was visible as a thin slit the colour of blood, glassy and rimmed with a seeping yellow pus. The pain must have been terrible, and Carter whimpered as the doctor dropped a clear fluid into the eye.

"What's the matter, Carter? Can't you take it?" Hargraves was deliberately brutal as he held the man's arms.

"Its the pain, skipper," groaned Carter. "It's driving me crazy!" He screamed as Gold dropped more liquid into the eye. "For God's sake, Doc, can't you do something to stop the pain?"

"Take it easy," said Gold gently. "I'll do what I can." He looked at Hargraves. "I'll have to dope him. Is that all right with you?"

"Why ask me? You're the doctor aren't you?"

"Yes, but we're near landing time and..." He shrugged at the captain's expression and took a hypodermic from a tray. Sombrely he watched as Carter sagged, slumped, and almost fell to the floor. "Morphine. It will give the poor devil a few hours rest." He grunted as he picked up the unconscious man. "I'll get him comfortable."

"No."

Hargraves shrugged and sat on the edge of a table, idly rolling the empty hypodermic between his fingers. He dropped it as Gold entered the room.

"How is he?"

"Bad, John. He'll have to lose that eye I'm afraid. I'll operate as soon as we land."

"Why not now?"

"Are you serious?" Gold stared at the captain. "You saw what a scratch did to him, what do you think surgery will do?"

"But that was different. He probably had dirty finger nails or something. With antiseptic surgery ..."

"It would be just as bad." Gold slumped into a chair. "We have lost all resistance to disease by now. The sulfa drugs are useless, penicillin the same, and the blood doesn't clot as it should. We're fortunate in that the ship was almost sterile at take off, but we hold our own diseases and germs can mutate too, you know."

"Then?"

"Yes, John. We are slowly rotting to death. First sores and ulcers, then infected wounds, blood poisoning, gangrene and finish. That's on the physical side, the mental is something else again."

"You think that our minds have been affected?"

"I know that they have. Brock complained about odd noises the other day, Baylis too, and yesterday I heard singing where singing could not be." The doctor shuddered and stared at Hargraves. "It'll be your turn next."

"Hallucinations won't kill me, I'm more concerned about the physical condition of the men. Will they last until we reach Mars?"

"Possibly, but you can't ignore the mental condition. If you do you're asking for trouble."

"Trouble?"

"Crews have been known to mutiny before, you know."

"Not this crew, they are intelligent men."

"They *were* intelligent men," corrected the doctor. "Don't make the mistake of thinking that these men are the same as those who left Earth. They're not. Physically perhaps, but mentally, no. If they hadn't been so intelligent to start with I'd feel a lot happier. Morons would put their sufferings down to the will of God, but these men know exactly who and what is to blame. They

know that there can be no escape and when things get too bad they're going to look for a scapegoat." He looked at Hargraves. "You are the scapegoat."

"You're crazy!"

"You think so?" Gold shrugged. "Have it your own way then. You insist on thinking of the men as they used to be, but they've changed, we've all changed. The free radiations have disturbed our minds and values have altered."

"I'll talk to them," decided Hargraves abruptly. "I still think that you're wrong, but we'll have this thing out in the open. I'll call them now."

It was a far different group of men who assembled in the control room than when Hargraves had announced the loss of the De Hartz. Almost naked, their bodies marred by sores and weeping ulcers, hairless, dirty, they looked nothing like the trim crew which had left Earth a few months before.

"Men," snapped Hargraves curtly. "Things are bad and there's no sense in denying it, but we shall land within five days and our troubles will be over."

"Yeah?"

"Yes, Brock. We are still alive and we can remain that way. Once we planetfall we'll be shielded by the Heavyside layer, and once out of these damn radiations we'll soon recover."

"And then what?"

"We rest and wait for the Fourth Expedition. They left shortly after we did and we have a rendezvous on Mars. Another two weeks and we'll all be looking back on this episode as just another adventure to tell the folks back home." He forced a confidence he did not feel into his voice and twisted his lips into a smile. "Any questions?"

"Yes." Brock licked his lips in a nervous gesture. "I've been thinking. Why can't we all get into one of the empty fuel tanks? Wouldn't the metal protect us from radiations?"

"No. Even if we did get inside a tank, always assuming that the tank could be cleaned of residual fuel, it wouldn't do any good. Most of the tanks are outside the ship proper and we'd be no better off." He glanced at the men. "Anything else?"

"What about Carter?" Baylis pulled at his lower lip. "I haven't had a proper sleep since the generator went out. Can't the Doc keep him quiet some way?"

"I've given him morphine," snapped Gold. "What else can I do?"

"I could think of something," grunted the engineer. He stared at Hargraves. "Have I permission?"

"To do what?"

"Put him out of it."

"What?" Hargraves stared at the man, hardly crediting that he had heard correctly. "Kill him you mean?"

"Why not?" Baylis spat. "He's dying isn't he? Then why should we have to put up with his moaning? Kill him and get it over with."

"You ..." Hargraves stepped forward and his fist slammed against the engineer's mouth. "Carter is a member of this crew and he will be treated as such. Any more of that talk and I'll put you in irons!" He glared at Brock. "Did you have the same idea?"

He didn't need an answer. Anger flamed through him as he looked at the man's face and Gold caught his arm as he lunged forward.

"Steady, John."

"I'll kill the swine!" He glared at the doctor. "You heard him. You saw him. It might be me they were talking about, or you. Damn it, Gold, let me go."

"Steady, you fool." Deliberately the doctor swung his hand and Hargraves snarled to the pain of the blow. "I told you that they weren't as you remembered them. They can't help it, any more than you could help it when you hit Baylis. Now get a grip on yourself."

"Yes." Hargraves shuddered and bit his lip, the pain washing away some of his anger. He glared at the two crewmen. "Get out. Get back to your quarters and remember this. If Carter is harmed I'll settle you both."

He waited until they had gone, then looked at the doctor.

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know." Gold frowned at his hands. "You've got a gun, haven't you?"

"What of it?"

"Maybe it would be a good idea if you were to take it and put a bullet through each of our heads, your own included." He stared at the captain. "I ran some tests today, ran them on a scrap of flesh from my finger and some blood. There is a definite cellular breakdown and loss in corpuscle density. It will only be a matter of time before our bones begin to disintegrate, not the hard

calcium, but the marrow and binding tissue." He swallowed. "I'd prefer not to be alive when that happens."

"But it won't happen within five days. We'll be safe then."

"Will we?" Gold shrugged. "Maybe, I wouldn't know, but this I do know. We'll never recover from this exposure to free radiation. Never." He stared at Hargraves. "Maybe you'd prefer me to do it. A little something in the water ..."

"No!"

"But ..."

"I said no." Hargraves dragged a hand across his face and stared at the sweat moistening his palm. "We're too near to give up now. Five more days and we land on Mars, two weeks more and the Fourth Expedition will land and relieve us. Nothing is going to stop me from landing, Gold. Nothing. Remember that."

"I'll remember it," said the doctor quietly. "But will the others?"

Hargraves stared blankly after him as he left the room.

It was warm and quiet and all pain and discomfort had vanished in the mists coiling between sleep and wakening. Hargraves stirred a little, frowning as he tried to recapture the vanishing illusions of fading dreams, then frowned again as a thin sound jarred on the edge of his hearing.

It puzzled him that sound. It was a sound which should never be heard in space, a thin plaintive sound belonging to a planet fifty million miles away, a world of soft rains and green fields, of warm sunshine and gentle breezes.

The sound of a baby's wail!

It seemed to be muted by the hull, a thin crying from the emptiness of space, a terrible sound and a terrible thing that a baby should be shut outside, away from warmth and comfort, locked away from its own kind. It would be better to open the air lock and bring it inside, much better, but he was warm and it was hard to move. Too hard.

He tried for sleep again, but in his ears, or perhaps it was within his mind, a forgotten memory jarred by the insidious radiations disturbing his neuron paths, the baby tore at his ease with its pitiful crying. He grunted, rolled over on the bunk, and opened his eyes.

And stared at the contorted features of Brock.

He twisted as the man lunged forward, light splintering

from metal in his hand, and as he twisted, the knife slashed into the bedding beside him. He kicked, rolled, swayed a little as his feet thudded to the floor, and yelled as the madman lunged at him, knife in hand.

"Gold! Baylis! Help!"

"What?" The thin doctor ran into the bunk room, rubbing his eyes, then darted forward as he saw what was happening. Brock snarled as he dodged Hargraves' driving fist, spun, slashed with the knife and blood dulled the gleaming blade. Then he was gone, the sound of his feet dying as he ran towards the generator room and the rear of the ship.

Gold stared stupidly at his left hand, at the blood spurting from his palm, and the severed fingers lying like white worms on the metal of the floor.

"My hand!" he gasped. "My hand!"

Hargraves caught him as he slumped to the floor.

A tourniquet stopped the flow of blood. A thick spray of sulfa powder and a bandage hid the wound then, just to make sure, he injected a large dose of penicillin. The doctor recovered just as he withdrew the needle.

"Bad?"

"Three fingers and half the palm gone." Hargraves didn't look at the thin man. "I've done what I could."

"Which isn't much, the drugs aren't working as they should, but thanks all the same."

"I'm the one to give thanks," said Hargraves quietly. "If you hadn't come when you did Brock would have got me for sure." He stared at the thin man. "You saved my life."

"Maybe." Gold shrugged. "Personally I don't think that I did you a favour. It would have been a quick death." He stared at the captain. "What are you going to do now?"

"Brock has gone insane, maybe Baylis too but I'm not sure about that. I suppose that I should go after him, search the ship and put him in irons, but I'm not going to."

"No?"

"No. We're about thirty hours from Mars. I'm going to lock myself in the control room until after we planetfall. I'd advise you to do the same, not in the control room, but in here." He hesitated. "You should be all right, Gold, but don't forget to loosen that tourniquet, and if anyone tries to get in, ignore them."

"I see." The thin doctor frowned at his bandaged hand. "And if you should go insane too?"

"Then we all die."

"Yes," said Gold, and winced at a stab of pain from his injured hand. "Maybe it would be the best thing that could happen at that."

Hargraves didn't answer.

The control room was very quiet, the silence broken only by the muted sounds of the air conditioner, the soft chatter of the Geigers, and the intermittent click of relays. Hargraves slid shut the door and locked it, then, taking a flat, small calibre automatic from a drawer, he checked the loading and tucked the gun in the waistband of his shorts.

Now there was nothing he could do. They had already turned, killed speed, turned again, and now drifted towards the orbit of Mars being gradually slowed by the solar drag. In thirty hours time the paths of ship and planet would meet, then he would have to take over from the automatics, pit his skill and judgement against the gravity and speed of Mars, swing the ship into orbit, kill velocity, stabilize and land.

It was never easy.

A vicious hammering at the locked door made him jump and snarl with instinctive animal-reaction to fear, the flat automatic bruising his hand from the strength of his grip. The hammering stopped, giving way to a muffled stream of obscene profanity and after a final heavy bang, shuffling footsteps died into silence.

Hargraves trembled, staring almost stupidly at the gun, and sweat trickled down his body, stinging as it touched the seeping ulcer and growing sores. Savagely he rubbed at his eyes, trying to clear from them a vague blur, then rubbed them again as the blur remained. No use, the fog stayed with him, but now it seemed to have a dim suggestion of shape.

Shrugging, he stared at the ranked dials, and from the clear plastic something stared back. Startled he turned his head, catching a glimpse of something white at one of the ports. It vanished to reappear shining from the tube lights, vanished again as he stared at them, and showed itself limned against the polished bulkhead. Everywhere he looked he could see it, pale and blurred, white and somehow familiar.

The shadow of a woman's face.

Thirty hours later they landed on Mars. It was not a good landing. On Earth the ship would have split like a rotten melon,

crumpled like a paper bag, but on Mars, the third normal gravitation coupled with the cushioning sand saved them.

Hargraves groaned, stirred, opened his eyes, and stared around the dimly lit control room. He struggled to his feet, wincing at the pain in his head, and carefully fingering a swelling lump on his temple. Memory returned and he stared about the control room, half afraid that he would see again the pale white shadow of hallucination, and shuddering as he recalled the past few hours when his sanity had hung by a fraying thread.

Painfully he crossed the tilted flooring and tugged at the door. He had pulled at it for more than a minute before he remembered that it was locked and when he finally opened it, something fell forward with a soggy thud.

It had been a man. Now it was a pulped mess, the abrupt force of landing had flung the man, whoever it was, against the panel with sufficient violence to smash flesh and splinter bone. Hargraves swallowed, stepped over the shattered thing, and stumbled painfully down the corridor.

Carter was dead, had been dead for a long time now, and a thin, sickly sweet smell welled from the bunk on which he lay. Hargraves stared at him, covered him with a blanket, and, gun in hand, looked for the remaining member of the crew.

He found him crouched down behind a generator, his body a mass of gaping wounds, and a terrible look of fear freezing his dead features, and Hargraves stared at him, wondering at poetic justice. Dimly through the ship came the sound of muffled banging and Hargraves almost ran to the small laboratory. The door was buckled, twisted in its frame, and he wrenched at it with mounting desperation. Finally it grated aside and Gold staggered into his arms.

"Hargraves! Thank God you're alive!" The thin man almost babbled in his relief. "What kept you so long?"

"Long?" Hargraves frowned. "I must have knocked myself out when landing. I've only just recovered."

"We've been here over two days now. I tied myself down and used the rest of the morphine and when I came out of it we'd landed. That was two days ago and I've been going crazy trying to get that door open with one hand. How are the others?"

"Dead."

"All of them?"

"Yes. Baylis knifed Brock then the force of landing flung him against the control room door. Carter's been dead for a long

time." He stared at the thin doctor. "We're the last of the Third Expedition, but we made it, Gold! We made it!"

Later, over steaming cans of vitiminised soup, they made plans. The ship was still air tight and the long furrow gouged from the sand when they landed would serve as an unmistakable sign. All they had to do was to wait for the Fourth Expedition. They could rest, eat plenty and drink as much as they wanted to. Chess would pass the time and their bodies would slowly recover from their exposure to free radiations.

They hoped.

Five days later, over a game of chess, Gold realised that it wasn't going to be as simple as that. Hargraves seemed unnaturally clumsy, several times he knocked over pieces and twice Gold had to remind him that a Pawn wasn't a King.

"Sorry," apologised the captain after the thin doctor had pointed out that a Bishop couldn't move the same as a Knight. "It must be the air in here. The conditioners are broken and it's hard to see in this mist."

"Mist?" Gold stared at the clear air, then, as he looked at the captain, a sick expression grew on his saturnine features. Leaning across the table he stared into the other's eyes.

A thin film overlaid the once clear blueness. A thin, milky white film of semi-opaque tissue covering the entire pupil and ball. Hargraves shifted uncomfortably at the doctor's examination.

"What's the matter, Doc?"

"Theres nothing wrong with the air, John," said Gold quietly.

"What! There must be!"

"No, John. It isn't the air. The doctor swallowed and looked away. "It's your eyes."

"My eyes?" Hargraves gripped the doctor's arm and sweat glistened on his brow. "What are you trying to tell me? Damn you, man! What do you mean?"

"You're going blind, John. A growth on the eyes, I've seen it before, and there's no mistaking it."

"My God!" Hargraves shuddered. "Blind!" Hope came into his face. "I can be cured?"

"On Earth perhaps, but here? I doubt it. The radiations, you know."

"I see what you mean. Our cells aren't quite as they used

to be. Tissue has died or run wild, wounds won't heal, drugs don't act as they should. But *blind!*"

"I'm sorry, John," said Gold. "I ..." He broke off, frowning, and opposite him Hargraves cocked his head, his glazed eyes narrowed with the effort of hearing.

"Did you ..."

"Wait!" Hargraves held up his hand. "Here it comes again."

This time there could be no doubt. Faintly, yet growing rapidly louder, came the unmistakable whine and thunder of an orbiting rocket ship.

The Fourth Expedition had arrived.

The sound grew louder, died, vanished into silence, then came murmuring back again. Hargraves was jubilant.

"They've swung into orbit," he exclaimed. "Cutting speed and manoeuvring for landing. They'll be here soon, Gold. They'll be here and we'll be safe again. Think of it, man. In six months we'll be back home!"

"Will we?" Something in the thin man's voice made Hargraves stare at him with sudden doubt.

"Of course. Why? Is anything the matter?"

"You ask me that?" Gold shrugged and his voice held a strange bitterness. "Look at me. You know what I was, a surgeon, a specialist, known and respected. You might even say famous. Now? How can I operate again? How can I ever enjoy life again? No, John. I don't think that I want to go back."

"Don't be a fool," snapped Hargraves roughly. "You've lost a couple of fingers, so what? Other men have lived and conquered their disability."

"Look, John," said Gold patiently. "I'm a doctor and I know just a little too much about myself to live under a delusion. It's more than just the loss of a couple of fingers. The wound isn't healing, worse, it has already gangrened. I haven't just lost my hand, John. I'm going to lose my arm. Even that wouldn't be so bad, but there is more. I couldn't operate again if I wanted to. My mind has been deranged, my reactions ruined, my knowledge scrambled. Look!" He held out his hand and Hargraves could see the nervous tremors afflicting the claw-like fingers. "No, John. In a way I'm a hero now, I'd like to keep it that way."

"Suicide?"

Gold shrugged, not answering, and looking down at his own hands Hargraves knew that the doctor was right. They would

never recover. Gold should know, the man was a brilliant physician and an expert on radiant poisoning, and deep within himself Hargraves knew that he had lived on false hope.

He stared at his hands again, twisted claws that had once guided tons of metal on wings of flame, now crippled and useless. His body too, once so big and strong, weak now and covered with sores. His eyes ...

He gulped and refused to think about it. Refused to imagine what life would be in some hospital on Earth, blind, crippled, dying, forgotten. Tied to the narrow confines of a hospital bed when he had been used to the vastness of space. There had to be a better way.

"I shall need a suit," said Gold quietly. "Will you help me please? My arm ..."

"Does it matter?" Hargraves sighed as he rose from the table. "There is a little air here, not much, but enough. Need we prolong the agony?"

"We?"

"Yes."

Gold nodded, not saying anything, but his eyes held a strange tenderness as he stared at the captain.

"I think we should wear the suits," He said. "It would be better that way."

Together they helped each other into the stiff metal and fabric of the suits, fastening the helmets and adjusting the air tanks.

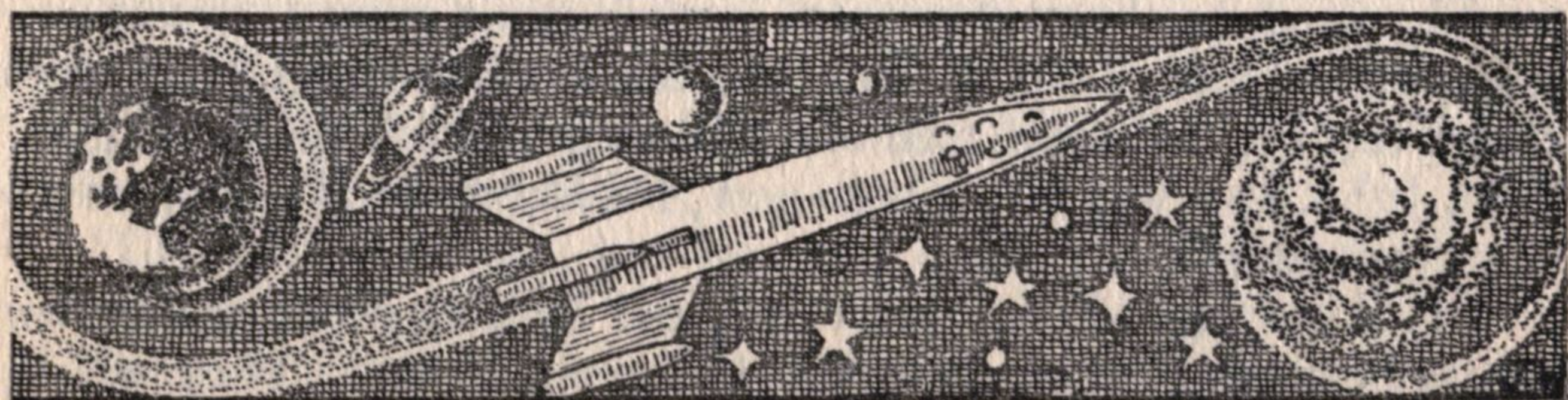
Together they set foot on Mars.

Dust swirled around them, the fine, age old dust of millions of years of continuous erosion, and Hargraves stumbled a little as he followed the bulky figure of the doctor.

Overhead the roar of decelerating rockets grew louder.

But neither man looked back.

E. C. TUBB



Weather Station

Self preservation is all very well depending, of course, on your point of view.

Illustrated by Jack Wilson.

“THE absolute placidity of our existance is about to be rudely shattered,” observed my Number One casually.

“Oh,” I said.

“Yes, indeed. I apprehend a major magnetic storm approaching from the general direction of the Asteroid Belt. It would appear to be converging upon one of our more important space-lanes with some rapidity. Far be it from me to advise in such a case, but—.”

I switched off the three-dimensional projector through which I had been studying some of the finer points of last year’s beauty queens and said, briskly.

“Then don’t! And don’t use such long words either—you know how it gives me an inferiority complex. Your job is to report facts. As commander of this weather station, I’ll decide what action to take. Now, plot the extent and direction of the storm and give me the data.”

"That," said my Number One, taking a dignified stand, "is not *my* job." He revolved on a caterpillar tread and waved a flexible tentacle at his other half. "Take over, Number Two."

I backed further into a corner to give my second robot worker room to operate. He purred happily to himself, spreading charts and instruments before him with a thoughtful disregard for the limited space of the ship's control room.

Number Two has a habit of spreading himself over all the available space, on account of his being, basically, a mechanical computer: To look at, he is a massive construction with the shape of an egg and transparent sheathing through which a complicated system of sprocket wheels and wiring and levers is visible. Unfortunately, his disposition is to spread himself in other directions; like so many other physically large persons, he has an exaggerated sense of his own importance.

He whirred and clicked busily as he mapped the storm centre, leaving his audio circuits open to give us the benefit of his cogitations.

Number One snapped: "Such noise! Some people can't seem to think quietly...stop it, you overgrown rust-heap!" abuse, all the while sorting and tabulating the data which would eventually fix the position of the approaching storm. I let my attention return, absently, to Number One.

Have you ever faced a robot whose eyes you cannot meet without a sense of insecurity? A feeling of inferiority? That is the effect Number One has on me and even allowing for the fact that he is *all* eyes, this weakness of mine is still unreasonable. He is officially listed as Long-Range Observer, Type IVa, and is inordinately proud of that small 'a'.

Imagine a cylinder, standing upright and covered with lenses of varying sizes, some plain, some faceted, and you have an idea of Number One's physical appearance. Those eyes are bright with a cold searching intensity, and his acid comments leave me in no doubt of his ability to see right through me.

Both robots are equipped with the usual appendages; caterpillar tread for moving about; flexible tentacles with vice-grips for holding things; audio circuits for communication. The fact that each was constructed for a specific function means that they have a certain advantage over me—and the form of their mechanical brains makes it impossible for them to appreciate their limitations. Both are examples of the supreme egotist.

I looked upwards, through the transparent dome of the

weather station. The black vault of space was dotted with star-dust and some of the larger asteroids made pinheads of light. Somewhere out there, a storm gathered. I could not see it, of course; the eddy and swirl of magnetic flux, so dangerous to the ships of space, is beyond the range of normal vision. That was Number One's job and the reason for his being.

Number Two had started pushing out his extensions and the control room was getting overcrowded. I felt myself being edged towards the door.

"Why don't you," suggested Number One calmly, "go and lie down? You're only in the way here!"

Halfway through the door, I mustered my dignity.

"A nice way for a member of the crew to talk to his commanding officer," I said. "It's practically mutiny!"

Number Two already had an extension out in the corridor and was chattering noisily. There was nothing else to do but retreat, so I made my way aft to my cabin. Number One sniggered as I went.

"And don't spend all your time dreaming about the opposite sex, captain..."

I glared back.

I reached my cabin, stretched out on the bunk and lay brooding. As commander of a weather station, I was well paid. That was good: In my leave periods, I could live in a style far beyond that of the planet-bound population, but ... was I paid enough to make up for the months in space, marooned with a couple of robots? I doubted it.

Weather stations are necessary, of course. Without them, our ships would hit bad trouble and the schedules be upset. Still, it's not a pleasant life and I hoped that the scientists who had dreamed up Numbers One and Two could be forced to spend a trip listening to their sharp-edged criticism. Not that such a thing was likely to happen, not now, with every technician we had harnessed to the war effort.

Space warfare is a lengthy, drawn-out business because of the distances involved and the difficulty of ships making contact in the void between planets. There had been engagements, affairs in which we had shown that we were not to be subjugated by brute force, but, so far, no conclusive battle had ensued. It would come; it had to come, for the invaders had given

unmistakeable indication of their intention to conquer and rule. Ours was a fight for survival of the race.

At first, our leaders had made friendly overtures to the aliens, but the language barrier plus lack of common interests combined with the hideously revolting form of the aliens and had made co-operation impossible. For centuries our story-tellers have conjured up, in imagination, the forms that life on other planets might take—but no-one ever visualized such unnatural shapes as the invaders had. It was hushed up in official circles, but two of our delegation fainted clean away when they got their first sight of the aliens.

So it was war...and the weather stations became of even greater importance, for it was essential that our fleet should not be damaged by storms when about to engage the enemy. We had twenty stations operating, ready to alert the fleet to conditions existing throughout the battle zone. And now a magnetic storm was approaching ...

The door of my cabin opened and Number Two tried to squeeze his bulk inside. I felt my bunk slide up the wall, and shouted: "Go away! How many more times must I tell you there isn't room in here for a robot? And just when I was contemplating such feminine beauty as ..."

Number Two interrupted me coldly.

"You have something infinitely more important to contemplate, captain—a storm of such magnitude as I have never before plotted, and travelling at a quite exceptional velocity. It will undoubtedly swamp our entire sector, the heart of it reaching us in a little over two hours, the fringes extending from the asteroids to Io."

I was being crowded into a corner again as Number Two insinuated his egg-shaped bulk further into the cabin. Beyond the door, Number One waved an agitated feeler and fixed me with baleful eyes.

"That's not all your trouble," he added happily. "I've just sighted the enemy!"

"All right," I said, "now let's go to the control room and do something about it."

Number Two extricated himself from my cabin with some effort and we all went to the control room:

"Plot the course of the enemy ships," I ordered brusquely, seating myself before the instrument panel:

I pressed a few buttons and, below in the engine room, auto

matic machinery started to life. The ship turned, accelerated, and headed homeward. I wasted a few minutes thinking about the difficulty of communication between ships in space and between a ship and planet.

Radio is an uncertain business, due to the random shifting of the ionised layers. Light beams can be used for visual signals, but the limitations are obvious; the beam spreads and becomes diffused, and is useless beyond a certain range. So I had to take the ship back to report in person...

Number One said: "Enemy ships closing in from star-board."

I looked up, and didn't need his special vision to see that we were in trouble: Through the transparent dome, the ships of the invading aliens were clearly visible—long, slender rockets of cylindrical section with pointed noses and vaned tails: The sheen of their silvery skins and fiery exhaust trails made a colourful pageant against the black waste of space:

I felt definitely uncomfortable. These ships were fast and the weather station unarmed; it wasn't going to be long before explosive shells ripped holes in our hull and the air rushed out, leaving me a corpse. I used full acceleration for a get-away.

Time passed, then Number Two confirmed my worst fears: "The enemy ships are rapidly overhauling us. Their line of flight will intercept ours in approximately fifteen minutes."

Number One said. "I hope you're not forgetting the storm, captain."

As if I could! Our war fleet was somewhere in space and had to be warned of the approaching storm...

Number Two was clicking mechanically with his audio wide open. The result of his cogitations left me with little hope for the future,

"A second flight of enemy ships is approaching from the port side. Without doubt, we shall be trapped between the two."

"You're a big help," I snarled.

It was a time for desperate measures, I punched more buttons on the instrument panel and set the weather station on a new course. We swung in a wide arc and the alien ships swung with us.

Number One cleared his audio circuits with something that sounded like a cough.

"I think I ought to warn you—" he began.

"Shut up," I told him, "and stay shut up! I'm piloting this ship and now is no time to undermine my confidence."

I thought I detected a reproachful look in some of his eyes.

The weather station ran the gauntlet between the twin ranks of silvered ships. I was gambling that neither line would fire for fear of missing us and damaging one of their own number on the opposite side. Number One was behaving in an agitated manner; at last, he could keep quiet no longer.

"Captain," he said pleadingly, "think what you're doing. You've turned the ship in a full circle and are now heading directly into the storm belt."

"Of course we are," I snapped. "This is a weather station and, as such, contains only the minimum of ferrous metals. The enemy ships are loaded down with the stuff. What do you think will happen to them when they hit the magnetic storm?"

"But what will happen to us?" wailed Number Two.

"Too late to worry about that," I said, and switched off everything that would switch off.

We coasted under inertia and I waited hopefully. Outside was night-blackness and the silver streaks of alien ships. I could not see the storm...

Number One covered his eyes.

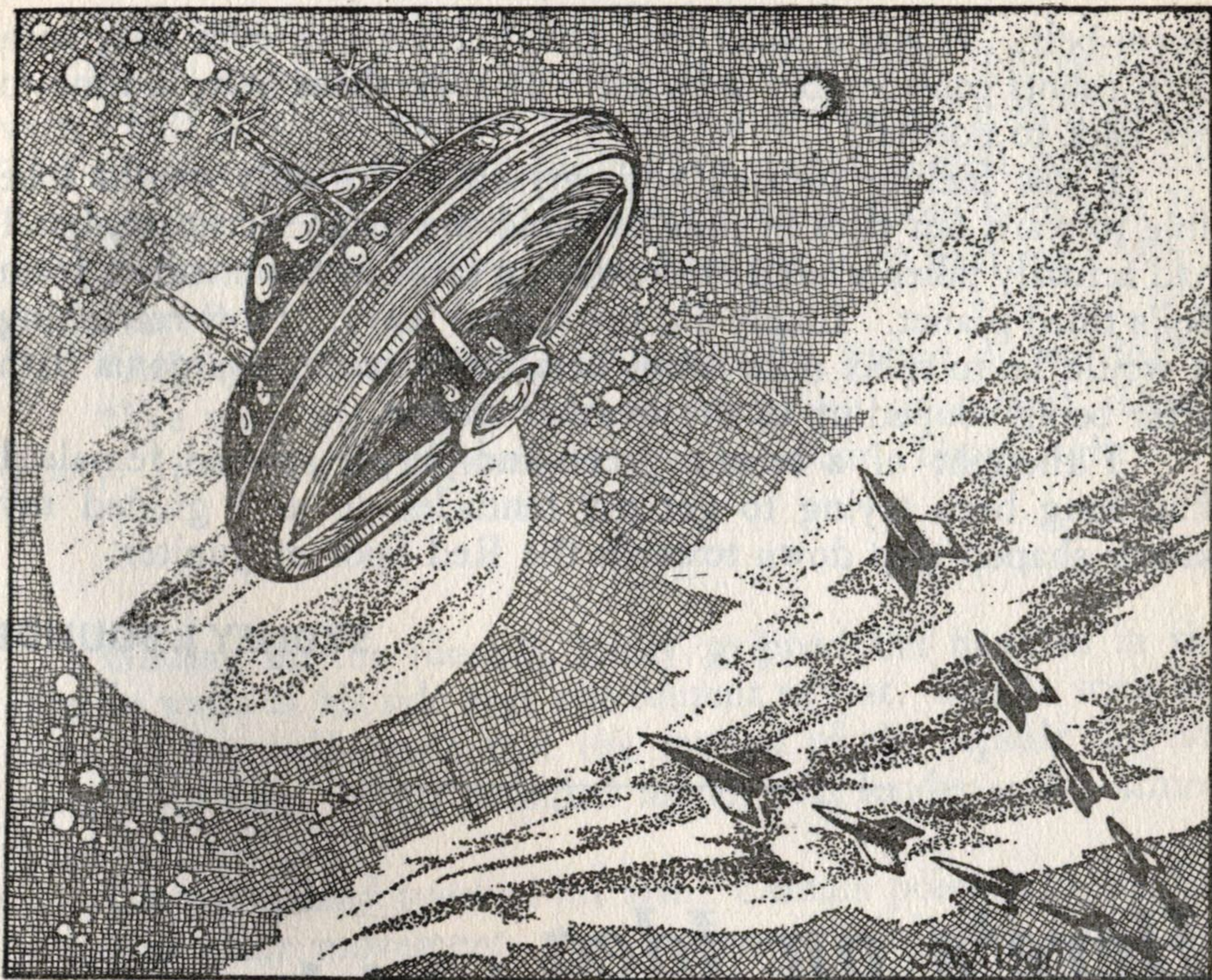
"I can't stand it," he sobbed. "It's too much for a poor robot."

Number Two was gyrating insanely and reciting nonsense. Both had a certain amount of ferrous metal in their make-up and the magnetism upset their circuits. Number One began a particularly bawdy song with actions to suit.

We hit the storm and the weather station took a buffeting such as I never want to experience again. Invisible forces tore at us. Magnetic flux hurled us in a tortuous spiral through the centre of the storm belt. I strapped myself down and prayed ...

I watched the alien ships closely. Less experienced in the ways of spaceflight than ourselves, their ships were constructed with a percentage of alloys containing iron ore. It was pitiful to watch them being torn apart. To someone who has not travelled the space-lanes, the fury of a magnetic storm is beyond belief. Nothing like it exists—can exist—on a planet. Only in deep space can such primordial forces unleash their violence.

The enemy had little chance of survival. Steel plates, warped by magnetic stresses of unimaginable magnitude, buckled as if an invisible giant had plucked at them. One ship exploded,



scattering the void with debris and mangled bodies. Two of the alien rockets collided and became a shapeless mass of wreckage. Others were relentlessly pulled to pieces.

Space became a living thing, kneading iron and steel into grotesque forms, and I became sickened by the sight of it. I closed my eyes and listened to the creaking of our hull, trying to remember if any important member of the ship's superstructure contained ferrous metal.

There was one hell of a racket going on in the control room and I opened my eyes to see Numbers One and Two behaving like mad things. I grinned weakly; it was some comfort to know that my two robots were not the supermen *they* considered themselves to be. If they tried to put on a superior air after this, I'd deflate their ego pretty fast with a pointed reference to their present behaviour.

We came through the storm with only superficial damage and with no longer anything to fear from the invaders. They just didn't exist any more.

I set a new course for home, swinging wide to avoid the

storm-belt. It was a quiet trip, the quietest I've ever had, with both robots considerably subdued. It took them quite a time to get back to normal.

I was feeling pleased with myself. Not only would I be able to warn our fleet in time to avoid the magnetic storm, but I had actually taken a hand in destroying some of the invaders from Sol's third planet. Likely I'd get special leave. How refreshing it would be to relax once more in a methane-and-ammonia bath after being couped up in the weather station.

I thought of a certain green-and-purple spotted female I had long been trying to get my tentacles on as I guided my saucer-shaped ship down towards the Red Spot of Jupiter.

SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

Here's an Idea

- ★ If you consider yourself a budding author, yet have never hit on a really unusual plot for your first story, why don't you take a look at our cover this issue and write a story with this scene coming in to it? Let's have plenty of suspense and good character work and, who knows, in a few years you may be one of the biggest names in science-fiction writing!
- ★ Your MSS can be of any length and should be typed (double spaced) on one side of white foolscap paper.
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- ★ All others accepted will be paid for at our usual high fees-to-authors in the normal manner.
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NEBULA SCIENCE FICTION, 159 Crownpoint Road, Glasgow, S.E.

Wind Along The Waste

Perfection can mean many things, depending on the individual—this man loved Mars until his death

A MAN, a part of the peoples of the planet Earth, sat upon a sandy hillock in the shadow of a high, gleaming, space ship and contemplated the planet Mars.

Can you realise what a wonderful thing that is? What an achievement? Do you know that it was man's first step from infancy? Can you imagine the turbulent emotions of the man upon an alien world? Do you know what an experience it is to look ahead and see something which is not only beautiful, but per-

fect, something that has never before been seen? No. If you are a mere man, your mind is too little to fully comprehend these things. In humility, then, you must accept them.

He breathed. Dry, exhilarating air, life giving. This planet was across empty gulfs, and he was breathing the air of another world. It was all a part of the perfection that stretched before and behind him, and all around him, encompassing his body and his mind, and all that he was.

Here, where no consciousness stirred, where no life, be it ever so tiny, disturbed the stillness; was no fault. Earth when set against this was as a gutter is to Niagara. And here was peace, a tranquility unsurpassed.

Observe Earth. There is an intelligent and erect animal left to his own devices. There is pain and ugliness, there is avarice, indolence and stupidity. Certainly there is that too which is worthwhile, the poetic and the beautiful exist. But see Mars. There is not life and its trouble, there is a perfect unity of all that is good.

Yet here there has been life, just as now it is on Earth. Here was a great race. The thin arid air is heavy with living memories that have their being in the low sand dunes and in the violet sky, in the harshly cleft gullies and the dry sea beds. Memories of they that once lived here, upon this pearl amongst planets. And now they are gone forever into the lost past. Their buildings and their bones are wandering dust, blown by the soft and silent wind. Their souls and their passions hang, now muted, upon the air. Once they had scurried here in circles, ever faster, thinking they had some goal, thinking they were going somewhere. Now they are here no longer. A mighty race has perished. A spark has flashed across the infinite. It is of no importance.

And as he thought these things, some lines from a very beautiful poem came to him—

*The Wordly Hope Men set their Hearts upon
Turns Ashes—or it prospers; and anon,
Like Snow upon the Desert's dusty Face
Lighting a little Hour or two—is gone.*

and again from the same poem the same apparently hopeless philosophy—

*The moving Finger writes; and having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety or Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line
Nor all thy tears wash out a Word of it.*

Once, these verses had made him sad. Once he had seen in them death and desolate hopelessness. All seemed as nothing, and reasonless. But looking upon Mars they elated him, for now he understood. He knew now that the philosophy of Omar Khayyam, the idea of "let us live now, for tomorrow is death" was so wrong. For here was perfection. Here had a race lived and slowly declined, and finally died, and this was the reason for it, stretching around him. This and no more. At last when all has passed, there is profound silence that is music and unsurpassed beauty. Here was all that mattered. This was all art and love and dignity. Surrounding him was everything.

He felt suddenly unclean. Hell! What right had he to be here? Why must a mere man come to the midst of all this and spoil it? He would go back to his own place and perhaps at last in aeons, it too would be whole and perfect.

But ... he saw fat and idle rich in deck chairs, staring fishy-eyed towards the Martian sunset. He saw a hot-dog stand, with neon signs, a gasworks, and open cast mines ...

The watery yet glorious sun subsided imperceptibly beneath the low hills on the horizon, and Mars, where he was, was suddenly a grave purple.

He rose and went into his space ship, and when he came out he held in his right hand a revolver. And as he levelled it at his head, he felt somehow God-like, and at last clean. He had no regrets. One sharp crack, for the last time to disturb the stillness and then he was lying on the sand, his blood reddening the ground around him.

The darkness deepened and bright stars showed. Around him the Martians became visible. They laughed with each other, for they had won their first battle against Earth.

The desert wind whined plaintively.

KENNETH POTTER



Blaze Of Glory

They were about to venture closer to the Sun than anyone had ever done before—when catastrophe intervened

Illustrated by Alan Hunter

The Icarus of modern astronomy is an asteroid that goes closer to the Sun than any other known solid body. This tiny planet, then is very likely to attract the attention of physicists who, interested in the properties of matter and space, wish to have a closer look at Sol.

The Icarus of Greek mythology however, was reputed to have flown so close to the Sun that the wax of his wings melted, and he fell and was killed.

Magnetic boots clicking stickily, Alexander Kahna Cathain stepped out of the lift.

He paused in characteristic pose, legs apart and braced, head held high, as much at home as he would have been under an Earthly gravitation.

Dr Richard Liffert, face to face with the President of the Three Worlds for the second time in his life, stared with interest. One could imagine Cathain as master of all he surveyed. He seemed big physically—until one compared him with the Space Marines of his escort, necessarily close in the stores-cavern. He seemed to be in the prime of life and was answering the questions of the newsmen before Ricky noticed the whiteness of his hair, the pallor of his skin, the wrinkles around the fading blue eyes.

Mike Hulder, Ricky's electronics man, had called Cathain a Dictator and murderer, and had added that there were those who would see that justice was done. It was not that Mike had any real sympathy for the men behind the Martian Mutiny—or at least Ricky did not think he had. It was perhaps that Mike was of Irish blood and loved to champion the underdog.

Perhaps a leader had to be harsh.

That he was human Ricky knew from their first meeting. For Cathain had found time three years before to listen personally to the sensational scheme to get a closer picture of the Sun than had hitherto been thought possible—

And now, walking towards Ricky, the President turned aside to speak to his Aide. "The girl? I don't see the girl reporter."

The immaculate Aide gestured sideways and murmured his reply.

Ricky glanced between the lightly secured bales and packing cases, towards the couches left behind by the workers who had tunnelled Icarus for the Project. A stretcher had been brought down from the landing bubble and long yellow hair had floated behind it as someone had said "It's the sensation of coming down out of nowhere on to nowhere that gets 'em."

"It is a dreadful feeling," said Cathain. He smiled as he stepped up to Ricky. His hand reached out. "I'm proud to be here, Dr Liffert." He gripped Ricky's hand and clapped his other hand over the bond.

Ricky could hear the whirr of the cameras. Into his mind came the warning made by the Marine Commander. "I want no trouble, now. I dare say you resent our intrusion on your privacy. But—Now, get this! Your observations will not start until after another fifty days. In any case they are of interest to no one but scientists. You are dependant, however, upon grants out of taxpayers' money. The President is coming four million miles out from Earth to see you. It is in your own interest to make the most of the publicity of this visit. Do you understand?"

Ricky nodded. This was certainly getting the Project off to a blaze of glory.

Cathain, still holding Ricky's hand, turned to face the cameras. "Few people," he said, "realise how important the true scientist has been to our civilisation. We take electricity for granted today, but all the light and heat and work that it does for us would never have been possible if there had been no scientific curiosity. Who knows? It may be that Richard Liffert and his assistant, both Doctors of Solar Science, may be setting out to formulate new epoch-making theories.

"And again—few people would care to do what they are doing. Faced with the problem of getting near enough to the Sun to study conditions on its surface at first hand, they found that only a specially constructed ship would be able to meet their requirements. We who live on the Three Worlds forget that the heat of the radiation on Mercury's sunlit face is enough to melt lead—and Dr Liffert and his companion needed to go nearer to the Sun than that. Only men of genius would have worked out this daring plan to use this little asteroid, Icarus, whose orbit swings out beyond that of Mars and in within that of Mercury ...

"And so, for the advancement of human scientific knowledge they have been supervising the boring out and covering of what is to be their home and observatory on Icarus, which having finished its slow progress around the outermost part of its eccentric orbit, gathers speed, swinging in towards the centre of the Solar System, plunging at the moment quite close past Mother Earth, ever faster, faster, until ... "

Cathain leaned towards the cameras. "Until," he said impressively, "within its rocky heart, the two intrepid scientists set going the instruments upon its surface to record a close up picture of the fierce radiation and unthinkable immensities of our Sun.

"Think of it. Already they have been here for more than 200 Earth days, days of work and planning. But now the planning is finished and the outside workers have done their part. Soon we, the last send-off party, will have gone. Not another living soul is likely to come within a million miles of them until the ship from Venus meets them 171 days from now."

He turned to Ricky. "Tell me, Dr Liffert, how do you feel about being cut off from your fellows for so long?"

"Er—" Ricky cleared his throat. "Oh, you get used to that."

"And the danger. Do you think this little asteroid—no more than five miles thick, four miles high and three miles wide

—rather like a bent slice of cake—an interplanetary rock splinter—will it be large enough to protect you?”

“We think so—” Ricky caught his breath. Cathain was supposed to have begun his climb to power out in Space itself. “Er—why don’t you look around our place here—see for yourself what we’ve done?”

“The President cannot afford the time.” snapped the Aide.

The Marine Commander looked anxious. “Most inadvisable to risk—”

“I feel almost guilty,” said Cathain and his smile reminded Ricky of a truant schoolboy. “I haven’t done anything like this for years.”

They stood with chests almost touching, hands lightly grasping the handles in the curving wall on either side of them. The capsule that contained them glided with unfelt motion through the communication tube from stores cavern to the living quarters a mile below the sunlit face of the asteroid.

Ricky tried to think of a suitable reply. He had not really expected Cathain to accept his invitation. All the man-made alterations to Icarus were designed for the comfort of two men only. There was only one capsule and it moved in the concrete connecting tubes with the 6 m.p.h. circulation of the air system.

Already it had taken them a couple of hundred feet along its tunnel. What did one say when utterly alone and in such close quarters with the President of Three Worlds?

Cathain glanced at his wrist watch. “The Navy should be able to make up an hour or so on the return to Earth. I work hard at being President. No one can blame me for taking an hour off when I get the chance ... No one, that is, except that organising Aide of mine—oh, he’s a good fellow is Cruza, but always so serious ... But I suppose that’s what makes him so valuable to me. And the Navy. They won’t like me out of their sight. Not after those vengeance threats. And those reporters. You’ve no idea what a relief it is to be clear of them. Always wanting to know what I think of this, what I intend doing about that ... Oh, I’ll wager they’re all trying to think of a way to get pictures of me in your living quarters.”

Ricky started and felt in his pocket. He had been in the act of entering the capsule when one of the reporters had thrust a piece of paper in his hand. He smoothed the paper out. Cathain

looked at him inquiringly and Ricky, grinning, held it so that they could both read.

"£100 for one good informal picture of the President in your quarters. Ask your own price for a series, and for what you talk about. Rennolds, Interplanews"

Cathain chuckled. "See what I mean? Are you going to do what he wants?"

"Wouldn't you mind?"

"Not in the least. But I warn you to be careful what you say. Cruza would drag you into court on my behalf at the slightest suggestion of slander."

Ricky shook his head. "You're an amazing man."

"Not in the least," said Cathain. For a few moments his young-old face showed a terrible weariness. "I'm tired of people saying that sort of thing. People expect me to be a sort of super-man. They think me strange for being human." He smiled suddenly. "I did expect something more original from you, Dr Liffert. Can it be that you, the famous scientist, are only just another human being, just like myself or anyone else?"

They laughed at each other then.

"Seriously," said Cathain, "How do you know you won't be roasted down here? Won't it be rather a strain on the nerves?"

"Uh-uh." Ricky shrugged. "How do you know you won't be assassinated to-morrow? Doesn't that ever bother you?"

When the grips on either side of them dragged at their hands, they knew they had arrived. Ricky slid open the door and pushed his feet out on to the metalled floor of the living quarters deep within Icarus. He turned and helped Cathain out.

"Cigarette, Sir?"

"No, thanks." Cathain took a worn pipe from his breast jacket. "I'll stick to this." He looked around as Ricky lighted a cigarette and while his fingers charged the pipe bowl. "D'you eat, rest, work and sleep all in this one room?"

"Pretty well. Of course when we're near enough to the Sun we'll be watching the recording instruments in that adjoining room over there. And there is a washplace with a shower—no bath—on this side. The door's beside the bunk."

Cathain struck a match and stared at the flame. "This business of no gravity takes some getting used to." The flame reached

evenly out all around the end of the match and he had to keep it in motion to prevent it from going out. He held it to his pipe and drew steadily. Almost at once smoke had enveloped his face and he was coughing.

"You're forgetting to blow the smoke well clear," said Ricky. "Hot air doesn't rise here. It expands. And you're more or less facing the air circulation." He took Cathain's arm. "Climb up into that bunk," he suggested, "then the vents above will draw off the smoke and give you a few minutes pleasure."

"Awkward this," muttered Cathain. Ricky understood how he felt. It was difficult to get used to moving when there was no gravitational field—and it was worst of all when one had one's magnetised boots clear of the floor.

Ricky pulled Cathain down upon the bunk and snapped quick release straps over his legs, waist and chest. "Better now?"

"Yes." Cathain struck another match. "It does make the smoke behave better."

"That's right." Ricky grinned and expertly swung himself up into the bunk on the opposite wall. He snapped the buckles in place. "Odd, isn't it? Of course there's no real need to lie down at all. As you weigh nothing—or so little that it seems nothing—you can relax and even go to sleep erect or in any other position you choose."

"Disconcerting, rather," said Cathain, puffing smoke. "I—"

The sponge rubber beneath Ricky suddenly seemed as hard as iron. Half stunned, bewildered by the shock as much as by the blow it gave him, he gasped for breath. He heard Cathain grunt with something like pain.

The lights went out. Weightlessness returned. His stomach heaved. Straps cut into his flesh with the dull thuds of solid things. The rubber solidified below him again.

Sound with the shattering, deafening immensity of thunder beat over him, became unbearable and muffled. He could feel blood trickling from his ears and running down the back of his throat from the membranes in his nose.

Red horror filled his mind. Only a few moments before he had been talking, chatting, and everything had been stilly silent, but now—

Reality faded as he seemed to fall into a great depth of engulfing darkness.

Unconsciousness came.

Out of a vasty depth of peace, he seemed to float effortlessly towards a shining surface.

He broke through this suddenly and horror came back. His own blood stiffened the skin of his neck and tasted salt in his mouth. The straps across his legs and his body ached into his mind. He was just sufficiently master of himself to send up a short prayer of thankfulness for the light. It must be his own vision that narrowed his view and reddened its edges.

At least he could see clearly in a small circle. A thin trickle of smoke was being sucked into the air circulation vents in the wall above his head.

He remembered the cigarette. He lifted his arms from beside him on the bunk. Weak they certainly were, his right hand felt bruised as he moved the fingers and there was a pain in his chest, probably from that hand being smashed down upon it by the...

Concussion? Yes, there certainly had been concussion. But what— No, there was no point at the moment in speculating as to cause.

He struggled with the quick release straps. Several moments passed before they fell away from his chest. How his lungs ached. The smoke was no longer a trickle but a thickening stream.

Danger. He swayed to a sitting position as the straps fell away from waist and legs. His legs felt sprained as he bent them at the knees. He moaned.

But he remembered the smoke and, peering around—it was like looking through the holes in a mask—he located the smouldering blanket at his side. He tore it free of its clips and flung it into the centre of the little room. It struck the metal floor and skidded into a metal table leg and broke into harmless flame there. Panting, he watched while his strength seeped back and the flames died down. He could not smell the smoke, though it must be acrid enough.

Suddenly he wondered if there would be any further shocks. Dare he leave the bunk? Only its straps and deep sponge rubber mattress had saved him from being smashed to pulp.

Cold tendrils of fear paralyzed his mind. Such a prolonged shock as that might have done any or every kind of damage to this, the newly made Icarus station. The air might be leaking away through a crack, or cracks in the rock. The mechanical reconditioning apparatus might be broken.

God! He gripped the edge of the bunk and the sweat bead-

ing his skin chilled the fever of terror. His right hand ached dully and his knees were twinging with pain.

Get sense, he told himself, get sense, you fool. Can't you feel—don't you see the air still circulating?

He seemed in his mind to take a grip on his thoughts. He had to hang on tightly to that grip as he swung himself out over the floor that had so recently smashed up so violently. How could he know it would not do it again?

His boots found the floor and gripped, but he missed something. He realised what that something was. He could not hear the click of contact. He was deaf.

He stood, fighting his helplessness as though it were a living opponent. Slowly he came to terms with his condition. So he was deaf. Perhaps it was temporary. Whatever had happened must have been the result of something unlikely. There was no reason to expect any repetition—

Was it—had it been—a "natural" disaster?

Only then did he remember Cathain. Alexander Kahna Cathain, President of Three Worlds. That was it. An attempt at assassination. One or more A-bombs, fired from a distance, had struck Icarus. No other force that he could imagine would account for that tremendous concussion—

It had been a highly organised attack.

Cathain? Had the intended victim survived by the same lucky fluke as had saved himself, Ricky Liffert?

Ricky stumbled towards the opposite bunk. He caught its edge.

"Cathain!" How disconcerting to go through the motions of shouting, yet hear nothing.

"Cathain." He shook the limp body of the President. He clawed at the straps that held it. He lugged it clear of the bunk and dragged it through the air as though it were some rigid balloon. The blood upon its head frightened him.

Loneliness. Only in Space was there such loneliness. It was to be feared.

He forgot his aches and pains. Cathain's boots floated down to the floor and dragged along stickily. In the washplace at last Cathain, still inert, seemed to hang upwards from the floor.

Ricky filled a sponge with cold water from a bag. What he spilt would evaporate into the dry air and be taken out again by

the reconditioning apparatus. If that apparatus worked. He bathed Cathain's face and neck.

The President's eyes opened. The irises were still blue but the whites were scarlet with broken blood vessels. The President's lips moved.

Relief made Ricky weak. He pointed at his ears and shook his head. And he became aware of the dried blood on his own skin, and of the numbness of his right hand and the stabbing pains in his legs.

Awareness wavered and he let go of his muscles, relaxing in the erect position possible on Icarus. The sharpness of impressions faded until—

His mouth seemed full of icy water, it hung in globules to his face and ears, cool and refreshing.

"Thanks," he said. And then he thought that probably the President could not hear.

But Cathain's lips did seem to be answering. And the man was pointing towards the door leading into the main living room. He was turning and staggering out of the washplace.

Ricky stumbled after him. Cathain stopped by the still open capsule that had brought them here. He listened. Ricky strained his own ears, but he could sense no sound. Would he ever hear again?

"What is it?" he asked Cathain. "What can you hear?" he found himself shouting.

Cathain turned and his lips were moving.

Ricky shook his head and pointed to his ears and shook his head again. Fumbling with his breast pocket he pulled out pencil and notebook and thrust it at Cathain.

Cathain listened, then scribbled. His hands were shaking so much that Ricky's limited vision did not at first recognise letters or words. But suddenly the meaning sprang into clarity.

"There's someone talking up there. I can't make out the words. Perhaps they aren't English."

"Who could ...?" Ricky rubbed his face. Perhaps whoever had fired the bomb had landed to make sure it had done its terrible work?

Of course it might have been some of the sailors from the escorting fleet. But they would certainly speak English. And the chance of any ship escaping the indirect effect of such an attack was very small. Rock fragments from Icarus would have riddled every ship—every compartment of every ship.

"It's just one voice," wrote Cathain.

Ricky stumbled away to the medicine locker. He returned with a half bottle of whisky, took a swig and passed it to Cathain. The spirit warmed through him. "We might as well go up and face whoever it is," he said, "there are no weapons here and I'd rather meet trouble halfway than wait for it to find me. What d'you say?"

"All right," scribbled Cathain rapidly, "what do we do?"

"We push the capsule into the outgoing air tunnel. Don't worry. It won't start off until we close the door. That's right ... "

Gliding up the tunnelling, Ricky gripped the handles in the capsule walls at his side and was content to rest. But he soon became all too well aware that the motion of the capsule did not agree with him. Blood pounded louder and louder in his aching head.

Cathain's hand touched his arm. Cathain pointed in the direction of their movement, that is above their heads. His lips moved urgently. He made gestures of increasing urgency.

Ricky stared at him. If only the blood did not pound in one's head so strongly ... It was as though they stood on their heads in a gravity field. He suddenly realised that there was indeed a pull on his hands, as though the grips were holding him back from falling "upwards" towards the front of the capsule.

Ricky blinked. What was causing this phenomenon? Artificial gravity was out of the question. The only other explanation was that the asteroid was no longer keeping one face to the sun; that it spun about its centre of gravity like a top. And why shouldn't it? The chances that a bomb should merely push it in one direction were too small to be considered.

Centrifugal force was tending to push them outwards into space.

In the tube as they were, Ricky did not trust himself to speak lest words should carry ahead of them. He made motions with his aching right hand and demonstrated what he meant by drawing up his legs—Lord, how they ached—and reversing his position.

Gradually the sensation of "standing", as the word is meant on Earth increased as they glided nearer to the storeroom.

Smoothly braked, the capsule came to rest.

A sense of urgency leant Ricky strength and he forgot his pains as he opened the sliding door a crack. Darkness outside: he snapped off the capsule light.

From habit he strained his ears. Then he remembered his deafness and caught his breath helplessly.

Cathain's hands clasped Ricky's shoulders for a moment and comfort seemed to flow between them. The door slid wide and Cathain was a dark shape against a faint glow of light at the end of the storeroom. Then he had gone, down over the edge—an edge that had previously been the top of the air-circulation inlet.

Ricky licked his lips. Why had the lights failed here? Had they been deliberately turned off so that anyone coming carelessly—or desperately—to the stores would be an easy target? He peered out of the capsule and his eyes, now growing used to the darkness, picked out glows and glimmers here and there on what had been the arbitrary ceiling and was now the centrifugal floor. Of course. That "floor" would be strewn with crates and bundles, gear and wreckage broken loose from light moorings.

He tried not to think of the shambles wrought by the shaking—like dice in a box—of men and material within that cavern. The preliminary smashing down of the ceiling must have mangled everyone there. A nightmare hail of massive packing cases must have inevitably battered the life from any survivors.

He felt a little sick.

A small light flared from the direction of the surface lift. Cathain striking a match? Only a pipe smoker would carry such things—

A second light blazed out from a brief pencil of flame above the match. A pistol shot. Who had fired it?

Ricky sank to a crouch as the matchlight began an arc upwards and went out. He kept his gaze upon the spot. Why did Cathain not strike another match? But of course he would be hiding or manoeuvring—if he still lived. But why only a single shot? Had it done its work?

The silence seemed to roar in Ricky's ears.

Silence ...

Centrifugal force of the little asteroid's newly acquired spin holding him on his hands and knees, Ricky stared out of the air inlet.

He could see nothing. A white image, burned upon his retinas by the pistol shot, slowly faded and the glows and glimmers he had noticed some way off caught his attention.

Gloom was most complete nearest to him. On the far wall a fair amount of gray light was shining. That meant something. But of course. Debris must be shallowest there, deepest near to him. That too must mean something. Oh, yes. That sloping mixture of mangled bodies and battered stores pointed the direction of Icarus's spin.

This simple deduction, unimportant in itself, made him feel very much better. It took his mind off the crawling horror of the shambles that must be hidden by the darkness, and it reduced his feeling of helplessness. Even though his vision was injured and his ear deafened, he could still show that he was master of his mind and no panic-stricken fool.

He was, in fact, lucky to be alive.

A glimmer—one of the widely spaced ones fairly close to him—went out. He jerked his head so that he faced it and it shone faintly as before.

Had his nerves been playing him tricks?

Another faint light made what seemed a slow wink closer to the effective centre of his view. Someone was coming towards him and although they must be making a clatter as they clambered up the slope he could hear nothing.

His skin prickled. He almost yelled out for the oncomer to declare himself; but that would be madness for the reply could not touch his deafness. He drew back into the capsule and his hand reached up for the light switch while he held his head low.

At the instant a shape rose against the faint light of the cavern distance, he switched on the light and launched himself forward.

"What the—" The exclamation, soundless to Ricky though it was, shaped plainly enough on Cathain's lips.

Ricky halted awkwardly with his face close to the President's. They stared at each other.

Cathain swallowed hard and his lips moved, but Ricky could not read the words they uttered. Cathain turned and pointed up to what had been the floor close by the lift that connected with the surface bubble. He beckoned for Ricky to follow, and started off back the way he had come.

In the light spreading out from the open capsule, Ricky saw that debris was piled to a height of only three feet below the rim of the air inlet. After only a moment's hesitation, he followed Cathain, stumbling and staggering over the rough, uneasy surface of splintered wood, jumbled machinery and stores and soft packing material.

Cathain's lurching shape faded to a grayness as the gloom closed in. By the time they had reached the whereabouts of the surface lift, he was no more than a shadow against the faint lights of the other end of the cavern. Ricky's gorge rose as he walked around a mass of jumbled girder sections, through which the light shone up with the reddish brown of congealed blood.

Cathain caught his arm. Ricky felt his hand lifted above his head. Ricky forgot the grip on his wrist, however, as his fingers stubbed against cloth that covered flesh that squirmed beneath his touch.

He explored gingerly. A leg, it was, a human leg. Quick release straps below the knee. Suddenly he knew what was expected of him. Cathain could not work these straps and was afraid, now that there was a semblance of gravity, that inexperienced hands might do an injury to the person who was fastened up there on a "gravity" couch.

Ricky caught at Cathain and clutched his arms, pushing them up so that the hands were on the unseen knees above and would support the weight as the straps were released.

He snapped open the fastening. Then, after making sure that Cathain did support the weight thus released, he stumbled a few feet back up the slope and, reaching up, knocked away a second fastening around the hips, supporting the weight above with his other hand in the person's stomach while he reached up at the other strap around the chest.

It gave. The full weight, not quite Earth weight perhaps but heavy enough, came down upon him. His knees, forgotten in the urgency of the moment, stabbed with pain and his injured hand bent the wrong way. He could not help moaning as he sank down helplessly with the person descending upon him and clutching at him.

Something like dry cobwebs settled on his face. Even as he gasped in alarm he remembered. Long yellow hair had floated out behind that woman reporter who had fainted during the descent from Cathain's ship to Icarus.

Three survivors. She was scrambling off him. He climbed laboriously to his feet. He knew little of such matters but thought dully that the living quarters deep within the rock heart of Icarus must have been in the direct line of the explosion. The shock must have made a pocket of pressure in which he had been caught and deafened; and a pocket of low pressure in which Cathain had also suffered injury but to a less degree.

They went back towards the friendly light of the capsule.

Darkness closed in behind them. Perhaps it was only psychological but the feeling of being urged up the slope of debris made Ricky's clothes stick to his back.

Unwilling to look behind him, however, he kept his gaze upon the girl. His thoughts jumped as the increasing light glinted on a tiny snub-nosed pistol in her hand. He had forgotten the shot. But it was not difficult to imagine her panic mounting in the stealthy darkness until she pulled the trigger in frantic reaction to what must have seemed a blaze of light—although no more than a match in reality. He caught her swinging arm and the little weapon, evidently forgotten by its owner, fell from her hand before he could take it. He felt no inclination to stop and search for it. They had no need of such deadly things.

Cathain fell against the rim of the air inlet. Moving air chilled Ricky's back, cleared his head. He gave Cathain a leg-up and waved the girl reporter to follow. She did so without lifting her head. If he had needed any confirmation of her sex the curve of her hips beneath her brown trousers would have given it to him. He clambered up after her and squeezed in with his back to them. Inch by inch he dragged the door around into place. It finally clicked shut.

He stood dully. A minute passed perhaps before he realised that they were not moving. The entire economy of the Icarus Observation Station had been based on weightless movement. Perhaps the pressure in the air circulation borings was not enough to return the capsule, weighted by the new rotation of the asteroid as it was, to the living quarters in the heart of the rock.

He waited. And suddenly the floor jolted up. It was all right. The air pumps were strong enough to build up pressure above the capsule so that it finally lifted. He found he had been holding his breath and released it in a long sigh.

At first they moved slowly but as they neared the living quarters—which were evidently on or very near the axis of the aster-

oid's spin—their induced weight steadily lessened and their speed increased.

They drove hard against the spring brakes and the capsule quivered to motionlessness. Ricky lifted his head from his chest. He tugged at the door. It seemed he would never get it to move. Then it began to slide. Before it was properly open he drifted helplessly out and his feet were drawn down to the metalled floor. The magnetised boots gripped in what was to him eerie silence. He hung up from the floor and eddies of air curled gently around him. The living quarters were fading from his awareness ...

Suddenly he was struck from the rear and jolted into renewed alertness. Turning he saw that the girl had descended from the capsule and was hunched upon a seat with her legs beneath the table. Cathain seemed to have fallen out after her. He hung upward from the floor with his eyes closed. There was a dark patch on his shoulder.

Ricky lurched towards him. He misjudged the distance and struck Cathain's arm a considerable blow. A blob of red liquid flicked away behind Cathain.

Blood. Ricky's head cleared. His hands tore at Cathain's coat and ripped the shirt beneath. It looked like a bullet wound. Of course—the shot in the dark. It seemed only in the shoulder muscle, evidently having torn straight through.

He leaned sideways, pulling Cathain after him and making the three slow, weightless paces to the medicine cabinet.

Directions in the Emergency Manual were short, simple but reading made Ricky's eyes sting and prickle. He slapped on the right drug-impregnated plaster, clipped on a plastic phial of plasma and then let himself go limp as the last of his energy seemed to drain away.

He wondered hazily what circumstances the Manual compiler had imagined when putting in that paragraph about gunshot wounds.

Yellow hair masking the face of the girl reporter swam into his attention and he revived slowly, thinking of her. She was numb with shock. Her experience during and after the explosion, listening to the explosion and screams and being held helpless in the darkness, was enough to drive her off her rocker. A shock like that might do anything—

He stirred. Pulling himself down on to the seat on the other side of the little table, he leaned against the bunk side behind him. Perhaps he was suffering from shock, only a little less than she was ...

She took no notice as he switched on the electric kettle and laboriously took down tea, sugar and dried milk. The water boiled before he was ready for it. He finished mixing the dry ingredients in the infusor and pushed it into the kettle, leaving it while he reached for chocolate and biscuits. Coming back to it, he stared through its glass top at the tea leaves coating the globules of hissing liquid.

He filled a plastic bulb and put it into the girl's hands. "Suck," he said. She did so with abject obedience and no sign of discomfort although the liquid should have been scalding.

He filled another flask and wet his own lips. How cool it was. And there was no tea taste. It was like drinking sweetened milk. The tea had not brewed. He found himself suddenly very thirsty and went on sucking the grayish liquid from the flask, caring nothing for the unsoftened tealeaves that came with it.

If water boiled at so low a temperature, then the air pressure here in the centre of Icarus must be greatly below Earth normal. But—that was only to be expected. Air would obey the centrifugal pressure set up by the spin and gravitate towards the caverns nearest the surface, just like everything else.

This second deduction, while having little point, again gave his ego a badly needed boost, and the awful feeling of urgency eased. At once fatigue took over and he slept.

He awoke and retched and staggered, fumbling, to the toilet. He was just in time to vomit into the air-sucking disposal basin. The fit passed and he retched for a few minutes.

His head cleared rapidly and, although he felt cold, he found himself striding purposefully back into the living room.

The girl sat at the table. She did not appear to have moved. But now the thought struck him that she looked as though she might be pretty. Her shoulders were round and shapely—even though her bowed head hid her face. He asked her how she felt. "You've only got to nod to let me know you're all right," he explained. "The explosion deafened me. I wouldn't hear you if you told me your life story."

But if she heard him she gave no sign. He put his hand on hers and although her flesh was normally warm she showed no reaction.

Worried, he suddenly missed Cathain. Where-? "Cathain?" he called, looking around.

An arm flailed out of the instrument room in response and he moved away from the table and towards the room. Cathain leaned against the unactivated wall panels that contained the recording ends of instruments sited—and to be sited—on the surface of Icarus.

Blood had trickled down his bared arm from beneath the plaster, but it was dry now and the phial had emptied its plasma into his veins. Cathain panted and his lips moved as he harangued Ricky.

Ricky shrugged. "I can't hear a word—not a sound," he said and was about to turn away when Cathain's feeble but urgent gestures halted him.

Cathain pointed at his mouth.

"You're hungry?"

Cathain nodded.

Ricky took his arm and pulled him back into the living room, lifting him up and strapping him down lightly on the bunk that had been meant for his assistant. The effort brought back twinges and aches and set him breathing so hard in spite of non-existent gravity that he had to relax for a few minutes.

As his breathing slowed and the pounding of his heart eased, he began to consider the things he must do. While he was opening tins and bottles for the others, he came to the conclusion that first he must make sure that they could depend on the essentials—air, food, water and power for light and temperature maintenance.

"Here you are," he told Cathain as he put the tins, a bottle and utensils into the clips beside the bunk.

Cathain nodded and held up Ricky's notebook open at a fresh page. "What hope of rescue is there?" he had written.

Ricky shrugged. "Haven't found out yet." The shaky scrawl hurt his eyes.

Cathain held up his hand and then scribbled awkwardly. "She'll be hungry, too. He pointed at the girl.

Ricky nodded. "All right." He thrust the other tins and bottle and spoon into clips on the end of the table.

"Eat," he told her.

She did not move.

"You can't go on sitting like that," he said sharply. "Here. I'll fasten you to the other bunk and you can get some real rest." He caught hold of her shoulders and drew her out from her seat at the table, pushing her up on to the bunk.

The instant her shoulders came down on the sponge rubber, however, she went rigid. She burst from his grasp, swung around to a sitting position. Her feet took Ricky in the chest. Caught unawares, he was lifted clean off his feet and floated off, squirming awkwardly as he tried to get his boots down to the floor.

Contact with the wall between air shaft doors and the two small rooms leading off jarred him. He jerked himself erect.

She was seated at the table eating meat loaf out of a tin.

Crazy woman! Ricky forgot both her and Cathain as he turned to the air shaft doors. The IN door of the centre pair was still open. But he did not want to go back to that mortuary of a storeroom.

The left hand doors had sunk an inch or so against their seating. He frowned as he bent to the pressure gauge between them, narrowing his eyes as he strained to see the tell-tale. Zero? Vacuum? The shaft leading out to the No. 1 Instrument and Observation Post was breached, its air dispersed into Space!

The right hand doors rested in their normal position, the pressure given on the gauge was lower than usual but probably equalled that in the living quarters.

He pulled the capsule out of the centre Inlet, but stopped. Before the explosion Icarus had always held the same face to the Sun. The unloading bubble had been in the centre of this perpetually sunlit face, and on its Solar East and West extremities had been the two observation bubbles. This face had been slightly convex so that one observation bubble was always out of sight of the other, although both could be seen from the unloading bubble ...

Also, if he was going to investigate the extent of the damage, he would need a spacesuit. And those were somewhere amongst the stores—

He fetched a focussing lantern from the locker below his empty bunk, pushed the capsule into the centre Outlet and closed the door. To his cleared head but sensitive nerves it went off like a sledge going down hill.

By the time he neared the stores he was bathed in sweat and gripping the handles for all he was worth, sprained hand forgotten. But, although he was certainly moving at more than the old speed, the sprung slides dragged him to a halt.

He wiped his face and stepped down, shining the lantern around. Having supervised the unloading of all except electronic gear, he had a fairly clear idea of where he would find the suit he wanted. He might as well take it with him up into the loading bubble—down into the bubble ... That momentary confusion of up and down in his mind reminded him that it was not unlikely that centrifugal force would fling him off the surface of Icarus now that it had moved. He would need an auxiliary reaction motor.

The first suit he located was crushed hopelessly between two splintered cases. But other two were close by. Being light compared with nearby gear they had landed on top of everything. He had to dig amongst the mess for the other things he wanted and feared to turn up something gruesome and was relieved not to do so.

He dragged everything into the surface lift and sat on what had been its roof as it—he shook his head ruefully at the contradiction in terms—as it sank up to the surface of the asteroid.

His first act as the lift stopped was to check the air pressure in the loading bubble. It equalled that within the lift, both gauges reading nearly 2 lbs. above the green, Earth-normal lines.

Opening the lift, he knelt and put his head out of the doorway. Below him, through the bubble roof, he expected to see stars, but there was only featureless darkness. That puzzled him. He switched on the wide-angle light of the lantern, and gasped. The lift came up into the loading bubble near its centre. The flat, thirty-foot-diameter dome of transparent plastic was twelve feet high in its centre, but only some three feet below the roof of the lift Ricky's light showed a jumbled mess of gear and bodies—dead bodies with limbs broken and smashed.

And the plastic around the mess was scored and scraped. But it was also dark. No stars showed through it.

Ricky looked to his left, towards the light. Starlight: from floor level to just over the vertically rising side of the bubble, and on either side to a total of 50 per cent of the bubble's rim ... No more.

He suddenly felt very much alone. The others—Cathain and the girl—about a mile distant through the shaft driven through Icarus's rock ...

He looked at the stars again. Earth was around four million miles away. He remembered that just before Cathain's arrival they—Mike Hulder and he, that was—had stood looking up at the lights of Earth and her Moon, a just perceptible half-disc and accompanying three-quarter disc, very small.

He shivered.

Then he looked down at the mechanical and human wreckage in the basin that had been the top of the dome. Why could he not see around the edges of that awful pile?

For several minutes he squatted there, puzzling, uneasily aware of the silence and the darkness and the horror below, between himself and mother Earth ...

What was there, outside the bubble between himself and those twinkling stars? It was not unreasonable, now he came to think of it, that one side of the bubble should be blackened from the explosion; but that did no account for all the sky being blotted out except for a narrow rim—

A chill shuddered through him as harsh light glared long white fingers above the plastic. He watched in fascination while the light waxed to an unbearable brilliance so that at last he must turn his head aside. And again he stared. Did his eyes play him tricks or was there a large half-disc of light so powerful that it shone even through the blackened plastic?

The Sun!

"Sol. Good old Sol." He felt a sense of kinship as the great disc lifted with slow but perceptible majesty above the horizon. Here was friendly light to help him solve his immediate problem. He looked down, outwards into Space. What was it that blocked his view of the sky?

Black holes, ringed with light—like round eyes—a many faceted single eye—

No, not eyes.

Tube ends. Rocket tube ends. The rear, business-end of a rocket ship. Whose? The enemy who had fired the bomb at them?

No, of course that was out of the question. This ship was too squarely over his head to have come down haphazardly; it must have been anchored down with landing pods astride the dome before the explosion. It must be Cathain's ship.

Ricky nodded to himself as he continued to analyse the scene. An explosion on the airless asteroid would be different from one in the Earth's atmosphere. There would be nothing to transmit the blast wave so far as this but on the other hand there would be nothing to absorb radiation. Flash heat of atomic fission would be enough to melt a skin of both metal and rock, so fusing ship to asteroid. The prolonged heaving of the entire asteroid would have completed the cementing process—even if the anchors had given way.

But— Rock fragments accompanying the waves of radiation could not have had so much mass as he would have assumed, although they could not have failed to turn a living ship instantly into a dead hulk.

And— That sudden change meant that it was a hulk with its atomic pile on heat—even low heat— He was looking up into the business ends of reaction tubes like multiple cannon.

Anyone of a dozen accidents might have left them ready to fire. Their faintest breath would flatten the bubble. At full blast they might batter in the rock roof of the store room itself. He—

He checked his thoughts. At the end of that sort of reasoning only panic waited. The darkness, loneliness, and deafness were getting on his nerves ... He stared down at the tube ends gleaming around the terrible pile of wreckage.

As the light changed its direction with the rising of the Sun the gleaming rings winked out like closing eyes. Against the black shadow of the ship's stern, on the side of the bubble away from the explosion, the exterior gadgets of the bubble stood out brilliantly. The radio antennae, the end fans of the heat pumps and the mercury boiler that kept the power batteries charged—

Fascinated, he watched. Within ten more seconds the sunlight was sliding down those instruments. Here was a matter far more urgent than any possible menace from silent, unmanned rocket tubes.

The giant metal hull of the ship blocked all radiation from the radio. None of the sun's heat could strike through that hull on to the heat pump ends or on to the mercury boiler. It wasn't bad enough that they would not be able to use the radio here; soon they would not be able to come this way at all. Without recharging, the batteries would fail after about three Earth-day periods, and the air circulation would stop. Already the stopping of the heat pump would be making the temperature within the borings dependent on the air circulation.

What would it mean to them to be cut off from the stores? There were three mouths to feed and the emergency rations, as well as being unpalatable, were designed for the minimum needs of two. And the concussion had almost certainly played havoc with delicate gear—including radio, and none of the spares had been unpacked.

Air they would continue to get from the circulatory system of the observation dome still remaining; but food and water they must have before they lost contact with the stores; electronic gear, too—essential spares to give them ears and voices to reach across space.

Before the others recovered, Cathain his strength of body and the girl her strength of mind, the power would fail. Their collective survival rested in his, Ricky's, hands.

He grabbed at the handles of the lift doors and dragged them together. The lift, scraping its protest against the centrifugal force unforeseen by its designers, drew itself up into the rock of Icarus.

Ricky jumped down on to the confusion of stores and paused to get his bearings. Locating the food crates was easy, but carrying them to the air tube entrance was hard labour. His condition came home to him and his aches, partly forgotten in the pressure of ideas and events, redoubled. By the time he had made enough journeys over the uneasy jumble for his first load into the heart of the asteroid, he was dead beat.

Although slow to start, the capsule carried him and his cargo up. Easing of the sensation of weight as he neared the living quarters brought with it blessed ease.

He found Cathain sleeping as one dead. The girl watched him dully through her yellow hair. Neither was in any condition to help him. He pushed the now weightless crates against the far wall and found straps to fasten them there.

A second journey left him weaker than ever. On the third trip he exhumed the body of Mike Hulder and it made him feel sick. But he made a fourth and fifth food-carrying journey. He found that each time the pumps took longer to lift him and he began to alternate cargoes of food with what he considered to be essential equipment.

He had lost count of his journeys backwards and forwards when he finally stood in the capsule and felt it move uneasily be-

neath his feet but fail to rise. It was like waking from a bad dream and finding oneself in a condemned cell.

With weary, fumbling fingers he thrust open the capsule door. He was past caring what he dragged out to lighten the load; almost he was past caring whether the capsule lifted or not...

He felt no particular emotion when he found himself crouching in the capsule as it rose with increasing swiftiness. He rose lightly to an erect posture, leaned against the side and thought that this would be the last time the capsule could be used to visit the stores, and dozed off.

He awoke, feeling much refreshed and both parched and ravenously hungry. As he opened the capsule door the air within the living quarters felt warm and sweet.

Cathain gestured from the bunk to which he was still strapped. The girl stood beside him and her lips moved.

She was pretty, not beautiful but certainly pretty. She appeared to have attended to her person for she looked as fresh and unmoved as a mannequin.

Ricky moistened his dry lips. She still looked unnatural, as though she was far from aware of their true position. That was it. A part of her mind, recoiling from the horror of her experience, still refused to remember. Perhaps this escapist forgetfulness had saved her from going mad while held up in those straps in the darkness.

That storeroom was the nearest thing to Hell that he had ever seen—

His eyes switched to the food locker. Open—and emptier than when he had last seen it. The clips at the table held opened cans. He lurched towards them. Half empty tins of jellied beef stew, corned beef, macedoine, greens pourri, turkey—

He pointed. "For God's sake! You two fools! What have I been sweating for, bringing in stuff like— There'll be no more of that kind of waste. See!" He glared up at Cathain's white-stubbled face.

Cathain held up the notebook. On it was written: "I'd given you up. Violet came partly to her senses and fed me. What chances are there of being rescued?"

"None at the moment," said Ricky. He snatched a tin and spoon and filled his mouth. The others cared nothing for what he had done for them. The girl was looking at him as though he

were something too, too horrible. Cathain was waving his good arm and his confounded notebook and shouting at the girl and Ricky and muttering to himself by turns.

There were times when it was good to be deaf.

When Ricky had finished, however, he began to see Cathain's point of view. Food and drink made the situation look different. Nothing had been wasted, really. He took the notebook from Cathain and read: "Have you forgotten that every minute takes us further and further from Earth? Are we really lost in Space?"

"Yes," said Ricky. "Lost. I've been doing what I could to make sure we stay alive, but you're right. We ought to try to contact someone before we get hopelessly out of range." He went on thoughtfully, explaining to Cathain their difficulties, telling of the piece broken off from Icarus by the bomb, describing the situation in the bubble and the storeroom and pointing out that the observaion dome still left them was their only hope of rescue and of keeping alive. "Without its gear and power production we're done."

"Has it got radio?" wrote Cathain.

Ricky rubbed his face. "That was—that was Mike's—my late helper's responsibility. It may have radio ... Yes, now I come to think of it, I believe it has—I'm sure he said he had radio sets ready to work in all three surface posts. Why didn't I think of that before? Fool that I am."

"Don't blame yourself," wrote Cathain. "Don't forget we've all been shell-shocked. You got it worst, too. Help me down. No." He caught Ricky's shoulder. "Read this, man. You'll need me as your ears. We'll have to take Violet with us. In her present state she's the mental age of ten years."

Ricky nodded. Without further ado he manhandled the capsule into the last of the air borings.

He climbed out of the capsule and stood on the plastic of the dome. Cathain watched from the capsule floor and the girl stared dully as he, Ricky, went up to the radio that hung down from the ceiling beside the operator's chair. He turned from glancing back at them and concentrated on the set.

It looked in good order. Of course the bulge in Icarus's surface—in the side that had previously always faced the Sun—would have deflected the direct blast and flying debris, in the same way as the dome had escaped.

But it was not to be expected, really, that the set would have escaped damage from the ground shock—although it was well out of any direct line of blast.

He looked at the upside down controls and knocked over the power switch. The 'receiving' light winked on and brightened as the transformer fed power into the circuits. He pressed the microphone switch and the 'sending' light came on.

He glanced back at Cathain and the President's young-old face filled with a reflection of his own excitement.

"Hello!" he said into the microphone. "This is the Icarus station calling anyone. Come in. Over to you."

He released the microphone switch but kept his hand on it.

No answer.

He called again, keeping up transmission for several minutes, watching the quiver of the modulation needle, checking all that he could.

As he released the microphone switch, he felt the vibration of the answer from the speaker and turned in excitement to Cathain.

But Cathain's face was filling with consternation, not joy ...

"What is it?" asked Ricky. "Who's answered? What've they said?"

Cathain's cold blue eyes turned from Ricky to the radio speaker, staring in the sightless way of one who listens intently.

Ricky licked his lips. His own ears, deafened though they were, seemed to roar as his brain tried to supply in imagination what those ears could no longer detect.

Beneath his feet the plastic top of the observation dome glowed, momentarily distracting his attention. But that was only a warning of the Sun's rising as the asteroid spun.

He looked up at Cathain. The President was looking at the girl who leaned against the capsule wall at his side. Her yellow hair, brushed straight down in a childish instead of chic simplicity, shaded her eyes, but they—Ricky could just see—stared straight ahead, absently, blankly,

Cathain looked down as he noticed the glow that now touched Ricky's feet with blinding light. His eyes blinked and turned first to one side and then the other peering down through the plastic, away from the surface of Icarus at the multitude of glaring stars.

"There!" His lips formed the desperate word and his arm pointed down to Ricky's left.

Ricky bent his head, screwing up his eyes against the star glare. A rather long light glinted. In its place, superimposed on the distant background of pin-head lights, an oblong of light shone and then winked out. A tiny light grew into a long light that Ricky now saw to be triangular. This shortened and winked out and began to lengthen again, but with the triangle reversed. It shortened, winked out. An oblong of light shone in its place and then winked out.

"It—" Ricky hesitated. "It looks like a reflection of our own shape—of this asteroid's—Icarus's shape ... But I don't see how anything could reflect—"

Cathain was writing rapidly.

Sunlight, creeping up Ricky's legs, began to feel warm, like the glare from a fire in spite of the radiation filtering qualities of the plastic.

Cathain held out the notepad. The veins on his boney hands stood out blue. He had written: "Whoever fired that first bomb at us picked up your broadcast. They've been following and they say they've got us pin-pointed by means of your signal. The bomb knocked us so far off our original orbit that no searcher could hope to locate us without knowing the direction and force of the bomb. They estimate we've eleven minutes before they send off a second bomb—larger this time because it's got no defence to penetrate. It'll be big enough to flash Icarus to dust."

"Eleven minutes ..." murmured Ricky. "They're in a hurry, Cathain, or they'd take their time ..." He did not feel any surprise. This had happened before without warning; now they knew what to expect. "They're frightened, Cathain," he chuckled, "or they'd land on Icarus and make sure this time."

He looked down and the top of the dome was like a bowl in which he stood waist deep in light. Scattering of the Sun's rays made the stars faint below him except high upon the surface of the asteroid, and only to the left were they as sharp and steady in the great darkness as before.

The tiny, changing light dipped below the blackness of the horizon.

Sunlight raced in a wide tide across the surface of the asteroid. It filled the dome in a flood of brilliance.

Against the searing light of Sol seen without the protection of Earth's atmosphere, the shape of the rocket towered up above the large flattened bubble of the unloading bay.

Ricky looked away. Dangerous, derelict rocket and a stores supply now cut off: neither made any difference now.

In the other direction the surface of Icarus was inky black, hidden from his glare-filled eyes. Minutes yet would pass before Icarus swung around its axis and this other of its three solar-vertical sides was illuminated.

He felt suddenly bitter and looked up at Cathain. "You've caused all this bloodshed. You knew there were assassins after you because of what you did on Mars. You ought to have stayed on Earth where you could have been protected properly." He glared at Cathain.

Cathain returned the stare coldly. He paled. He looked down at the notepad and wrote swiftly.

Ricky glanced at the result. "If I had not taken an interest in your scheme to observe the Sun, it would never have got the financial backing you needed. If I had not come here to give you a good send-off, the world would have forgotten you. Because I came, a thousand articles will be written and a million words spoken in discussion of what you may discover. The human race will learn a little more about the Star upon which all life depends for existence. Even if I am killed, it will not be important to humanity. Or, if it is important, it will only be because my violent death will horrify public opinion and stimulate interest in what I tried to do."

"Pompous ass," scoffed Ricky. "D'you think that sort of talk makes it any less evil to cause the death of my friend Mike Hulder, of the crews of half a dozen ships and of the newsmen who were here?" He pointed at the inert girl. "Look at her. What's she done to deserve an end like this?"

Cathain's blue eyes shone in the brilliant light, and then they looked away and the thin shoulders bowed.

Poor old man! thought Ricky. "It's not your fault, Cathain," he said at length. "Those men of the Space Navy were aware of their danger. It's a part of the life of all spacemen—especially of those ready to wage war. And the newsmen knew what they were doing ..."

"If you can blame anyone," he continued, "I suppose it's more my fault than yours. The radio here was not intended for communication with the planets. That above the stores was for that purpose. You need directional aerials for millions of miles ... I should have known better than to mark our position for the enemy to have a second shot at us." He bit his lip. Sunlight glared up

from below his feet, making garish shadows upon the floor above his head. "If there was only something we could do."

In the opening of the capsule, Cathain was scribbling rapidly. He knelt down and Ricky leaned against the top of the airshafts to see what he had written.

"Now don't you blame yourself. You'd left all this to your helper, I expect. I will have spent more days in space than you have hours. I'm the one who should have known about the aerals, and—"

Ricky looked down at the Sun, now past its zenith and setting with the rapidity of the asteroid's rotation. Their lives were nearly ended.

Cathain was still writing: "I know what they have done, and will do. They worked out an approximation of our motion during your broadcast. They have been searching the vastness for us and now are on course towards us. The instant they get a really clear picture of us on their radar, they will fire off the bomb—an H-bomb probably. The instant the bomb has left their ship they will turn away and fire all their rocket tubes at full blast. They cannot hope to escape rock splinters which will hurtle after them as Icarus finally disintegrates, but they can reasonably expect the rocket blasts to destroy these splinters. Now do you see? You are the theoretical scientist; I am the practical spaceman—who should have known better."

Ricky looked out at the setting Sun. He shrugged and held out his hand to Cathain. Gripping hands they waited.

Sunlight seemed to drain slowly out of the top of the dome, like water from a washbasin. Icarus's convex side—that originally had always faced the sun—had been dark for several minutes, and now one of the two concave, and longer sides, the one leading from the other edge of the observation dome held slanting light for an instant longer and then was dark.

Ricky pointed at the sky above the wrecked rocketship. The tiny, changing light again winked at them, as their movement brought it into view. "What d'you reckon that is?" he asked.

Cathain clutched his arm.

Awful brilliance seared Ricky's eyes. This is it! he thought. He would have liked to watch the end of the asteroid—but instinctive reaction made him clap one hand over his eyes. Yet he still clutched Cathain's fingers and could feel the President's weaker, but steady grip.

Death was nothing to fear. There was a certain blessedness about such sudden death as this. The unimaginable, all-knowing Intelligence that had created the Universe was taking him away from it with merciful swiftness. Although it would have been interesting to have viewed the face of old Sol— And, it was true that his human stomach seemed hollowed and queasy with terror and his nerves screamed to him to run, to hide—

There was nowhere to hide.

Cathain's hand was pulling at him. Other hands were clawing at him. He felt himself being dragged upwards and backwards.

He struggled to free himself. He took his hand away from his eyes the better to counteract the alarming lift. His eyes had come off better—owing no doubt to the filtering qualities of the plastic dome—than he had dared to expect. Long shadows stood out across the old floor of the dome above him. They stood out like bars, straddling the metal plating.

He looked up into Cathain's face. And Cathain was trying to tell him something. He stopped struggling and instead helped them to get him up into the capsule. The dome lights had gone out. Perhaps Cathain had put them out. The switch was at what had been elbow level from the old, arbitrary floor beside the capsule opening.

Ricky suddenly felt sick with relief. He was alive after all. Cathain was sliding the door of the capsule into the closed position.

The capsule pulsed with the air pressure building up above it.

Ricky became aware of the girl against whom he was crushed within the narrow tube of the capsule. She had her hands over her face. At first he thought she was screaming, but then somehow he knew—although he could not hear anything—he knew quite definitely that she had been having hysterics and probably had screamed; yet she had helped to drag him into the slightly greater safety of the capsule. She would be suffering agonies of reaction after being shocked back into something like her normal awareness of events around her.

Cathain squeezed around and held up the pad. He wrote: "The fools have flashed the piece of Icarus they knocked off with their first bomb. You saw it in the sky, remember?"

"Yes." So that was how it had happened. The peculiar winking light in the sky, merely a fragment of the asteroid, had been sufficiently like Icarus to deceive the enemy into firing their bomb at it in error.

Ricky looked at the girl. She was sobbing, hiding her tears behind her hands.

His nerves jangled as the floor of the capsule pushed at his heels. Then he relaxed. The girl, Cathain and himself, all of them were still suffering from the effects of the first explosion. They needed time to rest.

They were retreating into the dubious safety of their bolt-hole. Like rabbits—and like rabbits they could be shot at again the next time they emerged, or they could be smoked out, poisoned, killed by concussion—or unlike rabbits they might simply die when their supplies of Earthly products finally gave out . . .

He was still brooding when the capsule jolted to a halt. So they were back within the living quarters— It was terrible to feel so helpless! They were hunted; and they had neither weapons nor fighting skill with which to hit back.

He slid the door open and pushed himself towards the floor. His boots caught on the metal and he turned as Cathain steadied the girl's awkward descent. It wasn't easy moving without weight. Ricky caught her arms as she landed with the clumsy lightness of an inexperienced fairy. Her large gray eyes met his. He could feel her thanking him and he could sense she was a little frightened of him.

Her lips moved.

He shook his head. "Eardrums burst, I think. The bomb—I— You want something?"

She nodded, made motions of washing her hands and face.

"Oh, yes. Of course. Sorry." He pointed to the washplace. "Mind the stuff on the floor."

He watched her pick her way amongst the stores he had brought before the central airshafts had ceased to function. He had tried to pile the stuff against the blank wall between the air-shaft doors and the washplace and remote-control room. But towards the end he had exceeded the capacity of the straps provided for the purpose. Most of the unsecured stuff contained metal and had floated to the floor, only a few boxes and cartons still floated loose and these seemed to have mainly collected against the side of the two adjoining roomlets. Probably, he reflected, these living quarters were not on the axis of spin, as they would have been if the bomb had not chipped off a corner of Icarus.

She put her head around the doorpost, looked at him with

her pleasant mouth open as though she would speak and then gave an awkward smile and made motions of writing.

He turned to Cathain. "Pencil and notepad?" He took them and walked up to the girl as she beckoned.

She wrote: "You're a sight, Mr Liffert"—She went back and crossed out the "Mr" and substituted "Dr"—"I can't do anything about your ears. But I've taken more than one first aid course. Let me do what I can for you?"

He looked at her wonderingly, and she smiled. She had combed her hair and there was nothing childish about it now. He nodded vaguely.

She washed the remaining blood from his head and made him change his shirt. He glimpsed his eyes and was horrified at the scarlet hue of his eyeballs. She seemed to know what she was doing and this, and a sudden new fear that he might lose his sight too, made him submit.

She put drops in his ears and bandaged them. She smeared ointment on his eyes. She gave him two small pills and a large one. He felt like a small child as he took them and then found her leading him towards a bunk in the living room.

He awoke feeling amazingly rejuvenated. He stared at the ceiling for a few moments, only half aware of reality. What he needed now was a five mile walk, after a breakfast of grapefruit, cereals, bacon and eggs, toast and marmalade and scalding coffee . . .

He tried to rise, and the straps across his body brought home the predicament of himself and his two companions. He knocked open the fastenings and pulled himself up.

Cathain, sitting at the table below the bunk, looked up. "Awake?" his lips queried. "Feeling better?" He frowned, apparently at himself for expecting that Ricky would hear, and waved him down.

Ricky pushed himself down and got his legs under the table and settled himself in a sitting position lightly on the bench facing Cathain.

"I'm hungry."

Cathain scribbled: "She said you would be."

"Oh?" Ricky paused in cutting open one of the tins ready in the table clips. He looked around the living quarters. "Where is she?"

"Gone back to the dome," wrote Cathain. "We were talking and I said I thought you'd left the radio at receive. She seemed to think they might locate us again from that, and she went. Left me to watch you awake."

"Nursemaid—eh?" murmured Ricky. He spooned food expertly into his mouth and presently nodded. "It's possible to pick up a receiving set... But if they were that close to Icarus, they'd see it through their portholes—let alone on radar screens..." He shook his head. "She seems quite a girl. What's her name?"

"Violet Blonsen," wrote Cathain. "Everyone called her 'Vi' and everyone she met wanted to marry her. She was one of those women who're always suffering from vertigo. Ought to have gone back to Earth years ago, but she never did. Not that she's old. You can judge her age for yourself. Not much different to yours, perhaps."

"She was a reporter, wasn't she?" asked Ricky, chewing.

Cathain hesitated, then wrote: "Yes."

Ricky noted the hesitation, but did not follow it up. Three people marooned together indefinitely, in continual danger of being blasted into eternity, under sentence of eventual death, no matter how long they made their meagre supplies spin out... No, there was no immediate hurry. Secrets, if there were any such, would come out as the days...as the hands revolved on the chronometer in the remote control observation room...

Struck with a sudden notion, he slid out from under the table and, chocolate bar in one hand and flask of beer in the other, he went into the little side room to see how long it had been since the President of the Three Worlds had landed on Icarus.

Five days, two hours and some minutes.

No wonder he was hungry.

He finished the chocolate bar and had a swig at the flask.

At the time of the explosion Icarus had been moving "down-hill" towards the sun at a speed of about 18 miles per second. He did some quick approximations in his head. In five days they had travelled some 8 million miles around Icarus's orbit, plus or minus the effect of the atomic blast of the first bomb. The second bomb they could discount, for in vacuum only the pressure of its radiation could affect them. But, even supposing there was a friendly ship now approaching their approximate position, it would have a lot of space to search. And the chances were that no ship could have reached them yet, that none would intercept them for weeks.

He walked back slowly into the living quarters.

Vi was descending awkwardly from the capsule. She had forgotten to reverse her position and had come into the room upside down. He hastened to help her.

She mouthed words at him slowly. "How...are...you?"

"Much better, thanks." He scratched his five-day beard thoughtfully. "I suppose you didn't think to bring back the automatic wire recording that receiver will have been making since I switched it on?"

She shook her head.

"We ought to get it," he said. "I think I'd better go. I can make observations and get some idea how far off our original orbit we have been knocked."

She looked doubtful.

"I'm all right," he assured her. "It won't do any good to wait. The sooner I start making observations the better. I'll have to get several reasonably accurate ideas of our position spread over a few weeks before I can calculate our approximate orbit around the Sun."

He climbed into the capsule and was about to close the door when he found she had followed. She grimaced at him.

"All right?" he queried.

She turned her gaze upward and shrugged. Unable to understand what she meant, he lost patience and shut the door and the capsule started off easily.

Several minutes passed. The capsule jolted slightly. He supposed this was the centrifugal effect of Icarus's spin conflicting with the steady circulation of the air.

Vi squeezed his arm and spoke to him, exaggerating the movement of her lips. He shook his head. "Sorry . . ." and she repeated the words several times before he nodded. "You mean what made me maroon myself on this tiny world?"

She nodded eagerly, and smiled.

He smiled back. "I'm a scientist. It's my chosen job to study the physics of the Solar System."

"Amazing!" her lips said, "I . . ." He lost the gist, but at length got her meaning right: "Do I care much because I have been deafened?"

He hesitated. "Well, yes I do. I liked listening to music. There's a lot I'll miss, now I come to think about it. That is, if I am permanently deaf. Perhaps they'll rig up some gadget for me . . . What's that?" He watched her lips repeat her question several times, then smiled again.

"No, I don't think the shock still numbs me as much as all that. Instead I'd imagine that the feeling of having-to-do-something-to-survive-at-all and of being responsible for the safety of you and Cathain is more likely to keep me going."

He thought for a few moments. "I suppose there'll be some nuisance value. But—most likely the worst'll be the feeling of being different from the ordinary run of folk—sort of a freak. Can you understand that?"

She frowned at him instead of answering.

He sensed that he had somehow said the wrong thing and tried to make amends by changing the subject: "That's enough about me. I'd rather hear about you."

She lifted her gray eyes to look searchingly into his.

He prompted: "To start with, how come such a pretty young girl as yourself should choose to spend years in Space? Most men only come out to make money or work the restlessness out of their systems or study . . ." He broke off.

She was blushing. She bowed her head and stared at her feet.

During the rest of the trip out she avoided his eyes and remained silent. While the capsule still vibrated tightly in the braking springs, she slid open the door and jumped out on to the curving plastic of the dome. She walked to its bulging side and, with one hand holding the top of a seat bolted to the floor above her head, she stared out into the darkness of interplanetary Space.

Ricky stared at her in perplexity, but shrugged as he remembered the reason for his coming.

He stepped down on to the plastic and crossed to an instrument cabinet. The sextant he wanted fell out of its drawer and he had to retrieve it from the centre of the dome.

This was like anti-gravity . . .

Sunlight glowed in the dome top beneath his feet. It glinted on a silver cigarette case. Ricky picked the case up. It had been Mike Hulder's. He opened it and his thoughts went back to the last actions of his friend and helper.

He sighed as the sunlight reached his ankles, rising like flame.

Vi turned at the sound, and he held out the case. "Smoke?"

She came towards him, looking an almost fearful apology at him. As he held a lighter for her—how strangely homely to see the flame standing upwards as it would on Earth—he began to

feel the heat of the glaring radiation. The plastic did not cancel its effects as effectively as a planetary atmosphere—

With the smoke in his nostrils, he glanced around for the whereabouts of the instrument panels. One lost one's bearings in this upside-down place . . . Locating the panel he wanted, he reached it as the light reached his waist. The switch that would pull up the shades, tent-like over the outside of the dome . . . Ah, there it was. The sun-side only would be best.

As he activated it, he turned and saw that Vi had climbed into the capsule.

She came out again, however, as the glare faded. He nodded reassuringly at her and began to busy himself with his sextant. Venus was still only a half disc, tiny but brilliant. Mercury showed almost as clearly a few minutes later as the Sun approached a line with the top of the dome.

Ricky, ready for the instant, took the Venus—Icarus—Mercury angle, accurately enough he thought, even though it was awkward working with upside-down clamps.

He altered the position of the shade and sat, waiting for the Sun to sink below their sharp horizon. "Owing to the triangular shape of Icarus," he said, "and also to our perch here on one of the angles, the period of daylight won't equal that of darkness as it does on Earth at the equator—even though we are on Icarus's equator, so to speak. H'm. I suppose it'll be dark for only about seven-eighths of the time. Though— We would, of course, have about half of the dome in shade for some part of our 'day'—if it wasn't for the high refractive powers of this plastic the engineers developed for us."

Sunlight faded. "There's Earth," he said, pointing. "And there's Mars, over there. I'd lost my bearings for a moment." He adjusted the sextant and noted the angle so that he would have a check on his first angular measurement.

Just then he caught sight of Vi gesturing at him.

"D'you want to go back, now?" he asked.

She shook her head and held her head and stomach. Her face was tinged with green. Poor girl. No wonder she had not wanted to make this second trip in the capsule.

He walked up the slope of the dome to where the empty spacesuit locker hung down from the floor. He pulled open a drawer in its side and tins of anti-vertigo pills showered out.

She took the two pills he gave her and he went back to turn the drawer upside down and restore its contents. This done his

gaze alighted on the electronic gear, and he bit his lip in thought. Why not connect it all up, just as though nothing had gone wrong? Besides giving them something to do, the finished job would give them a means of viewing Space even while deep in the asteroid's rock.

He looked around, intending to voice the idea to Vi; but she was being miserably sick.

By the 10th day from those first angular measurements, Ricky felt he had enough data to make a reasonably accurate assessment of their speed and the rate at which it was increasing, and so to plot the rest of their orbit around the Sun.

In a sitting position with his legs braced beneath the operator's panel in the tiny remote control room, he completed their next course and extended the curving line of their orbit. With the mighty blast of the first bomb superimposed on their original motion, they would now swing around the giant mass of the Sun a mere ten to eleven million miles from its visible surface.

Half frightened, half elated, he was staring at the line he had drawn, when he became aware of someone standing behind him.

He turned. Cathain's eyes, cold as chips of blue ice, stared into his. Cathain's lips snapped and curled although no sound reached into Ricky's deafened world.

Ricky held out pencil and paper. Something urgent had evidently happened. Cathain had scarcely looked at him for days.

Cathain snatched the writing materials. He stamped up to the panel and Ricky looked down as the pencil stabbed and slashed at the paper.

"Curse you! You could have brought something explosive out of the stores with all the trips you made. You knew the lift gear would freeze up."

"Yes, I knew that," said Ricky. "But what d'you want explosives for?"

Cathain scowled at him. He scribbled: "Is there only one serviceable spacesuit?"

"No, there should be two," said Ricky. "There were three including the spare, but one was smashed up in the jumbled mess of stores and . . . and . . . I remember bringing one suit in a fairly early trip. The other I put on what I think was the last load. Didn't I?"

"How the blazes should I know?" wrote Cathain.

Ricky bit his lip. "Oh. I remember I had to take some stuff off for that last trip. I'm sorry, Cathain, but I hadn't much idea of what I was doing."

"No?" Cathain banged the pencil on the control panel. "You couldn't have been too far gone. You've got your gadgets installed and connected—"

"Some of them," interposed Ricky. "And I've had to improvise. What in heaven's name is all this about?"

"Still acting innocent?" wrote Cathain and glared. "You think I'm not used to dealing with scientists, don't you? I've suspected for days that you've been stringing us along because you don't want to be rescued yet."

"I knew it was no use asking you to help. But I've been outside to the observation dome and walked on my hands, with my feet dangling out into Space, all the way to the unloading blister. You knew there are rungs driven into the rock for that very purpose, but you didn't say so, did you?"

Ricky licked his lips.

Cathain continued writing: "That rocket ship is fused to the rock. It is, as you say, almost a total wreck. But there are two alternatives we must face if we want to be rescued. We can either blast it clear of the rock, or one of us could shake it free using its own side-firing rockets. Either way—it is no use to us as a ship—we shall be rid of it and able to use the powerful interplanetary radio built into the blister which it caps so effectively."

"Then we would stand some chance of immediate rescue. But you don't want us to be rescued until you've finished your damned observations?"

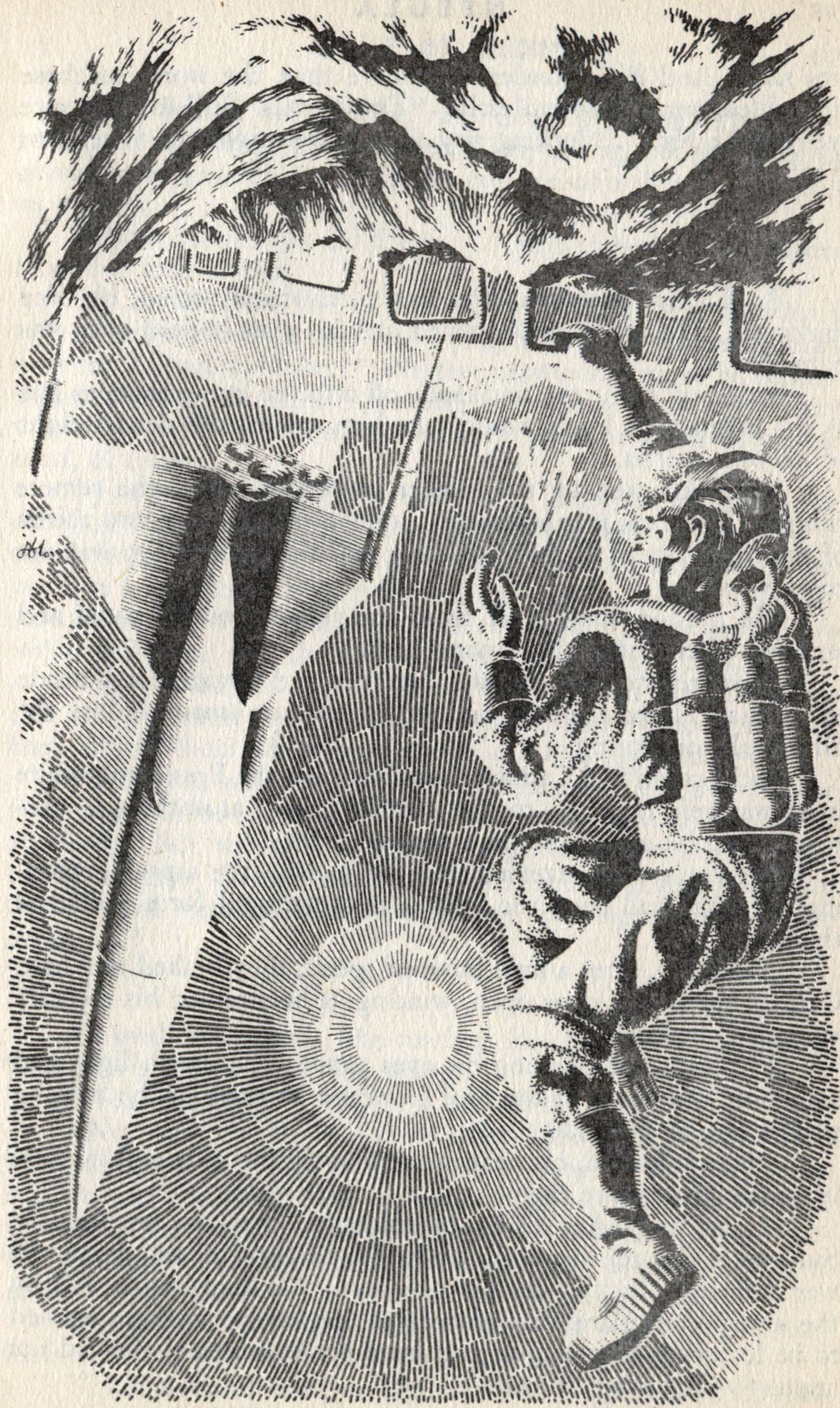
Ricky shook his head and looked up at Cathain.

Cathain glared accusingly; then suddenly glanced sideways. Vi's image was watching them from the personnel telescreen that linked the living quarters with the observation dome. Her lips moved rapidly.

Cathain's eyes narrowed. He wrote: "She can see the spark of a ship's wake—very far away."

Ricky immediately switched on the main power. They waited breathlessly while the tubes warmed up in the sky-scanning camera far above in the dome and in the receiver behind the high-definition projection screen which half filled the wall at their right.

Ricky turned up the brilliance and they searched amongst the pictured stars. Cathain pointed in the direction of the bright double star that was Earth and her moon. "She said there," his



lips said. And Ricky understood more than the words as those lips added, perhaps soundlessly: "The Devils. Still making sure we're done for. . . blocking any signals we might try to send to Earth . . ."

As Cathain stared at the starry television screen, his face darkened. His wrinkles deepened and his eyes burned with impatience.

Suddenly he turned and made off into the living room as fast as his magnetised boots would take him against the dead weight of his own inertia.

Ricky knocked up the master power switch of the remote control. With only one mercury boiler working only two thirds of the time instead of three working full-time, electricity was not to be wasted.

He pushed himself off from the remote control panel and strained after Cathain's swaying back.

They reached the capsule together and straightened inside it. Cathain closed the door and they moved up smoothly into the air circulation boring.

Ricky could feel Cathain trembling; but the President's white head was held high, his mouth steadily gazing at nothing in particular and his mouth set in a studied calm.

Presently they reversed their position in the capsule, standing on what had been the ceiling as centrifugal force pulled at them.

At length, after a final burst of speed, they braked to a halt. Cathain thrust the door open, wincing as he strained his recently wounded shoulder.

He leapt out, shading his eyes against the garish light and staggered the width of the roof to where Vi knelt at the bulging plastic of the east side.

Ricky followed, his head bent to avoid the gear and cabinets upon the floor above them.

As he dropped to his knees beside the others, he saw that the Sun was no longer casting its light into this part of the dome. Vi was pointing. Ricky stared but his eyes still held images left by the unexpected glare. He glanced at the others. Cathain seemed to be lecturing Vi and, judging from her expression, she did not appear to like what he said.

Ricky looked out into the vasty depth of Space. There, between the clustering stars, he could just distinguish the glow of incandescent gases that marked the position of a ship that altered its velocity.

"Right between us and Earth . . ." he breathed and the others turned to look at him.

He looked from one to the other. "Now do you see why I saw no sense in risking our lives trying to shift that derelict from over the unloading blister?" Neither answered him, so he continued, addressing Cathain. "It stood to common sense where they would be. Always supposing that they had not given us up for dead, of course.

"Just put yourself in their position. They see us. They fire off their big bomb. They know from their instruments that it struck home and did its work. But they have a good idea of our position and velocity this time, and go back to make absolutely sure we are finished. And, to their amazement, they see we are unharmed—and that their bomb hasn't blown us to dust.

"So— What do they think? What else can they think but that we have some kind of defense against their bombs? It must have shaken them when we survived the first explosion—

"Can't you imagine the conference they would hold? All the time they must be frightened in case we succeed in beaming an SOS to Earth. But we will be out of range of Earth after only a matter of days. So they decide to be satisfied with simply cutting our line of communication—jamming any signals we try to make . . ."

Vi swallowed hard. She reached for the pencil and pad in Cathain's breast pocket. She wrote:

"You cold devil! You knew this all the time!"

"No," said Ricky. "Don't be silly. How could I know anything of the sort? I just felt we were wasting our time trying to call for help after we'd done so once and got a bomb flung at us for answer. If we'd seen that wake up there, I would have done something to support my theory. But it wasn't a bit of good talking to either of you about it—not the way you were acting."

She frowned at him; then wrote: "If you thought they hadn't left us, why didn't you say, so we could watch?"

"That wouldn't have been of any use. They went off directly away from us while the H-bomb was going off. Therefore they

would come back directly towards us. You cannot see much of the wake of a ship from its front view."

She frowned at him and he anticipated her next question: "No, Vi. They aren't coming towards us yet. We are now too far from Earth even to send a beamed message with our comparatively low-power transmitter—even if we could use our transmitter. But, although Venus is about 15 million miles away, we will more or less keep pace behind it in its orbit for a week or more. They are moving over, at what they consider a safe distance from us, to cut us off from Venus."

"Couldn't they be friends?" she wrote.

Ricky shook his head. "Are they acting like people who wanted to rescue us? No, they're our enemy all right. They're waiting until we get close enough to the Sun for the Solar interference to blanket all our signals. Then, like a big game hunter who has wounded his quarry, they'll close in and finish us off. This time they mean to make no mistake."

She buried her face in her hands.

Cathain put his arm around her shoulders and glared at Ricky. He pulled the notepad over the plastic towards him and retrieved his pencil from her nerveless fingers.

He wrote: "There was no need to frighten Vi like that, Dr Liffert. But, since you have, let me tell you something. You forgot to get the recording made by the radio you left switched on after the second bomb. You came here for it—remember? Well, I remembered it and I got it at the first opportunity. And I played it back myself.

"The voices it had picked up out of Space seemed to me so grim that I didn't tell either of you about them.

"First of all, I soon realised that the first bomb had sparked off a bloodbath revolution. It looked like a signal for attempts to seize power on all three worlds. I'd been expecting something like that sooner or later. But—not knowing whom I could trust—I divided control of the counter-measures and kept the co-ordination under my own control.

"There would be no one able to give the lead— And, of the second-level key men, there were reports of swift assassinations. By this time these things may have combined to demoralise law and order. In other words my continued absence is very likely to have brought complete anarchy everywhere on the Three Worlds. Of course, I don't know; I can only guess, for suddenly the

record of intercepted messages was broken by interference—

“I see now that it was those devils blocking us off— But it makes no difference. I can’t bear to think what is happening. I can’t bear to think—

“This may put the human race back a century in its steady progress towards peace and plenty— And you—YOU go on with your preparations to observe the Sun, as though nothing at all had happened.”

Ricky found he had his mouth open and closed it. He swallowed hard. “This is a fine time to confide in me. Why the blazes didn’t you tell me all that before? Didn’t you trust me?”

Cathain shrugged. His lips moved but Ricky could not get any idea of what they said.

Vi, however, lifted her white face, tossing back her hair—it had come loose—in a gilded flurry. From the too-rapid-to-understand movements of her lips Ricky gathered Cathain was not in her good books.

“Well . . .” Ricky sighed. “At least we’ve both put our knowledge in full view. Didn’t you guess at all at the origin of the interference on that recording?”

Vi and Cathain had stopped their row to look round at him. Now Cathain slowly shook his head.

“A fine spaceman you are,” murmured Ricky. “And after all your boasts. I didn’t think it’d be much good my looking at that ship. But if you can miss one obvious thing, maybe you can overlook another. Is it all right with you if I look over what you’ve been doing to the derelict?”

Cathain glowered, shrugged.

Ricky looked around the dome. “Where’s the spacesuit you’ve been using?”

Cathain indicated the cupboard which had been intended for storing the suits.

Ricky stood up and went over. Opening the doors he found that Cathain had altered the fitments around so that the heavy suit was right-way-up to him as he stood on the roof.

He took it out and was stepping into it when other hands helped him, a pair on either side. He looked at Vi and grinned and then at Cathain, who nodded approvingly.

Cathain brought cylinders of oxygen from the compressor

and clamped them on to Ricky's back. He tapped them and looked through the facepiece inquiringly.

Ricky, looking out, nodded.

Cathain put his thumbs up and guided Ricky's weightier steps towards the airlock.

Ricky entered the airlock and Cathain pointed up at the metal rungs concreted into the rock. Ricky nodded and reached up experimentally, finding he could close his fingers over them fairly comfortably. How fortunate the rungs were thin, or they would have been useless to him in these thick gloves.

When he looked around, the inner airlock door was swinging shut. He glimpsed sunlight touching the top of the dome, making the faces of Cathain and Vi look almost black, and then he was alone.

As soon as the airlock had pumped itself as near to vacuum conditions as it could, he clung with one hand to a rung and unclamped the outer door.

Sunlight blazed at him. He shut the vizor of the suit and swung from rung to rung out into the open. The swollen Sun climbed higher in the black, starry sky as he went. Before long his arms ached and he rested, crooking an arm around the rung above him.

Above him? The incongruity of the thought struck him. No spaceman he, he felt his heart begin to pound. His grip tightened in the rung. Below him the abyss yawned, the stars like spearheads waiting to impale him.

Sweat beaded out, and ran down his face and body. He tried to control his frantic breathing. If only the situation wasn't so alien! It was impossible to imagine holding on to something on Earth and knowing that if you let go, you would fall up into the empty Hell of Space.

He hung on.

Without any conscious effort, then, he found his mind considering the strangeness of the situation and his panic dissolved into scientific interest. Although he was careful afterwards not to look outwards at the stars beyond his swaying feet, he felt no further discomfort apart from aching arms.

The mile of rungs "above" him in the surface of Icarus at length stretched behind him. He found a wire cable-ladder leading from against the side of the unloading blister—now dark and frosted inside—and he lowered himself outwards to where the main hatchway had burst open.

The shocking outrush of air from the split hull had killed all occupants instantaneously. There was little left to show that they had been human. Successive "days" of intense radiation, short though they were, had vapourised all liquid. Smashed and pulped bodies, when dehydrated, lost all semblance of anything human.

Ricky shuddered . . . and stepped over the pitiful huddles upon the ceiling. He had come to see what Cathain had been doing.

He climbed up towards Icarus into the rear of the ship and found—as he might have expected—that the power house itself was hardly touched. It was too solid, or too perfectly braced to be damaged by a shock or shocks. The designers had done their work well. The atomic pile had to be safe no matter what.

All the same its tremendous, dead weight had mangled the controls that led from it as though they were wire and dry sticks. This was where Cathain had been working. Ricky marvelled at the job that had been done by the old President. If proof had been needed of Cathain's boast to have been a spaceman of the old school, it was here in the improvised repairs.

"A grand job!" said Ricky as, back in the dome at last and with the suit off, he rubbed his aching arms. "How you managed it at your age, I can hardly think."

Cathain's lips moved. He might have been saying "You young fool."

But Vi wrote: "We'd begun to think you'd let go—or something. I was worried to death."

Ricky looked up. Her eyes were shining as though with tears. Cathain was smiling. Strange to think that only a few hours ago they had each been going a separate way.

Vi began writing again. "I can teach you the deaf and dumb alphabet." She began there and then, as sunlight touched the top of the dome below, to run through the letters on her fingers, her lips moving.

Ricky watched absorbed and looked up eagerly as she finished. "Give me a few days. I'm not too quick at anything new—but I pick things up in a rush after I've got the hang of them—But—" He looked up into her wide eyes. "—how come you know the deaf and dumb alphabet so well?"

She looked at Cathain and her eyes came back only slowly to look searchingly into Ricky's. Her lips moved. "I have no roof to my mouth," they said soundlessly to Ricky. "The noises I make are horrid. I—"

"The things you say," interrupted Ricky, "seem all right to me."

"Your poor ears!" her lips said and her fingers caressed his unhearing ears.

Moving swiftly, Vi's tapering fingers formed letter-signs that two weeks of constant practice enabled Ricky to read with ease. "D'you think it'll be tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" he mused, and switched his eyes up to gaze, with her, through the dome plastic, out at the cone of incandescence that marked renewed activity on board the ship besieging them. "Well, from the look of that they'll not be coming at us tomorrow— Although it depends on what you mean by tomorrow. On this little planet with its eleven minute day, you could say tomorrow's only a couple of minutes off. It'll be longer than an Earth-time tomorrow, too, for they are plainly moving to keep us blocked off from Mercury. But . . . Well, I shouldn't think it'll be longer than tomorrow would be on the Moon of Earth—"

She grimaced at him. Her fingers weaved signs: "O.K. Clever! So you think we have something like 28 days to live?"

"Yes," he said sombrely. "I've just taken a new observation and checked it with maths. We're getting close enough to the Sun to make things uncomfortable for our unwanted escort in their tin box of a ship. They're altering course to keep their distance from the Sun . . .

"Here on Icarus we're moving at something like 30 miles per second—more than half as fast again as when you and Cathain landed . . .

"How our velocity climbs." He put down his instruments and wiped the sweat from his brow. "At a rough estimate we must be getting up towards 50 miles per second." He panted in the oppressive stuffiness of the dome and ganced at Vi. "You're ready with that switch?"

She nodded, her eyes glistening in the starshine.

He stared at her a moment.

Fierce radiation scattered harshly from the top of the dome below them. The click of the switch beneath Vi's fingers sounded unnaturally loud. The heavy radiation shades rose up on either side to shield them.

Ricky moistened his dry lips. He spoke into the darkness as though talking to himself. "Well, I should think we're alone now . . .

"Yes," he muttered. "We were about ten million miles behind Mercury when we went over her orbital course. But—while Mercury was losing speed as it swung out away from the Sun towards its maximum distance of about 43 million miles—we are still gaining speed as we plunge nearer and nearer to the Solar surface.

"After reaching our peak velocity—something like 100 miles per second—we'll lose speed again as we climb out."

He was silent for a while and then added: "When we cross Mercury's orbit on our way out, we'll be too close for our own safety. Or for Icarus's safety—ought I to say?"

He frowned in the darkness. "With both Mercury and the Sun pulling on Icarus, there's no doubt in my mind that orbital velocity will be lost and, after a few landing ellipses Icarus will end up as fuel to the Solar fires."

He sighed and wiped the sweat from his brow.

One of the massive shutters began to slide down and the starshine picked out Vi's slender form. Her fingers moved. "Ricky. Are you telling me we're doomed anyway—even if the ship doesn't kill us?"

"Oh no!" he said quickly. "The heat or radiation of our unprecedented approach may kill us, but if we get through that—and escape the ship's third attempt—we'll have no trouble in contacting the Mercury Observatory—we'll be so close . . .

"That's if we're still alive." He rubbed his face. "I'm worried what'll happen if we die or go mad. After all this—if the films and measurements were just to fall into the Sun . . ."

She stared at him, smoothing her golden hair. Then her fingers spoke. "Is your data more important than your own life?"

"To me it is," he said and lifted his sextant as the other shade sank into the rock face of Icarus. "This is the last time we'll be able to do this on the surface."

"Eighty miles per second," he murmured, "and every second still a little faster." He turned from the glowing control panel deep within Icarus to look at Cathain and Vi close behind him.

How bloodless and spent they both looked! They stared in awe over his head at the big-screen picture of part of the Sun as seen from the asteroid's burning surface.

Only a quarter of the great Solar disc glared from the screen. A group of dark sun-spots flickered ominously towards the left centre of the view. On the edge of the disc a flicker of light caught Ricky's attention as he looked back at the screen.

He brought the compensating spectrohelioscope into action and the disc blacked out. Where the flicker of light had been a great, branching limb of light leaped out against the darkness of Space.

Cathain's lips moved.

Ricky looked at Vi and she lifted her hands. "He says that ship counts on us being frizzled to death."

"Oh."

Ricky took her hands in his. How quickly the breath rasped in and out of their lungs even at this depth. How one's skin pricked with the heat. One could almost feel the thunderstorm that seemed to threaten. Even the unchanging silence of his ears had a new significance.

The screen went black and its glare faded from the tiny room. Ricky blinked. Of course, it was only that Icarus's rapid rotation had plunged the observation dome into shadow; but the memory of the black storm clouds of Earth was strong in his mind. His nerves tingled with the electric hush of Icarus's violent rush through Space.

"Ninety miles per second," he gasped.

Something hit him on the shoulder. He started up crazily. Vi's contorted face and wildly swinging arms scared some sense into him. Cathain hung upright like a corpse. He pushed the old man aside and seized Vi. There seemed to be something wrong with the lights. Flickering in and out they alternated with the blue glare of a phosphorescent discharge over everything. She held her hands over her ears and went rigid with her eyes tightly shut as he carried her through the prickly air into the living room, to the bunk.

She went limp as he strapped her down and began to look for morphia tablets.

He went back for Cathain.

"One hundred miles per second," he croaked helplessly.

Only the meters and recording apparatus went on with something like normalcy.

He got to his feet. The wall-screen lit with a glowing tide of light—of the turbulent surface of Sol. He swayed helplessly as it moved and felt as though it were a seething cauldron over which he hung.

Static electricity lifted his hair and spat and glowed everywhere around, sometimes playing havoc with the recording apparatus, sometimes no more than a glow to match the furnace air.

Somehow he found himself in the other room. He bathed the sweat from Cathain and Vi and fed them with hands as jerky and fumbly as those of a puppet. An ape must feel like this, he thought in a flash of lucidity, as it tries to use human tools.

Then he was back in the seat before the control panel. His hands and legs twitched uncontrollably. The giant screen glared with hydrogen flocculi upon the too-near face of the Sun.

He lived in delirium—a blessed state of unawareness from which each brief relapse into sense seemed worse than before. Terrible heat choking in his throat and prickling his skin, tautness of nerves a-jump with the electric tension, fear of lethal and worse than lethal radiation, of being grilled to death, of being left alone by the deaths of the others, of being disfigured by agony, of going insane, of the total failure of the flickering lights—of a mechanical or electronic breakdown that he would not—in this condition—be able to remedy—

He was panting. He opened his eyes. Light shone steadily into his mind. How calm the tiny room seemed with the big

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screen dark and the phosphorescence gone and the instrument dials steady, except for a vibrating needle here and there.

One of his hands was an inch or so above the shelf under which were his knees, the other hand touched his throat. He lifted one and pulled away the other so that they floated before his face. His weakness shocked him but the skin of his hands and arms, though blotched and glistening, showed no blisters of any kind.

He shuddered as a chill ran through him. The edge of the Sun's disc sliced on to the screen. It was more curved than he remembered it. Icarus was on its way out from the Sun. Thankfulness washed through him.

He felt anxiety for the others and pushed himself off to stride and stumble into the main room. Cathain's elbows stuck up like a scarerow's and they moved. Vi lifted her head to look at Ricky as he pulled himself off the floor to the table top. She smiled and thrust her hands up to touch his cheeks with her fingertips.

Then she began to use her fingers to talk to him. "Dear Ricky! Your poor deafened ears have helped us so much. You could not hear the racket the instruments were making, nor the infernal crackle of the electric sparks—"

"It was only static," he interposed.

She smiled. "Yes. Static. But noise enough to drive one mad. I couldn't shut it out. It went on and on and on—"

"Yes," he murmured. "It did seem a long time. Countless revolutions of this little planet. I wonder how long . . ."

He went back into the little room. The image of the Sun was sliding slowly off the screen. He watched it go on and then turned to the control panel. The chronometer told its tale of days and even before he began to check the other instruments to read an approximation of their orbital course, he pictured their position in his mind.

He was, however, checking his data and was computing when Vi startled him by settling a flask of warm coffee on top of his papers.

"Careful. Don't spoil them!" he cautioned her.

She shook her head over him as he took the flask and she pushed it up to his lips. He drank to please her. It was so important that they should know what their position might be. How long had they before they must expect another attack.

He took a sandwich from her hand to prevent her feeding him with it. She looked at him determinedly and his protests died

and he munched at the tinned bread and butter with its layer of meat and spinach. He never had liked spinach.

"I think," he said between mouthfuls, "that we have about two earthday periods before . . ." He chewed and swallowed "After that—" He took another mouthful as she guided the sandwich towards his mouth. "After that—" Ugh! After that we will have to take turns to watch the big screen—"

He came out of the depths of sleep and started up in alarm. Vi was shaking him and pointing at the little room and shouting though he could not hear her. She was too excited, he could see to use sign language.

She half dragged him from the bunk. They staggered together into the control room. And at once he saw what was wrong. "Cathain has gone up to the dome?"

She nodded, pointed at the big screen, which was black, ex-

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cept for stars, and then waved her hands to attract his attention back to them. "Cathain took over from me but I could not sleep. I heard a roaring sound of atmospherics and what might have been a carrier wave of radio and then Cathain came rushing out. He leapt into the capsule, and off he went. I shouted to him that it wasn't safe for us yet on the surface. But he took no notice.

"I went into the room here and Sol was just slipping off the screen. And I could see the enemy ship black against the disc."

"What?" gasped Ricky. "So they're coming in closer to the sun than we are. They'll pass us at a fair speed, I expect. Yes. They—" He looked up as the screen shone with the edge of Sol's disc and went on, talking as though to himself. "They'll not land after all. The radiation's dangerous enough for them in their ship. They'll do exactly as they did before. Bomb us and accelerate away. They mean to finish us off without giving us a chance to surface and fight back."

He frowned, staring through narrowed eyes at the turbulent face of the Sun. "But what can Cathain be doing on his own? What is there he can do?"

Vi dragged at his sleeve and pointed at the shelf notepad. Cathain's familiar scribble gave up its message into Ricky's mind.

"This is their third attempt. I've got an idea that might make it their last. As it'll take some time, however, I can't risk you interrupting me. I'm getting old and slow. So I will leave the capsule in the dome. You'll have to come after me down the shaft to get it. If you start now you should be in time to see my counter-attack."

"Goodbye, Richard Liffert. And you, Vi, goodbye and look after the young fool."
Alexander Kahna Cathain.

Ricky stared in bewilderment at the signature. Cathain must have gone crazy. They must hurry after him to save him from himself. Or worse. There was no knowing what he might do if he had cracked under the strain of their past ordeal and present waiting.

With Vi behind him he dived into the airshaft boring. Pulling himself hand over hand along the cables in the recess left for them, he gathered momentum headfirst into the darkness.

Aware of Vi's inexperience of this sort of thing, he shouted

over his shoulder. "Take care. We will be falling outwards towards the dome before very long. The farther we go towards the surface of Icarus, the greater will be the centrifugal force acting upon us and the faster we will tend to fall. Don't lose touch with the cables, or you'll not know how fast you're falling until it's too late."

In the darkness he could not hear her. He felt himself chill with fear of her missing her grip and so falling outwards faster and faster bouncing from one smooth wall to another, battered, helpless to land—

He braked on the cables sliding through his fingers. Vi cannoned into him, soft but stunning. He grabbed at her. She clutched at him. They were falling in each other's arms before he realised what they had done.

He groped out for the cable and felt nothing. His sense of direction lost, he held his breath. Vi seemed to jerk.

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Falling—

His elbow scraped and his sleeve was shoved upward. Cautiously he pressed Vi to reassure her. And he ran his fingers over the surface of the wall as it slid up past him. They dropped into the recess quite close to where he anticipated they would. The cable slipped through them and he let his breath sigh out. Vi must have scraped the opposite wall and they had cannoned back to their previous position.

The cable seemed to hold its speed without much change.

The tiny spark of light that was the transparent end of the capsule steadily brightened, however, and presently the increasing speed of their fall showed in the increasing friction of the cable's surface.

The last couple of hundred feet they climbed down, feeling a weight approaching some two-thirds of their weight upon Earth, but seeming greater than that after their long confinement in the gravity-free centre of the asteroid.

Ricky got his feet on top of the capsule at last and helped Vi down. A few minutes later they entered the upside down state of the dome.

"Where can he have gone?" murmured Ricky staring around the empty dome. The open and empty cupboard of the spacesuit caught his attention. It hung down grotesquely from the floor behind the desk and radio cabinet.

Ricky gasped and turned, his boots scraping on the plastic as he raced to the side of the airlock. The derelict spaceship showed like a stark tower against the stars, its peak haloed with light from the rising sun.

Vi was shaking his arm and looking at him questioningly. For answer he pointed to Cathain's second message scrawled upon the circular hatch of the airlock itself. "Don't forget I was a space man for a long time—Cathain."

Ricky and Vi stared up at the ship as it began to gleam with increasing light. Suddenly it was like an outline of light against the stars. Then the gigantic mass of the sun was coming up over all the eastern horizon.

Such was the glory of the sunrise—with its electric white glare—that even in that instant they did not realise that the ship was lifting. Its cone of tail gases glared for an instant before it was lost in the eye-searing horizon.

Neither Vi nor Ricky moved, not even when the automatics lifted the shade to ease the radiation pressure on delicate gear, not even when the sun sank from sight behind them.

They stared in fascination at the sky. Cathain was lost against the stars. Ricky was thinking that if they could not see him then neither could the crew of the enemy ship. Radar was not yet of any use to anyone for the sun was still too near.

"It's not likely that we will see anything," said Ricky. "He will strike them unawares, if he does at all. The ships are not really likely to explode, except for the outrushing of the air. It would be too quick for anything to be done . . ."

He sighed and looked up at a star so bright that it had a perceptible disc. "Mercury," he said. "Messenger of the Gods. In another week we will be close enough to contact the observation station there on this radio. I'd say there's not the slightest chance of our not being rescued. You'll see. In two week's time you'll be talking to the Commanding Officer and have a hundred

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men around you. Men who haven't seen a woman for weary months."

She looked at him. "Cathain," her lips said. "He has died for us."

Commander Brennan of the Mercury Ob. held his arm for Vi, and Ricky stared rather grimly at the gold stripes of the dress uniform.

Vi took the arm but her eyes strayed to where the sun showed over the desolate horizon. She was not looking at the fantastic panorama of the twilight belt that harboured the observatory, even though she had confided to Ricky that it was a thrill to be going to see what no other woman had seen.

Airless surface, airless waste of millions of miles of nothingness between them and the thin incandescence of the Solar chromosphere . . .

Ricky reflected on the strangeness of life. The confusion and fighting on the Three Worlds had made little difference here on Mercury. Yet the insurrection had been virtually ended by a single message sent out from this very observatory.

The truth of the attack on Cathain, and his choice of self-sacrifice to save his two young companions, and to a lesser extent his saving of Ricky's observation findings—these things had caught the imagination of humanity.

How could such a man be a Dictator?

From the rim of the sun that was just visible above the Mercurian horizon a great eruption flared up in a long and branching arm.

Ricky sighed. He glanced at Vi hanging on to the Commander's arm. The naval man had appropriated her almost as a matter of course.

It was only to be expected. Romance, such as the end of Cathain or the legend of the Space Navy, was what kept the world going. He turned away. There were mountains of data to co-relate and prepare for further study.

But a hand caught his arm. It was a slender hand and one now well known. And he looked up into Vi's face. And she smiled and looked down at her hands. Her hands spoke to him: "The Commander wouldn't think anything of me on his home planet. I wouldn't be any use to him for long. But I think you and I

need each other. And—Cathain told me to look after you, didn't he?"

Ricky smiled. She was right. Need of each other was a good basis on which to build a marriage. "But—" he hesitated. "It's not much fun being married to a scientist who works in the laboratory of Space itself—"

"Oh, don't you think I've thought of that after all we've been through?" asked her fingers.

He drew her to him.

With her golden hair against his chin, he noticed that the large Solar prominence was still flaring upwards. Was it possible, he wondered, for two ships, locked together in death, to cause just such a splash as they went hurtling into the Sun at the several hundred miles per second of Solar free fall.

It was certainly . . . a—

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From KENNETH F. SLATER and MATT. A. ELDER

CITY—*Clifford D. Simak* ****
(*Geo. Weidenfeld & Nicolson*),
9/6.

When I say that Clifford D. Simak's *CITY* won the International Fantasy Award last year, there is little more I can add to convince you that it is a book worth reading. However, for those unacquainted with the Dogs and that robotic Jeeves, Jenkins, this is not a "novel" but a connected collection of short yarns telling of mankind's future adventures. The Webster family, through the thousand years of the book's scope, play a leading role in the training of the intelligent and vocal dogs, in the loss of the system's greatest philosophical concept, in the departure of man from the earth when he sacrifices his humanity for a Jovian paradise. It is therefore logical that the last remnants of mankind should be called "websters" by the Dogs, so long guided and protected by the family, and now under the guidance of Jenkins, the thousand-year-old robotic servitor of the family. The Dogs, imbued with the high ideals of man's culture which man himself never managed to bring to fruition, are almost defeated by the "websters," who re-invent the bow and arrow, and by the "cobblies" — the *things* from the world next door. Until Jenkins solves both problems by taking

the "websters" in to the world of the cobblies, thus ridding the dogs of their dragging heritage and releasing on the cobblies the most destructive of life forms. Each incidental story is a gem, and the whole, connected by the observations of the "Dog" who records these "myths," forms a book which is the crown of Simak's twenty-plus years of s-f writing.

LANDS BEYOND. *L. Sprague de Camp and Willy Ley* ****
(*Sidgwick & Jackson*), 21/-

Into 321 untrimmed pages of text, and another score of bibliography and index, co-authors de Camp and Ley compress a wealth of information, logic and interest. The subject of the book is an attempt to position geographically, those legendary lands which were given birth to by imaginative travellers. In terms of time the authors deal with Plato's mythical Atlantis, nine thousand years before Christ, and with one of the most modern legends, that of Mount Shasta in Northern California. Between these temporal extremes the travels of Odysseus and of Sinbad the Sailor are plotted theoretically. The wild stories of the Fabulous East, of Prester John, the Amazon and El Dorado are brought under the microscope-

like consideration of Messrs. de Camp and Ley.

These, and many other equally intriguing subjects, are fully dealt with in a very interesting and easily readable manner. This is one of the few books which really are worth twice the price.

THE COMPLETE BOOK OF OUTER SPACE *** (*Sidgwick & Jackson*), 10/6

This book really is complete. It supplies a comprehensive selection of articles on all aspects of the flight into space, from the legal difficulties of space travel to the flying saucer myth. Most of the big names in space research are represented here. Willy Ley on the space ship, Wernher von Braun on the space station, Dr. Heinz Haber on space medicine

and a string of others including our own Dr. Leslie Shephard of the B.I.S. on inter-stellar flight. The book is profusely illustrated, both by photographs and paintings. The "Father of Science Fiction," Hugo Gernsback, supplies an article and much of the artwork comes from his publications. The book gives a broad picture of the state of things as they stand now in the struggle for space.

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and the Flying Carpet to a "Letter from Tomorrow" from some lucky lad who has just spent a holiday on the Moon. For the market it was intended to cover, the book is top grade; every detail is explained in easy language and the flow is helped along by numerous illustrations of moderate excellence by well-known artist Gerard Quinn. Here is the chance to educate that young nephew up from the realms of Dan Dare and Tom Corbett—Space Cadet, into the higher reaches of "Nebula" and its companions.

THE WEAPON MAKERS—A. E. Van Vogt *** (*Geo. Weidenfield & Nicolson*), 9/6.

A. E. Van Vogt should certainly need no introduction, and this book of his continues the story which started in **THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER**. In actual fact, this latest work, **THE WEAPON MAKERS**, was written before **THE WEAPON SHOPS**, but the original version has been drastically revised to graft it onto the later-written work. Much, I feel, has been lost in this revision. Hedrock, already a somewhat overgifted immortal, becomes a super-superman and whereas in the original version his honours were shared with Neelan, now Neelan plays a minor part and Hedrock steps into his shoes. Hardly an incident occurs in the book in which Hedrock fails to make an appearance—in fact, he doubles himself up in several! However, for those who delight in the complexities of the van Vogtian plot, this is a worthwhile yarn continuing the story of the Isher

civilisation with its royal house and its very active opposition and counter-balance of the Weapon Makers. It is not, however, Van Vogt at his best.

THE TWENTY - SECOND CENTURY—John Christopher ** (*Grayson & Grayson*), 9/6.

This is another collection of short yarns, this time largely unconnected, although the first set of five have Max Larkin as the central character, and the "managerial" civilisation as the background. The managerial world is John Christopher's own private variety of 'future history,' and although he can only claim some six years of s-f published writing, he stands high. Hence, his civilisation of "big business" is a wholly believable one. The next ten tales are grouped under the heading "The Light Fantastic," a misnomer if ever there was one. Only two of them end on a happy note; the others vary from the compassionate story of Mr. Kowtshook to the tragedy of the medically-rejected spaceman who makes one flight too many and is exiled on the moon; from the pathetic story of the "Monster" who tries to obtain aid from mankind and is slaughtered in Loch Ness to the subtly horrifying endings of "Sentence of Death" and "Weapon." The final group of five tales are given the non-committal heading of "The Old Way Home" and if anything are somewhat lighter and brighter than the preceding ten. The bulk of the stories are well-written and entertaining, if somewhat doleful. Furthermore, this represents the first s-f collection of a British author to be originally printed in this country.

SCIENTI FILM PREVIEWS

News and Advance Reviews for Science-Fiction Film Fans

From FORREST J. ACKERMAN

Read this column closely this time—it will save you a lot of money. America has made another picture as bad as *Robot Monster: Killers from Space*. These callers from space aren't even good time-killers. Fugitives from a Vargo Statten island universe, these invaders from the planet Astron Delta are characterized by eyes which look like they had been staring too long at Jane Russell. "Bulb-eyed" is the way they are referred to by a press agent who perhaps never heard of "bug-eyed." Same publicist parted company with the truth, too, when he laid this claim for the picture: "Science-fiction thrills and sensations almost beyond belief, but based on the possibility that Earth could be attacked by invaders from another world, blister the screen with explosive excitement in this super-exploitation special in which the destruction of the human race almost succeeds." "Awesome" Deneb-Tala, chief of the Astronians, master of the ultra-advanced (read retarded) scientific plan to wipe out the human race, looked so much like a rich man's Eddie Cantor that I

couldn't help thinking of him as Popeye the slayer man. Just so you'll know what you're not missing, the plot-pourri goes something like this: The sun's dying down out around Astronia, so an advance squad of Astronian scientists comes to Earth to case the planet. They set up their operations in the area of our atomic testing grounds, and every time we detonate a bomb they siphon off some stray radiations somehow and file 'em away for future reference. One day they plan to turn these radioactive rays on all the insect life on earth, mutating them into elephant-sized monsters which will make a meal of the human population, after which they will be eradicated by the Astronians' heat-ray . . . which does rather seem doing things the hard way, but who can understand the motives of an Astronian or a movie producer? Doug Martin, nuclear scientist, crashes during a flight over a bomb-test area. He is killed—but mysteriously turns up days later, wandering with amnesia. He has unaccountably acquired an operation type scar over his heart, and before

long we learn of course that he has been brought back from the dead "with skill, knowledge and instruments beyond the knowledge of man." Martin is now the Astronians' pet zombie, a kind of Astronia del Martin as he were. I had to sit thru this picture, but the memory of it is too painful for me to put it all down on paper. It is something like being asked to review a comic book, and that isn't funny. "Killers from Space": Don't fail to miss it if you possibly can.

Creature from the Black Lagoon—in three dee or two, this picture falls flat. A devil fish-man left over from the Devonian menaces an expedition (including Richard Carlson, who seems more at home in outer space) deep down the Amazon. For 8 reels that drag like 18, this fishy Frankenstein emotes mainly with a clutching webbed claw that keeps creeping thru open portholes and over the side of river banks. Before this bad dream is ended, the amphibiantics of the fish-man have been exploited to the hilt—and beyond. The make-up of the monster actually is excellent, a thoroughly convincing job, but the plot line somehow wriggled off the narrative hook. Before finis is written to this

finny fiasco, the Creature has been poisoned, flamed, leadened (with bullets) and harpooned a couple of times, absorbing enough punishment to understandably make any ichthyo-saur. Nevertheless, it was unforgivable of him to go anthropomorphic on us, kidnap the heroine and lay her on an altar preparatory to a fate worse than Kinsey. Would *you* be interested in making love to a seal?

Passable but not among the hundred best scientifilms ever made is *It Stalked the Ocean Floor*, previously called "The Sea Demon" and "The Beast from Bikini." This is not even another *Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, which wasn't another KING KONG or LOST WORLD either. But it has mild moments of interest with a one-man sub., and a gelatinous giant of the deep, which looked like an over-size gum-drop with a Cyclopean eye when I saw the preview, but which (I was told by the producer in the foyer) was to be improved. As I shall never see the film again, I'll have to find out from one of *you* what sort of a substitution was made.

Hollywood will soon release a *Cat Women of the Moon*. In what sounds like a move towards reprisal, I understand you British (and I don't blame you) have done a *Devil Woman from Mars*.

Ensuing issues of NEBULA will carry advance information on *The Conquest of Space*, *The Unknown*, *This Island Earth*, *Duel on Icarus*, *The Flying Lab*, *The Star Rover*, *King of the Dinosaurs*, *Ring Around Saturn*, *The Naked World*, *Target Earth* and *Green-out*!

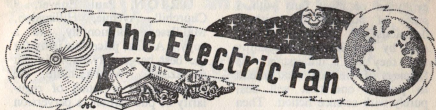
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Latest News of Fan Activities

From WALTER A. WILLIS

ORBIT, organ of the Leeds Science Fiction Association. Editor George Gibson, The Adelphi, Leeds Bridge, Leeds, 1. Quarterly. 1/- per copy. The title of this magazine always reminds me of two lines of dreadful dialogue from a mercifully unfinished story by Bob Shaw:

Pilot to Navigator: "Give me an orbit."

Navigator to Pilot: "Why, what did you do with the bit I gave you?"

The thought that this dialogue is liable actually to occur on some spaceship is enough to bring the human race to a screeching halt on its march towards space flight and send it screaming back to savagery. Not so ORBIT 3, however, a fanmag which has improved immensely since its first issue was reviewed here a while back. The contents this time include a revealing article by R. M. Bennett on science fiction in schools. Apparently Mr. Bennett, a primary school teacher, made his pupils write an essay on science fiction and here are some of the results. According to one of these youthful Heinleins "the Moon was very big and we could see some big crates on it." Made from powdered boxite, I suppose. It

seems that the part of the current sf boom which has struck these youngsters most is the counting "SEVEN . . . SIX . . . FIVE . . . FOUR . . . THREE . . . TWO . . . ONE . . . ZERO . . . WHOOSH!" which seems to be inseparable from any Hollywood take-off. It's a wonder the filmmakers didn't use it for the Dance of the Seven Veils in SALOME. Mr. Bennett, where I don't know this magazine would be without (I leave that sentence in all its mind-shattering horror just to make you realise how well the rest of this stuff is written) has also a bright little column, and there are some other articles of varying interest. Also, alas, some amateur fiction of varying lack of it. To the more sophisticated fan, however, who prefers to skim his promag rejects in other promags, the most entertaining article is a report of the year 2006 Convention by a Big Name Fan of a bygone era, Dennis Tucker. Mr. Tucker's hero is getting on beautifully until he mentions science fiction, whereupon he is summarily ejected. This is more than a joke, for the appearance of this article in ORBIT is a sign that the editors of this magazine, too, are following the traditional

evolution of most fans with a sense of humour and without delusions of grandeur. They start by complaining indignantly that they can't understand the fanmags of their day and intend to publish one that will deal purely with science fiction. Then after a few issues they get tired of competing with the promags or rehashing the same old subjects — My Favourite Story, Whither Science Fiction, The Influence of Franz Kafka on Vargo Statten, etc., etc. — and turn to the more rewarding and equally fantastic field of what might loosely be called the social activities of fandom. About which time some even newer fan castigates them as "esoteric" and the cycle recommences.

THE MEDWAY JOURNAL, Tony Thorne, 21 Granville Road, Gillingham Kent. Four issues for 3/-. This little magazine consists largely of accounts of the activities of the Medway Group, who organised the very successful MEDCON last year. By all reports they are more at home with practical work of this kind than with journalism but these chatty and informal reports show what can be done towards producing an agreeable magazine with a minimum of literary talent. Other contents include serious articles on scientific subjects which I'm sure will be of immense interest to many people. Personally, though, I prefer to get any scientific knowledge I want from textbooks or scientific journals, where you can be sure of the authenticity of the information you're absorbing, or at least can assess it.

ORION, Paul Enever, 9 Churchill Avenue, Hillingdon, Middlesex. Bi-monthly. 4d. a copy. At that price this is by far the best bargain available in fan magazines. What's more, the editor makes a fetish of regularity of publication, a perversion most unusual in fan publishing circles. Either proudly or defiantly he also proclaims that 85½% of this issue consists of amateur fiction. I'm willing to take his word for that figure . . . I just wish it was less. Personally, I preferred the first issue which was almost entirely written by the editor—he's a far better writer than most of the ones he's likely to get. However, one of the stories is better than the usual run of fanmag fiction—its rejection slip isn't showing — and is almost up to the standard of the non-fiction. Best among this is Enever's editorial matter where among other things he pungently criticises the pernicious anaemia of most criticism by fans of other people's fanmags. Of course he's quite right. What happened is that when the new provincial fanmags arose a couple of years ago, the older fans were so pleased to see any life in the wilderness that they carefully avoided throwing cold water anywhere near the spark. Pomposity, dullness and bad writing were overlooked as they searched desperately for something that could be praised without too much insincerity. Now however that the newer fans are more self-assured the bloodbath hoped for by Enever may not be long delayed.



GUIDED MISSIVES



Letters to the Editor

DEAR MR. HAMILTON: This is the second time in the fifteen years I have been reading science-fiction that I have written to the Editor of a science-fiction magazine. I have enjoyed the last two issues (numbers six and seven) so much that I want to tell you so.

Some years ago I graduated from the blood-and-thunder, space-and-gadget-opera type of s-f magazine and for the last decade have limited my s-f consumption almost wholly to John Campbell's "Astounding (!) Science-Fiction," which is, as perhaps you know, the one really adult American periodical of the genre, despite a spate of slick, cynical and sophisticated imitators in the last two years or so.

I subscribed to "Nebula" because I had, and still have, a deep admiration for the British; along with "Punch" and the "Manchester Guardian Weekly," your magazine adds to our admiration and enjoyment of things British.

In particular, I enjoyed "Sustained Pressure" in number six; this is one of the finest stories I have read in any kind of magazine. I appreciate the fact that in many of your stories the characterisation and plotting is refreshingly unhackneyed; a great success in bringing characters to life is being had by several of your writers—I hope

this trend will continue.

The cover paintings on numbers three and six I like very much, and that for number seven I think is exceptional. Mr. Clothier's lunar scene is the happiest effort in the astronomical-painting field I have yet seen. Not only is it satisfactory—at least, as far as I can tell—technically, but it has a lyrical mood-evoking power which pleases me immensely. May we hope for more of such work? The only other s-f cover artist who evokes such a response in me is Timmins, who for years did the "Astounding S-F" covers—no more, alas!

My best wishes for your continued success, both literarily and artistically.

Sincerely yours,
Rev. RICHARD B. HUNTER,
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY, U.S.A.
** Many thanks for your very nice letter, Mr. Hunter—I only wish we could have reproduced the charming little sketch of a bespectacled kangaroo reading a science-fiction magazine which concluded it!*

I'm sure many readers will join me in looking forward to your next letter.

DEAR SIR: Why is there so little S-Fiction on the Radio? "Journey into Space" was interesting, but at the best it was only standard Space-Opera.

Radio Luxembourg has its "Dan Dare" but this again can only appeal to the juniors.

I admit Charles Eric Maine's "Spaceways" was good but the S-F content was small, the only play of interest to the serious fan so far has been another of Maine's, "The Einstein Highway." Please print this in one of your future editions as I would like to hear the opinions of your other fans.

J. M. WELDON,
TOWYN ABERGALE, N. WALES.

** You certainly have an interesting talking point there, Mr. Weldon. Although there has been more s.f. broadcast by the B.B.C. than you mention, the quantity which reaches their microphones, when compared to the amount of non-s.f. stories and plays which they broadcast, is right out of proportion to the quantities of each which one sees on sale on any bookstall.*

Even if B.B.C. apathy was to blame, one would certainly expect Radio Luxembourg to broadcast more science-fiction than their "Dan Dare" juvenile though, of course, their programme sponsors, anxious to obtain the biggest listening audiences possible, may feel shy of experimenting with a more adult type of science-fiction.

What do other readers think? I'll look forward to continuing this topic in future Readers' Columns.

SIR: I kindly beg to present to you my impressions on the fifth Nebula Science-Fiction which I read recently.

I have been awarded a membership in the Nebula Science Survey Group of Brighton by

Stephen C. Wright, Esq., president of the Group and a dear friend of mine.

I am very fond of reading fiction, and I spend all my leisure hours with any book at hand. I must really say that the first story, written by William Temple, is the best piece of the book. The content has something which makes me fly from the real world and its original surroundings, to an imaginary one where everything makes me wonder and think. The sub-marine kingdom, inhabited by an unknown race is well described, so as to give anybody an idea of something identical to science-fiction. The "Trouble Maker" takes the second place, and in this novel I appreciate the imaginative power of the writer. Mr. Tubb is a good fiction writer, and any reader can observe his ability to project the readers into strange and unusual places and situations. The short stories are also amusing, but they are not so interesting and lack imagination and a flow of facts. Nevertheless, they are readable.

SHEIKH A. M. RAYMODE,
MAURITIUS.

** I was indeed pleased to hear from you, Sheikh Raymode. It is certainly encouraging for me to know that NEBULA travels so far—and is appreciated wherever it goes!*

DEAR ED:

I prefer the short stories—especially those with a "snapper" at the end. Why this should be I don't know, unless it has a connection with the fact that my favourite author prior to s-f was O. Henry. Ted Tubb is rele-

gated to second place in No. 7 mainly because I think he is doing the same thing too often. His story, "Emancipation", is a fine piece of mood writing, but if he doesn't watch out, he will be classed as the British Ray Bradbury. They both play on the same themes — children and the evilness of Man. "Troubleshooter" comes last because I found the "snapper" too obvious. It must be well concealed, as in "Cold Storage," before I rate the story as good.

Artwork in this issue was fair. The cover was excellent as far as actual illustration was concerned. The four - colour reproduction resulted in almost photographic clarity. My only objection was to the theme. This subject has been drawn so often in the past that no matter how good the present one is artistically, it only raises a rather bored "What, again?" from the viewer.

As for Walt—Will his punning never cease? Honestly, this puts me in a *quandary* because he seems to have the right *slant* on things. Do you think he might be *fission* for compliments?

JOAN W. CARR,
M.E.L.F. 17.

* *Nice punning, Joan. You should get a Willis Cross (perhaps you have) for that last paragraph.*

There are plenty of fine short stories coming next time—their "snapper-endings" all carefully concealed!

Don't you think you are being just a little harsh when you class Bob Clothier's fine cover painting for my last issue as commonplace? However, his next two for me, in all modesty, are ABSOLUTELY TERRIFIC.

FANALYSIS

So that we may continue to give you the kind of story you like best, please complete the ballot form below. Number the stories in the order of your preference, your favourite first and so on. Mail the completed Form to the Editor as soon as possible.

Fly Away Peter	
Episode	
Weather Station	
Wind Along The Waste	
Blaze Of Glory	

The result of the Poll on the stories in NEBULA No. 6 was as follows:—

SUSTAINED PRESSURE

Eric Frank Russell 25.8%

TEA PARTY

E. C. Tubb 25.8%

THE HAPPIER EDEN

J. T. McIntosh 19.4%

FIRSTLING

F. G. Rayer 12.9%

IT WILL GROW ON YOU

L. Major Reynolds 11.0%

INSIDE INFORMATION

Tony C. Thorne 5.1%

Naturally, if you fill up our ballot form this time you will have your opinion taken into consideration. The author of any story gaining over 40% of all votes cast will receive a CASH PRIZE, depending on the length of the story in question.

Nebula No 10 will carry the results of the Poll on the stories in this issue.

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L OOK through this NEBULA for an
announcement from the new Editor of
Britain's leading fanzine, SPACE-TIMES!

MISCELLANEOUS

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your own home! Glasgow and district
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you have read should now be on its
way to the H. G. Wells Club to encourage
the younger generation to read and enjoy
s.f.—Contact A. Gregory, 3 School Street,
Witton-le-Waer, Nr. Bishop Auckland, Co.
Durham.

Concluded from page 2

get your Club Secretary to do it
instead.

Plans for "The Superman-
con" (The Second Manchester
Science-Fiction Convention) now
only a month away, are almost
complete and, in spite of some
slight and rather unnecessary
unpleasantness between commit-
tee members and personalities in
the SF professional world, it
looks as if the many interesting
and varied items on the pro-
gramme will combine to make a
very enjoyable Convention to
which I hope a large number of
you will come. There will be a
large number of colourful displays
of fiction publications in the Con-
vention hall, so look out for
NEBULA among them and
have a word with me. The
Place: The Grosvenor Hotel,
Manchester. The Date: Satur-
day and Sunday, 5th and 6th
June.

In conclusion, I would like to
extend a hearty welcome to many
Australian readers who are seeing
NEBULA for the first time with
this issue. You have missed a
lot of good stories—stories which
have earned NEBULA a reputa-
tion second to none in Great
Britain—but there are lots more
scheduled for future issues which
will be even better, so I'm confi-
dent its stock will very soon be
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