SPACE STORIES

JUNE 25c

FEATURING
THE DARK SIDE
OF THE MOON
a novel
by SAM MERWIN JR.

JUNE 1953

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION
Real Causes of TV Interference
In This Area Revealed

A message to every TV set owner who is tired of paying $5-$10 for the same unnecessary service calls over and over again—and who is unfairly blaming his serviceman for something that is not his fault.

Have you ever wondered why your TV set can't be fixed—why your TV picture still gets aggravating wavy lines, streaks, distortions and zags—why high powered aerials, expensive new sets, even top flight servicemen often fail to stop this TV interference?

THE TRUTH ABOUT YOUR TV SET

It is a known fact that your TV antenna not only picks up the picture waves you see on your screen, but also picks up electric static waves that can ruin your picture.

THE REAL CAUSES OF TV INTERFERENCE

And the reason you or your repairman have never been able to block out this interference is because it does not come from within your TV set but from sources outside your TV set! These sources are the real cause of TV interference. These are what may cause your TV screen to flicker, flutter, streak or get hazy.

For instance, you yourself, realize that a doctor's diathermy machine up to 2 1/2 miles from your home can ruin your TV viewing pleasure for hours on end.

Do you know that a car or truck passing your home can streak, distort your TV picture? Do you know that nearby telephone lines or neon advertising signs, can make your screen flicker and flutter?

And do you know that any electrical appliance in your home—or your neighbor's home—can streak, distort and haze your TV picture for an entire evening?

ANY ONE OF THESE CAN CAUSE YOUR TV INTERFERENCE

Inside Your Home

| Electric toasters | Phonographs |
| Vacuum cleaners | Electric razors |
| Sewing machines | Refrigerators |
| Electric broilers | Oil burners |
| Ringing telephone | Door bells |
| Radios |

Outside Your Home

| Cars | Streetcars |
| Trucks |
| Trains | Doctor's diathermy machine |
| Hospital machines | Subways |
| Electric cash register | FM Radio |

WHICH OF THESE TV HEADACHES DO YOU WANT TO STOP—IN JUST 45 SECONDS!

STREAKS caused by cars, trains, subways, cash registers, electrical appliances can be BLOCKED OUT by TEREFON before it reaches your set.

WEAK PICTURE—TELEFON CLARIFIES weak signal. Helps to hold picture bright and steady.

WAVY LINES caused by "Hams," FM broadcast stations, other TV sets, antennas, can be BLOCKED OUT by TELERON before it reaches your set.

FADED PICTURE due to weak, static random signals can be CLARIFIED by TELERON before it reaches your set.

BORED EFFECT caused by doctor's diathermy machines, hospital machines, can be BLOCKED OUT by TELERON before it reaches your set.

TV STATIC caused by telephone lines, neon signs, atmospheric conditions, can be BLOCKED OUT by TELERON, before it reaches your set.

HOW TO STOP TV INTERFERENCE IN JUST 45 SECONDS!

The only way to eliminate TV interference is to BLOCK IT OUT, before it reaches your set—in exactly the same way sunlight glare is blocked out by sunglasses before it reaches your eyes.

1. You can install an antenna filter to help reduce interference sneaking through your antenna, but it CANNOT STOP streaks, wavy lines or static due to interference pouring in through your wall socket.

2. Or you can fix your set yourself in just 45 seconds simply by clipping onto your set a new double protection filter circuit and power line plug that not only blocks out interference coming in through your antenna, but also blocks out interference coming through your wall socket. The name of this amazing invention is the TELERON INTERFERENCE TRAP which actually blocks out these interference waves before they reach your set.

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Bill stepped in and eased back into the luxurious cushions. As they rode along, he told Jim with just a trace of sadness, how he was still working at the same old place and at almost the old salary.

Jim Williams listened attentively. "Bill," he said suddenly, "I want to tell you something. Five years ago when we were working together, we used to wish we could get ahead."

"And then one night I happened to see an advertisement in a magazine. It told about International Correspondence Schools and how they help men to success through spare-time study. Right there I decided that I would be one of these trained men."

"I remember telling you about sending in the coupon. And I remember how you laughed and said I was just wasting my time and my money. But I wasn't, Bill! It was the best investment I ever made."

"I found that the minute I spent in marking and mailing that coupon has been worth $50,000 to me. In other words, I have made just $50,000 more in the last five years than if I had stayed at the old job. And I say very frankly that I owe my advancement to I.C.S."

"How much longer are you going to wait before taking the step that is bound to bring you advancement and more money?"

The way is easy. Without cost, without obligation, mark and mail this coupon. It takes only a three-cent stamp and a $50,000 minute of your time, but it is the most important thing you can do today.
THE DANGEROUS AGE
by George Viksnins

Dear Mr. Mines: Hooray for space-opera, hooray for SpS. Finally an honest-to-Ghu action mag's been put out. I agree 100% with Wally Parsons. Let's simply talk about space-opera, about the stories printed and other things excluding religion, mature science fiction, etc., ad infinitum.

What???? Sam, you can't do this to us! A short letter column? No!! No. Ten thousand times no. I like the letter column and fanzine review sometimes even much better than all the rest of the mag. Of course, I liked all the stories in February's SpS better than the letter column and the column was good too. Drop a short story or print a shorter novel, but by all means have a kingsize letter column.

Who bit Jim Leake? What's got into the boy? He's moderately sane in TEV, why did he crack up in his February letter? Such a pity! Was a nice fella.

Oh, yes, I nearly forgot. Gotta review and give my unqualified opinion of Feb. SpS. First, let's bisect the cover. Yes, I said bisect. One part is all right, the other is pitiful. Look, Sam, you can put dames on the covers of SS, TWS, FSM, and WSA; I don't care. But, do you have to do this in SpS? Most teenagers like to read their zines in school or on the trolley going to school, so why do this to us? The adults can read their zines in the confines of their dens, we can't. So, why not use good space scenes on your covers or some space-man fighting a BEM? Don't you see any other possibilities than scared femmes?

The stories were ALL good, except for D. W. Barefoot's yarn. I don't quite see why and neither did he explain why our mythology would be followed up in alien cultures. THE BIG JUMP was a story in the good traditions of space opera and was excellent.

How about bringing CF back in SpS? Don't throw the inkwell, Sam, this's a new suit. Hey, watch it!

As to the stories, I rate them this way—1. THE BIG JUMP, 2. Coming home, 3. The bleak and barren land, 4. 3 lines of Old Martian, 5. Even the bright gods must die. All the illos were good too.

Now, for the unescapable plug. If anyone wants to sub to a teenage fanzine, or wants to join an all-teenage fan club, will he please contact me. Also, I want teenage correspondents. Of both sexes.—4152 Parkside Ave., Philadelphia 4, Penna.

There's only one good reason for putting dames on the covers, George, they dress it up so. Now on the February cover you had quite a choice. You could disregard the dame and concentrate on the BEM—and a big beautiful BEM it was, or the man, or the machinery. But the dame wasn't doing anything except standing there and looking scared.

Who's Captain Future?

BROKE BUT HAPPY
by Marilyn Shrewsbury

Dear Sam: I missed the first ish of SPS, but the second looks mighty good. That BEM on the cover nearly scared me to death (I thought for a minute it was a mirror) but the letter department was O.K.

It looks as if you are putting the bite on me for another two bits. Pul-leeeze don't put out any more magazines or my budget will be shot to Mars!—Box 1296, Aransas Pass, Texas.

Any more magazines and we'll go with you to Mars. What in the name of Saturn's rings is a budget?

TEARS IN HIS EYES
by Dick Clarkson

Dear Sam: Egdal!, wotta bem! I've seen bems in my time, Sam, but as far as pure ferociousness (Continued on page 121)
WHY was this man great? How does anyone—man or woman—achieve greatness? Is it not by mastery of the powers within ourselves?

Know the mysterious world within you! Attune yourself to the wisdom of the ages! Grasp the inner power of your mind! Learn the secrets of a full and peaceful life! Benjamin Franklin—like many other learned and great men and women—was a Rosicrucian. The Rosicrucians (NOT a religious organization) first came to America in 1694. Today, headquarters of the Rosicrucians send over seven million pieces of mail annually to all parts of the world.

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THE ATOM BOMB, in case you've forgotten, exploded over Hiroshima with a brilliance 100 times that of the sun. From a distance of 30 miles the flash would temporarily blind anyone looking directly at it. A sphere of incandescent air 450 feet in diameter—the fireball—is formed in a second and starts to ascend. It lasts about ten seconds, during which the characteristic mushroom cloud takes shape and begins to sprinkle radioactive particles over the country. This was the small bomb. We now have improved versions.

CHANGE OF SEX is weird enough, but from Japan comes the story of a living human embryo found in a man's chest. A Japanese youth went to a doctor about the pains in his lung. Operation disclosed a living female embryo about the size of the human fist, alive and growing in his lung. The doctor's theory was not that the youth had actually conceived a child, but that this was a dormant twin, which by reason of endocrine changes had suddenly started to grow again. It is apparently rare for one twin to absorb the other in this way before birth.

THE CENTER OF THE CHEMICAL INDUSTRY is shifting from the eastern part of the United States to the southwest. Major reason is the abundance of petroleum and natural gas in the southwest, out of which so many synthetics are now being made. Paralleling the movement west is the growth of the chemical industry which has doubled in size since 1940, expanding its plants at a cost of fourteen and a half billion dollars. Nylon, polyethylene, anti-knock compounds for fuels and ammonia are currently featured in multi-million dollar expansion plans. 200,000 new jobs are expected to be created.

ASTRONOMERS AT PALOMAR AND MT. WILSON observatories suggest that the universe is twice as big and old as previously supposed. The 200 inch telescope at Palomar has permitted observations of the Andromeda nebula which indicate it is twice as far away as earlier estimates. This means it is twice the size. It also means our own nebula, the Milky Way, is not relatively larger, but is about the same size as Andromeda. Unless you worry about these things, you have no idea what a relief this is to astronomers, who were getting inferiority complexes about our freak nebula.

DOES YOUR WIFE WIN ALL YOUR ARGUMENTS? Science says you may as well give up. The female tongue simply flaps more easily than the male. In what must have been a hilarious test at George Washington University, geneticist Edward E. Gahres checked the ability of both male and female students in rolling and folding their tongues. Females won by a narrow margin. Males also proved to be one-half of one percent more tongue-tied.

IF YOU'VE NEVER EATEN ANY METAL, you may have to start with cobalt. An experiment with white mice indicates that the metal gives protection against atomic radiation and X-rays. Just how it works is not entirely clear. It is known to stimulate the production of new blood. It also suppresses oxygen in the red blood cells and a deficiency in oxygen is believed to bolster the body's resistance to damaging rays. Don't rush out to the corner grocery, however, for a package of cobalt. It may have to be "atomized" or whatever it is they do to cereals, before it is palatable.

EINSTEIN HAS BEEN VINDICATED AGAIN. An equation of his first published in 1905, showing that electrical conductivity takes place as a process of diffusion has been experimentally demonstrated by 63 scientists working at a transistor school of Bell Telephone. We knew the man was ahead of his time, but—63 scientists to prove him right!
The Dark Side of the Moon

A Novel by SAM MERWIN, JR.
Miles was an expert on galactic glaciers—and this was the first time he found an iceberg that was too hot to handle.

MILES STANNARD let the sand run slowly through his fingers and watched it form a tiny cone on the beach. It was like the formation in the bottom of an hourglass, he thought. Then, deciding his mental meandering was pointless under the circumstances,
he turned on his side and looked at Joyce.
She was lying stomach-down with her slim body exposed to the slanting rays of the afternoon sun, her head pillowed on her arms. Regarding her with eyes squinted against the brightness, Miles wondered if, had he not just returned from a long womanless stretch on Antarctica and in the South Polar Seas, he would have looked at her twice.
She had been introduced to him immediately upon his return, two weeks earlier, at the massive United Nations Headquarters in New York, and they had been spending virtually all their free time together since. Joyce was still full of surprises for him. He still found it hard to believe that such a basically plain-featured, small young woman could light up into something approaching beauty when stirred to excitement or laughter.
And her body, which at first glance, clothed, looked so unopulent as to be almost boyish, was as gracefully competent and functional as that of a woodland dryad when seen, as he was seeing it now, innocent of clothing. They had accepted the invitation to Juan Wister’s English lodge over the week end largely because in Britain they could dispense with the sininity of bathing suits. In America, thanks to the Puritan tradition, the authorities were still fussy.
Miles wondered a little about Joyce’s being able to wangle them an invitation to such a high muck-a-muck affair as the house-party. Wister was rated as one of the last truly rich men in the world, perhaps the sole remaining “mystery billionaire.” It seemed a little odd that a mere U.N. secretary, even an executive secretary, should have such entrée into lofty international circles.
Her bronzed skin rippled as she stirred upon the beach-robe that protected her from direct contact with the sand. She lifted her head quickly to toss brief blue-black hair clear of her forehead and dark eyes regarded him inquisitively, small soft lips framed a question. “A couple of credits for your thoughts, Miles,” she said in the soft but clear English diction that was part of her fascination for him.
“Beyond the usual—” he began.
She wrinkled her brief nose at him and sat up, drawing the robe around her shoulders. “Don’t be cute,” she commanded. “What else were you thinking about?”
He drew a line on the sand, parallel to the edge of the ocean, with one of his big toes. “I was thinking,” he informed her, “that King Canute was born about fifteen centuries ahead of his time.”
“How so?” she inquired, dark eyes alert.
“Well,” said Miles, “if he’d gone about things properly, he could have made it look as if the tide was obeying him. Look at that bluff.” He nodded toward a low sand-cliff, topped by a clipped box hedge, a good hundred and fifty yards back from the water. “The sea came up that far in his day.”
Joyce Hartwick looked distressed. “Do you have to spoil the week end by talking about it?” she asked abruptly. “I thought we could get away from it during these last few days at least.”
“We might enjoy the week end more if you weakened,” he said.

JOYCE picked up a handful of sand and threw it into his face. Miles promptly lunged for her, from his sitting position. She tried to roll away from him, but he caught her and they mock-wrestled until both of them grew aware that they were becoming a source of amused comment by the main cluster of house-party bathers, a little further along the beach.
Miles dropped the handful of sand he had been trying to pour into the girl’s mouth and reassumed what he hoped
was dignity proper to one of the planet’s ablest hydraulic engineers.

"Why can’t you act like a grown man?" she said loftily. "That pun!" Her hauteur was somewhat marred by the fact that her nose was daubed with sand. She felt it, rubbed it clear.

"I wasn’t joking," he said. "Not really."

"I know it." Contrite little fingers gripped his near forearm lightly, dark eyes peered into his. "But, Miles, what sort of a deal would it be for me—I mean, if I did decide to—let’s try to be adult about it. I’m fond of you—maybe too fond of you."

"I know exactly what you’re going to say," he said bluntly.

"But I’m still going to say it," she replied. "How long were you on Project Antarctica? Nine months, wasn’t it? And how long have you been back? Fifteen days! And now how long before you’re off again? Less than a week. What sort of shake is that for girl?"

"You act as if I’d asked to marry you," said Miles sulkily.

"You did—just the night before last in New York."

"I must have been drunk—in fact I was drunk. It all comes back to me now." He ducked another handful of sand just in time, added, "All right, I’ll ask you again sober."

"When you’ve been tapped for the Moon-trip?" Her reply was incredulous.

"There’s not much to worry about—they’ve got it all figured out." Even as he spoke, a tiny knot of worry that had been lurking just under his diaphragm expanded with a suddenness that made him momentarily breathless. Sure they had it all figured out—as far as human ingenuity and science could figure out a Moon landing that had never actually been made.

For a moment he wished he had yielded to a teen-age desire to become an author of tri-di vidar scripts. If his aptitude tests had not revealed that his bent was definitely toward engineering he would never have got into any of this—the Antarctica Project, with its resulting discovery that a minuscule but unaccountable portion of the Earth’s ocean water was being syphoned off into space, and the subsequent finding of what was probably some of the missing water, frozen in a vast single ice-deposit in one of the dead volcanic craters on the far side of the Moon.

Being a scripter, he thought, would be a lot more romantic—at least it would give him much better opportunities at the fleshpots, for which he felt a perfectly normal young-man’s longing. Maybe his job sounded romantic—what with plotting the melting of the South Polar Ice Cap and being selected as one of the very few experts to make the first landing on the Moon.

Actually, the Antarctica job had consisted of slipping and freezing over treacherous ice-fields, making borings and taking measurements, or of spending long hours in a Nissen hut trying to make sense out of the findings in the field. The dullest sort of a routine—also wretchedly uncomfortable. He suspected Project Moon was going to be a hell of a lot worse.

But somebody had to find out how Earth-water was being stolen and conveyed to the Moon—and why. Not to
mention who was doing it. He felt a little proud, in a way, that he had been selected for part of the job. He wondered who else was going—and turned, frowning, on Joyce. "How come you know I've been tapped for the trip?" he asked. It was supposed to be top-top-top secret.

Joyce lay back on the sand, her hands locked behind her dark hair, her beachrobe barely covering her sleek bronzed body. "I've been wondering when you'd ask," she said. "I'm quite proud of myself for finding out."

He shrugged after a moment, then said, "Well, you'd better not talk about it to anyone else."

She laughed at him. "Men are so damnably serious about their little games," she said. "Don't worry, it's not general knowledge."

He traced a figure-eight in the sand, put arms and legs and head with a suggestion of Joyce's hair on it. "Just as a safety precaution," he suggested, "maybe you and I ought to get out of here and hole in somewhere alone tonight."

There was a definite glint of mockery in her dark eyes. "That would be dreadfully rude," she told him. "Juan isn't the sort of man people like you and I can afford to go around offending; Miles."

"He'd never miss us," Miles said promptly. "Come on, honey."

"No," It was a word of decision and anger, tinged with jealousy, and frustration began to stir within him.

"Now who's playing games?" he demanded. "I've noticed the way you've been playing up to our host all week end. I haven't said anything because—well, because I thought you were my girl."

"I'm not anybody's girl." Her reply was sharp. "Nor do I intend to be for a while. And as far as that goes, what about Dr. Saari? She's been drooling over you and you've been loving it."

"I've merely been trying to be polite," he said loftily, though his conscience screamed silently at the lie. Come to think of it, Greta Saari was attractive in her cool mature Baltic way. Furthermore, she owned one of the best scientific brains on Earth.

"Well, you don't have to carry and fetch for her as if you were a trained dog," said Joyce, eying him resentfully. "Who said I was trained?" he countered.

"Not I." Joyce stood up, drew her robe around her, peered at the larger group of guests along the beach. "I'm going to join the human race for a bit." Deliberately she kicked sand at him as she stepped across in front of him.

He managed to give one of her ankles a yank, causing her to tumble abruptly to the beach. She made no sound but swung her beachbag at his face. The corner of one of its wooden clasps caught him sharply under his left eye. He swung at her, but the sand in his eyes caused him to miss. By the time he could see, she had scrambled to her feet and was well away from him, chin high in the air.

She stepped in an unseen hole in the sand, did an off-to-Buffalo, all but fell on her nose. Miles whooped, his temper evaporating, and there was a burst of laughter from the other members of the party, who seemed to have been watching. Joyce stood over them, said, "Everybody here excepting me is witches," and turned to walk alone toward the companionway that led up the sandcliff toward the Lodge.

JUAN WISTER, a thickset, dark, dynamic figure with shining white teeth, pulled a gaudy batik nylon robe about his hairy body and trotted after her. He had a powerful-looking arm around Joyce's slim shoulders as they scaled the companionway together.

Miles got to his feet and walked slowly toward his fellow guests. As he approached them one of the men said, "What'd you do, man—bust the little girl's pail and shovel?"

Before he could reply, a woman rose and dusted sand from her body. She tossed medium-length dark-blond hair
back from her face and said, “I’m for another dip before we go in for a drink.” There was a strong North-European cast to her accent. “Come on, Miles—you look as though you needed to cool off.”

He dropped his robe and followed her down the gentle slope to the foam-frosted edge of the water. Greta Saari was almost as tall as he. Her body was fully and firmly feminine and she moved with more of the grace of a trained athlete than that of a ballerina. She was tanned to a dusty golden hue with a warm hint of pink underneath. Seeing her thus, it was difficult to think of her as a scientist. Yet she was rated among the few top rhodomagnetics alive.

She swam easily, powerfully, out through the lazy rollers to where the sea, through greater depth, acquired smoothness. There she trod water and laughed silently as Miles caught up with her.

“Sometimes,” she said in her heavy accent, “I don’t think any of us appreciate the blessing of the sea.”

“Best place in the world to drown in,” he replied.

She said, “You’re joking, Miles. But I’m serious. And so should you be, as a hydraulic engineer.”

“Maybe I’ve seen too much water,” he replied. “Besides, just now I don’t want to be serious.”

She swam in a small circle, returning to face him. “You and the cute Miss Hartwick—you’ve had a fight, no?”

“We had a fair facsimile of one—yes,” he told her.

She looked at him and her gray eyes were enigmatic. Then she said, “Miles, I think perhaps you should be careful of that young woman.”

“On the contrary—she’d better be careful of me. I may look tender but I can assure you I’m not.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that,” said the doctor.

“Well, I was.” Miles was blunt about it. “I’ve been in the Antarctic a hell of a long time with nothing but penguins to pine for—and damned few of them.” Then, as the emphasis of her remark sank in, “What were you thinking of, Greta?”

She trod water a few seconds, then said, “Last night, after dinner, your Miss Hartwick went upstairs.”

“That’s scarcely unusual,” replied Miles, recalling the episode. Joyce had been gone for rather a long while. “After all, nature does call—look what it’s doing to me. Pitiful!”

The ghost of a smile lightened her usually grave countenance. She said, “Poor Miles—but I should think there must be plenty of women anxious to assist you!”

“None I want, dammit!” he said gloomily. “But what about Joyce’s jaunt to the upper regions?”

“When I went to my room a little later to get a clean handkerchief, it had been searched.”

“Why your room?” he asked, blinking. “And why suspect Joyce? Why couldn’t one of Juan’s servants have done it?”

“You ask questions in bunches,” she told him. “Well, I’ll try to answer them. I am known to be doing some very confidential work for the United Nations. As for Miss Hartwick, she had the opportunity—and doesn’t it strike you as odd that a girl in her position should be able to obtain an invitation to such a party as this?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Miles, not wishing to reveal that he had entertained a similar suspicion. “Her job doesn’t indicate her social rating.”

“Perhaps not,” Greta Saari shrugged prettily. “It could have been a servant. At any rate nothing was taken—and there was nothing for them to find.”

“Tell me, Greta,” said Miles to change the subject, “what causes a person as important as you to come to such as place as this?”

“Why,” she replied seriously, “to meet you, of course.” Then turning abruptly, “They’re already leaving the beach. Don’t you think we’d better go back in?” She didn’t wait for his response, began
to swim toward the shore. Puzzled, Miles trailed after her.

BY THE time he had changed into zebra-striped cocktail shorts and maroon nylon shirt the others, except for Dr. Saari, were already gathered on the flagged stone terrace. Glasses were many and varied and pleasantly full; chatter flowed freely and gaily. Plucking a large martini from a tray offered by a butler in blue-and-white jockey silks, Miles looked about him for Joyce.

She was looking up at Juan Wister over a half-empty glass. Her slim figure, enchanting in the briefest of white-piqué cocktail Bikinis, her lips curved in what he could only think of as a Giaconda smile. Wister, a peacock in blue-green-and-gold samba suit, was smilingly attentive, even handsome in his swarthy, hirsute way. The heavy fingers of one hand rested intimately on one of Joyce’s bare shoulders.

“Caviar?” Another servant made the offering.

“No thanks,” said Miles. “Caviar emperor.”

The attendant looked at him blankly and moved away. Miles looked back at Joyce and this time caught her eye. Her expression changed instantaneously to one of soft concern. She whispered something to her host, then left him and came directly to Miles. “I’m sorry I acted so beastly on the beach,” she said.

He told himself he was a fool to entertain, even for a second, suspicion of such a clear-eyed, marvelous person, and said, “I don’t suppose I was any help—but you can’t blame a guy for trying.”

She looked up at him as, seconds before, she had looked up at Wister, saying, “I guess maybe I’m the one who’s been wrong. It’s getting me down, too, darling.”

This, he thought, was more like it. “You know how you can make everything perfect,” he suggested.

“I know,” she replied, and seemed all at once to soften all over. “Tonight?” he asked her.

She hesitated a long time. Then, looking a little frightened, she nodded. “But not before two o’clock,” she whispered. “I want to be sure everybody’s asleep.”

“Don’t lock your door,” he said softly. “If you do I’ll break it down and wake up the whole house party.”

Joyce giggled. “You couldn’t,” she said.

“Don’t be too sure of that,” he told her. “I may look like a cross between a shoelace and a piece of okra, but it’s all muscle, d’ya hear—all muscle!”

She gurgled softly, laid a warm little hand on his bare arm that sent electrical vibrations all the way up and over to the small of his back, then turned as a group of the other guests moved around them. “Miles is trying to tell me he’s a weight lifter,” she stated.

IT GOT the chuckle it rated and Miles went along with the gag, holding his arms out with fists clenched, even doing a knee-bend. But he wasn’t really with it. Joyce’s sudden change of front and heart had left him inwardly reeling, his nerves singing like harpstrings in anticipation of the early-morning hours.

His impressions of the lavish dinner and the evening that followed were vague. He recalled Dr. Greta looking at him quizzically from across the long dining-room table, managed to set an anguished partner some five thousand points later in a game of six-pack bridge-samba, which he usually played well.

He was grateful that the party broke up early that evening—Wister for once had no entertainment flown in from one of the Americas or the Continent—so that his rendezvous with Joyce would not have to be delayed until things settled down for the night. But once he had reached the privacy of his suite, and undressed, shortly after midnight, he found himself seized with feverish impatience.

An hour and fifty minutes—he decided to kill some of them by taking a bath. He dawdled in the shower stall until his skin resembled the surface of a dried
prune. Only twelve minutes went by.
He prowled the carpet in his robe, picked up a volume from the bedside table, tried to read. It was one of the newest and most highly rated space-mysteries, a type of book he usually devoured with interest—but he was unable to read a single paragraph sensibly.
Putting it down he turned off the light and went to the window. His room was on the land side of the lodge, overlooking the moonlight-silvered geometric patterns of the formal gardens that stretched in neutral colors toward the sharp outline of Marnus Mount, a glacial remnant that rose like a mound of perfectly moulded blanc mange.
He wondered if the ancient Druid priests, as legend recorded, had used the hill for their primitive rites and sacrifices—it was reputed to be hollow and packed with the spirits of their victims. But he was unable to keep his thoughts long away from Joyce, with her slim, bronzed body and the promise of her lips and eyes.
A figure crossed his field of vision, moving away toward the hill. Thanks to the moonlight Miles had little trouble recognizing stocky Juan Wister as the house-party host worked his way through the various hedge-gates. Idly Miles wondered why Wister was roaming abroad. Then he decided he was glad his host was out of the house.
On the brink of turning away to resume his pacing, Miles’ attention was caught by another figure, a slimmer, slighter one, that seemed to be following the billionaire’s exact path. He frowned, wondering a little. And then the follower looked back toward the house and for a moment the moonlight picked out her face.
It was Joyce—and, sure she was not followed or observed, she turned and continued on her way.

II

TWO minutes later, clad in hastily redonnéd clothes. Miles slipped through a side-door of the sprawling half-timbered lodge to follow his host and Joyce Hartwick. As he moved rapidly through the succession of carefully-nurtured gardens and hedges toward Mount Marnus, his thoughts were in a state of utter confusion.
He scarcely knew what he hoped to accomplish by declaring himself in on this odd nocturnal act—but for him there was no choice. He had to learn what Joyce was up to. Adrenalin, pumped up by jealousy, fueled his blood. He wondered briefly why Joyce and Wister should feel it necessary to leave the multi-roomed lodge for their tryst—but had seen too much of the quirks of humanity not to accept the fact. Perhaps they wished to meet well away from possible discovery by himself or some other member of the house party.
Slipping through the shadow-patterns cast by the moonlight, he pondered his host. Juan Wister was something of an anachronism, a twentieth-century figure born a hundred years too late. He had appeared, apparently out of nowhere, five or six years earlier, with numerous important “interests” and an apparently inexhaustible supply of credits.
There had been all sorts of rumors, naturally. Wister had made his pile in some of the still little known and reputedly rich crannies of the Matto Grosso. He had won his way, through craft and ruthless violence, to uncrowned dictatorship of a jungle empire. He had been his own judge and executioner and proprietor of a harem that would have put the seraglio of Abdul Hamid the Second to shame.
Some of the rumors had been ugly, but none had ever been proved. And, as Juan Wister continued to spend money lavishly for the entertainment of himself and a growing legion of friends and sycophants, they had faded to romantic legend. Without ever seeking any sort of political authority Wister, through extension of his favors in the highest quarters, had become a near-important world figure.
The ugly rumors and legends came back to Miles with full force as he worked his way across the meadow beyond the gardens. He was just in time to see Joyce’s slight figure disappearing into the shadow of a row of yews at its further border. How could she, he wondered, deceive him in favor of such a notorious roué?

Perhaps her attachment to the billionaire was of long standing. The thought sickened him so that he halted and almost turned back. Such circumstances would explain her ability to get them invited to the house party. And if she were a tool of Wister she might have been the person who had searched Greta Saari’s room. Her master might have suspected the Finnish scientist of having with her some secrets of rhodomagnetics, possession of which could mean added billions.

Miles hesitated, one foot poised to head him back toward the lodge. But then, through the yew barrier, he saw a flicker of light. It seemed to come from Mount Marnus itself and curiosity overcame the confusion of his thoughts and feelings. He went ahead.

By the time he had reached the shelter of the trees, neither of his quarries was in sight. But the light was still visible, shining in a bright fluorescent rectangle from the base of the hill itself. For once ancient legend was the truth—the big mound was hollow!

Miles cut to his left and worked along the foot of the rise, his personal problems submerged by the strangeness of the sight. His curiosity had the upper hand. He moved cautiously through low shrubbery in an effort to see what the hollow hill held. There was no visible path in the moonlight. There wouldn’t be, he thought—not if Wister wanted to keep the hollow hill secret. And if he didn’t, why use it at all?

For some reason he felt afraid. If the legend of the hollow hill were fact, how much more likely to be true were the whispered stories of the billionaire’s ruthlessness. Miles looked about him for booby traps. He saw none, but his neck-hair stirred a little as he made his way slowly toward the edge of the door.

Having come this far, however, Miles had no intention of turning back. Close to the door he moved a few feet up the abrupt slanting side of the hill to get a better view. The ground felt curiously hard beneath him, almost as if it were wintertime.

But this was July.

He pushed hard on it with the heel of a hand—and frowned. It might have been merely a thin layer of sod over metal. Wondering briefly, he shelved the problem and went on to the edge of the open doorway, poked his head around the edge, saw the turf was backed by a gleaming stainless-metal wall some four inches thick.

If this were Wister’s subterranean seraglio, the interior of the hollow hill scarcely resembled the traditional silk-cushion-and-swimming-pool luxury of a haven for odalisques. Rather it looked more like an ultra-modern factory or military construction. The great circular vault of the huge chamber was a repository for varied and elaborate types of machinery at whose nature Miles could only guess.

In its center rose a huge shining globe of metal, supported by heavy pintles. It must have risen a good fifty feet from base to summit and metal scaffolding contained a ladder that led to a closed door, halfway up one side of it. Miles decided it must be some sort of device for cracking oil or some other mineral substance. He was no expert on this complex industrial science.

It might, he decided, lie behind the searching of Greta Saari’s room. Certainly, if Wister were still active industrially as well as in speculation, he might have an interest in the latest developments of rhodomagnetics—the study of attraction between non-metallic elements. And the existence of this secret plant seemed to cry out that the billionaire was far from retired.
Anyway, Miles decided, it was a hell of a place for a rendezvous.

He became aware of a throbbing humming sound that seemed to emerge from behind the big globe as he clung to his uneven post beside the door. Then there was a rasping beep-beeping obligato that caused the lights within the hill to flicker. Someone, probably the billionaire, was using power and plenty of it.

It occurred to Miles that the sounds might be some sort of method of communication. He listened attentively to the beep-beeps—but they were in no recognizable code. They reminded him more of electrical interference, as such could mean anything—or nothing at all.

They ceased abruptly—and before Miles could move away from the doorway, Juan Wister appeared, walking rapidly toward him around the big sphere in the chamber. He had barely time to pull back his head, had no chance to seek cover behind any of the shrubs. He could only hope that, coming from such a brightly-lighted place, the billionaire’s sight would be briefly impaired in the semi-darkness of the
moonlight outside.

Wister emerged and pressed something and the door slid shut behind him. He was no more than two feet from Miles and if he turned his head to the right ... Miles held his breath and battled a sudden rash of unbearable itches upon his body that reminded him unhappily of the opening chapters of Huckleberry Finn.

It couldn’t go on. Wister looked to the left, began to turn his head slowly toward his pursuer. Then there was a rustle from the line of yews and Joyce’s figure emerged into the moonlight, calling softly, “Juan, Juan—I’m over here.”

The billionaire stared at her for a moment, then moved toward her, saying, “Joyce, you shouldn’t have followed me.”

Left behind, Miles’ relief was thoroughly spiked when he heard the girl say, “But I had to, darling. I was afraid you had a date with one of the other girls.”

“Out here?” Wister sounded amused and unbelieving. He reached Joyce, slipped an arm about her, added, “Nice little girls should know enough to wait. I’m afraid you’ve been very naughty, dear.”

Their conversation became mercifully inaudible as they faded toward the house. Overwhelmed with the enormity of this betrayal, Miles made his way slowly back after them. Once more in his room he eyed the bottle of usquebaugh that reposed in majestic state upon the small cellarette beside the mantel. Thus far he had left it strictly alone. Now he picked it up, poured a slug into the waiting tumbler by its flank. So this, he thought, was the almost unobtainable mother of all Scotch whiskies. Incredibly strong... he decided he’d better cut it with water. But only a little water. . . .

JUAN WISTER was one of those hosts who liked his guests to do their sleeping at night. He didn’t bother them much during the day—leaving them free to sample the varied sorts of entertainment afforded by the luxurious resources of the Lodge—but he did like them up and about.

Miles was routed from bed much too early by a blue-and-white-clad footman, who carried various liquid restoratives on a tray. When Miles, after taking a shower he could not even feel, had sampled them, the servant gravely produced a tiny oxygen tank and gave him a whiff. To his amazement Miles began to feel almost human.

Wandering downstairs toward the dining room he became acutely aware of something that had troubled him about the Lodge without his conscious mind being aware of it. The place was old—having been erected in Elizabethan times. Being located almost on the beach, it should, he thought, have shown signs of decay and rust.

But it didn’t. It was clean as the proverbial whistle. Not a cobweb lurked in any of its myriad corners, not a bit of metal showed oxidation. It might almost have been erected this year. Miles pondered this minor puzzle, not wanting to think about Joyce.

“Good morning, Miles.” Greta Saari’s heavy accent greeted him. She was in the process of following a servant to her seat at the table. The plate put in front of her had been lavishly filled from a long sideboard with kippers, Irish bacon, O’Brien potatoes and marmalade.

“Glad you like it,” said Miles, thinking not for the first time that the Finnish rhodomagnetician was uncommonly attractive for a female scientist. Like himself she was clad only in her beach-robe and unlike himself she was facing the day clear of eye.

She regarded him with amusement and smiled sympathetically, then said, “Poor Miles—you are having a wretched time, aren’t you?”

“With a silent w,” he told her, eyed the food with distrust. He settled for one kidney and a piece of toast, dived into a glass of iced tea. The effects of the oxygen didn’t seem to be lasting.
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When he paused to breathe he found Greta regarding him seriously through slightly tilted, deep-set gray eyes. She said, "Miles, I hope you and I are going to be friends."

"If I had a tail I'd wag it," he told her.
"I shall be in New York this week," she informed him. "I think I'd like to see you on Monday night. There are a number of reasons..."

"All purely scientific, of course," he suggested.

"Oh, of course!" He was unable to decide whether she was serious or not. She took from her robe a gleaming metal flask and poured water into her glass, sipped it.

"Why do you do that?" he asked her.
"If it's gin I'm going to be sick right here."

"It's not gin," she assured him. "I have to drink specially prepared water." Once again she seemed perfectly serious.

She was definitely an oddball, he decided. There was some powerful repression working on her. Even when she smiled or laughed it seemed not to be through any innate humor. Perhaps the high latitude of her native Finland was too rugged to allow her the luxury.

But she was damned good-looking... and she was a hell of a lot less flighty than Joyce. Furthermore, she was a scientist like himself, and a scientist of recognized importance. They probably would have a lot more in common. He said, "I'm free Monday night as far as I know—that's tomorrow. How about having dinner together?"

"We shall," she replied cryptically, and he wondered what in hell she meant. Maybe she had a few years on him, he reflected, but it would be nice to go around with an adult. And what did a few years mean in the twenty-first century? Perhaps it was her kindness, perhaps it was the food—but Miles began to feel almost human.

They strolled across the lawn to the beach-cliff and down the companion-way together and he noticed that the sun was shining and that there was a faint haze on the horizon and that it looked like a lovely day. It was almost too bad, he reflected, that he had to go so soon. He might be going to enjoy the Lodge after all.

But Joyce was on the beach, sunning herself with Juan Wister, a little apart from the circle made by the rest of the sunbathers. At sight of her Miles felt all his new and hard-earned sense of well-being fade. The little so-and-so, he thought. He looked at Greta almost desperately, seeking to regain his pleasure in her attractiveness. She was still a comely woman, perhaps a lovely one—but she simply wasn't Joyce. He wondered what sort of spell this slim-bodied little witch had cast over him.

Joyce greeted him with reserve that balanced Juan Wister's amiable grin—a grin that, to Miles, looked like the leer of a satisfied satyr. They made room for Greta and himself, but he decided to go into the water, where he could be alone.

"So soon after eating?" Greta inquired. "It is not good for you, Miles. You might get a cramp."

"Don't worry—if I do I'll drown quietly," he informed them.

"That would be a pleasant novelty," Joyce said callously.

Miles went swimming alone and sulked. When he got back to the beach Joyce and Greta were not in evidence and Wister informed him a call was waiting for him at the house. "Next season I plan to have a visibox here on the beach," he said in vague Latin accents.

"Sorry," said Miles and trotted on back to the house. He took the call in his room. It was from the London HQ of the United Nations. Its purport was clear, its wording brief. He was to leave at once for Croydon, to be flown back to America.

This was it, he thought. The Moontrip had been speeded up for some reason known only to the high brass. He got out of his clothes, showered to wash the salt from his body, had a footman pack his bag. Then he went looking for Joyce.
He found her on the stone terrace, where Juan Wister was superintending the pouring and serving of pre-prandial drinks. Greta Saari was not in evidence amidst the gay kaleidoscope of beach robes and luncheon costumes. She was giggling over some remark Wister had made to her. Miles practically had to drag her away.

“But you can’t run out now,” she said when he told her he was leaving. “It wouldn’t be polite.”

“It’s orders,” he informed her.

For a moment her gay mask faded. She said, “I had no idea it would come so soon.”

“Something must have happened to speed them up.”

“Evidently.” Her voice was dry. Then, in a whisper. “Why didn’t you come last night? I waited till three o’clock.”

He shrugged, amazed at her play-acting, said, “I was afraid you’d be otherwise engaged.”

She had the gall to look hurt. Then she said, “And after what I did to keep you from being spotted, stuck there like a mustard plaster on the side of that hill? If I hadn’t diverted Juan’s attention in time...” She shrugged.

“I didn’t know you saw me,” he said uncomfortably.

“I’d have had to be blind not to,” she retorted tartly.

“And just what were you doing there?” he countered, changing the subject in a hurry.

She looked him in the eye for a moment, then said tartly, “Under the circumstances, Miles, I don’t think it’s any of your business.”

WISTER reclaimed her then and there was no further chance for conversation. Miles informed the billionaire he was going to have to leave at once. Wister shook his head and replied, “What have I got—leprosy or elephantiasis? You’re the second this morning.” Then, turning to Joyce, “You don’t have to leave with him, gallo—I hope?”

She hesitated, said, “I’m staying.”

“Good!” Wister rubbed dark hands together and flashed his teeth in a smile. He eyed Miles archly and added, “One would almost think you were deserting poor Joyce for Dr. Saari.”

“Well, hardly,” said Miles, feeling both guilty and slightly bewildered at this turn of the conversation. “I never met her until this week end. No, I—it’s business back in New York.”

Thinking of Dr. Saari he recalled their date for dinner on the morrow. Well, under the circumstances he’d hardly have a chance to keep it. He had an idea that once he was back in UN hands he wasn’t going to be free until he got back from the Moon—if he got back.

As he walked toward the chauffeured aircar Wister had waiting for him minutes later, Joyce slipped up alongside him and grabbed his sleeve and said, “I think you’re kind of a heel, Miles Stan-nard, but I do wish you luck.” With which she began to snivel.

“You’ll get a red nose,” he replied coldly. “I don’t think Juan would like that.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed furiously and stamped a small foot in sheer frustration. “How can you!” Her vocabulary proved unequal to the task set upon it.

“Temper, temper!” he warned and fled to the waiting aircar as she reached for a nearby vase in the hall. Another second and she’d have tried to break it over his head. He felt a small glow of triumph at having so upset her.

En route to Croydon, while the chauffeur dodged up and down and in and out among the swarms of Sunday fliers, his elation faded. Actually he felt a little sick about the way the week end had gone. Suppose Joyce had been speaking the truth. She could have rescued him from discovery by Wister the night before on purpose—come to think of it she must have, since she had spotted him there on the hillside.

Triumph turned to shame. He made up his mind to send her some flowers or something from the airport, then wondered what on earth he could send her
that would mean anything in such a luxury-packed place as the billionaire's Lodge. And he wasn't a rich man in the first place.

Anyway, when he reached the port there was no opportunity for such gallantry. He was informed they were holding the two o'clock New York flight for him—saw by the terminal clock that it was already six minutes past the hour. Never before had anyone even delayed a local on his behalf. The importance of his mission began to make itself felt—and his fears began to return.

Perhaps he should have been prepared. Certainly Juan Wister had implied that he was not the first member of the house party to leave in a hurry that morning. And another of the billionaire's fleet of aircars was parked outside the terminal, conspicuous with its gleaming blue-and-white blazer colors.

Furthermore, Greta Saari had been absent from the beach when he returned from his solitary swim and Wister had made an apparently abstruse remark about his following her. So he should hardly have been surprised.

Still it came as a shock when he entered the compartment reserved for him in the big rocket plane by the UN and saw one of its couches already occupied with the Finnish rhodomagneticon stretched gracefully upon it, smoking a cigarette.

She sat up as he came in and said, "Sit down, Miles. It looks as if we'll be able to keep our dinner date a night early."

"You mean—" he began, halted as he realized he was about to give away the secret of his selection for the Moon-trip.

But she nodded, offered her mirthless smile. "I too," she told him. "We're both going to the Moon. That's why I wanted so much to meet you earlier."

He sat down and fastened his straps. "I'm not sure," he said, "that my poor beat-up ego can stand such deflation. Oops!"

With a shudder and a rush and an out-distanced roar the big rocket-plane took off.
tered and motioned the grinning assistants to leave.

He studied Miles and Greta with sunken eyes whose alert intelligence seemed to penetrate like X-rays. Then, sitting down and resting folded hands on the desk-top, he spoke. "Dr. Saari, Mr. Stan-nard—I am sorry to have cut short your well-earned leave, but information recently received has put a premium upon our solving this problem with the utmost dispatch."

He paused, added, "I hope you are not feeling your shots too severely." And, when Miles and Greta had murmured dutiful lies, "This is by way of being a final briefing before you take off. You will leave this room to go directly to the rocket-ship that will take you to the White Sands spaceport.

"Since you two will comprise the entire passenger list of the Moon-ship and two-thirds of the entire expedition, it is vitally important that we cover all aspects of the project now."

Miles glanced at Greta with surprise and a trace of embarrassment. He had heard that quarters on a spaceship made a primitive Holland submarine look like a luxury hotel—but he had had no idea that only three of them were going. Greta, himself—and a pilot. He was going to keep his date with a vengeance—in fact it looked as if his dinner engagement might stretch into a life-long marathon.

Then he concentrated on what Dr. Mohammed ud Din was saying—for though the early portions of the problem were bone-familiar to him, he could not afford to run the risk of missing anything new.

WHAT it came down to was this—after more than two decades of debate and limited experiments the UN had decided it might be feasible to use the newly functional solar heat, primed by atomic radiators to melt a portion of the South Polar cap. Geologists had already determined that vast areas of arable soil lay beneath the glaciers and with a population crowding five billions the Earth, despite fantastic new synthetic food manufacture, needed both soil and lebensraum more than ever before.

As a hydraulic engineer Miles' role had been a vital one. It was his job to ensure that the melting of such a vast amount of ice would not raise the level of the oceans to such an extent that existing land, especially coastal urban areas like New York, would not be inundated. If all ice at both poles were liquefied the seas would rise something like 200 feet, which would make the project more destructive than helpful.

There were ways of managing the job that offered partial success. Most promising was the erection of an immense dam across the mouth of some of the deep inlets of the desolate continent, thus creating a pocket or reservoir into which immense quantities of the newly-released water could be stored and poured.

It was going to cost a large mint, naturally—but with the resources of a world behind it, the job could be accomplished. Models had already long since been set up to test actual ways and means. This was done before the whole project was sidetracked.

It had begun some nine months earlier one night on the project, when Will Carter and Miles had been bending a bottle together in the chill spring late-evening sun of an Antarctic October. Carter, whose job was to judge the effect upon the world's climate of such a change in its water-content, had said, "Near as I can figure, Miles, it doesn't matter a damn how much we give 'em. According to my records over the past hundred and eighty years or so the whole world's drying up anyway—little by little. Be a good thing to drown a few millions and keep their grandchildren from dying of thirst."

"Hear, hear," Miles had replied derisively. Then he had sat up straight and frowned and said, "Funny—you know we have it figured to a drop how much
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CARTER had stopped as if shot. "I wonder..." he had said, eyeing Miles oddly. "But if it is I'd give ten years' salary to know who's doing it and why and how it's being conveyed there."

Which was what Project Antarctica had temporarily become. Carter had won a fat raise and higher rank instead of having to give up ten years' pay. Subsequent flights around the Moon had confirmed the fact that the white deposit was certainly ice—and that it contained sufficient sodium chloride and other elements to make the hypothesis plausible. Hence the expedition to land on the Moon and find out what was going on—for there appeared to be but the one ice-deposit.

Dr. Saari had come into it when the how was discovered—through newly-developed rhodomagnetic detectors, which had proved the existence of some definite method of syphoning water from the middle troposphere into space before it could fall back to earth. Now the problem was to get a couple of experts up to the moon to discover, if possible, just what was going on.

The cadaverous scientific genius from Pakistan concluded his part of the briefing and turned the session over to Will Carter, who got to his feet, flicked ashes into a standing tray and said, "From then on the problem was first, how many could we send, then who."

He inhaled, blew smoke at the ceiling, went on with, "There wasn't much trouble about the first question—not at this primitive stage of space-travel. The best our experts could give us was room for two—and not much room for them.

"The problem of selection was tougher. We needed not only experts but experts who could double in brass—even more important we needed people who, in the judgment of our space-medicine department, seemed capable of surviving on the Moon."

Miles wondered a little wistfully why there was mention only of their getting to the satellite and surviving long enough to run a few tests—but none
whatever of their coming back safely.
He glanced covertly at Greta, felt a little
ashamed of himself as he noted the im-
perturbable calmness with which she
seemed to accept the idea of being one
of the first three humans to be sent to an
alien globe.

"Dr. Saari, as probably the world’s
most brilliant rhodomagnetician, was an
almost immediate choice," Will Carter
continued. "We must get somebody up
there who understands how this syphon-
ing is being done, to what extent it may
help or harm not only Project Antarc-
tica, but the continuance of life on Earth
itself.

"Miles, I didn’t select you because you
suggested that the ice on the Moon
might come from our own atmosphere—
though your making the suggestion last
October caused me to keep you in mind.
But you’re a wafer expert—and an ex-
perienced field engineer. You’ll be going
along in both categories. You may even
wind up serving as grease monkey under
Major de Frees’s orders. By the way,
he’ll be in nominal command of the ex-
pedition, in space and on land, but I
hope the three of you will be able to work
as a team."

There was considerable more but none
of it important. Not until they were
about to be dismissed did Miles ask,
"Will, why this speedup—or aren’t we
supposed to ask?"

Carter just grinned and shook his
head. "Tell you when you get back," he
answered and that was that.

MILES and Greta, still feeling rocky,
were whisked to the UN airport
that occupied what was once La Guardia
Field. They rode together in an armored
UN surface car, surrounded by a roadair
police escort. Using only the upper levels
they made the trip in seven minutes. At
the field they were put aboard a UN
rocket-ship capable of holding several
hundred passengers. Outside of the crew
and stewardesses and the like, they were
the only two aboard.

"I feel like a pea in a basketball," Miles
told Greta as they wooshed over Scranton
at a speed of some 1,500 miles an
hour. "And speaking of peas, I believe
I'm actually beginning to get hungry."

"Me too," said the Finnish scientist,
whose color had begun to improve. "I
wonder if there is time."

There was—and the idle attendants
seemed glad to have something to do.
Within scant minutes they dined upon
jellied beef-and-turkey stock, filet mi-
gnon and tossed green salad, custard
with fruit compote flavored with coin-
treau and coffee.

"You see," said Greta with her
strange mirthless ghost of a smile, "we
dine together tonight after all."

"But not in New York," said Miles.
She shrugged. "What is space?" she
inquired rhetorically, then unstopped
the cap of her gleaming metal water-
flask.

"We’ll soon know more about space," said Miles. Then, watching her half-fill a
glass, "Hey, what about your water-sup-
ply on this trip? Aren’t you going to
miss it?"

"We’re taking some with us," she told
him apologetically. "I know every gram,
every cubic millimeter is important, but
it is necessary. I must have all my
faculties about me."

"Of course," he told her. Then, pick-
ing up her tumbler from the table, he
tasted the water left in it. It was oddly
flavorless but otherwise unremarkable.
"Tastes like water," he told her.

"What did you think it would be like?" she countered.

"I dunno," he said, honestly puzzled.
He wanted to ask her what ailed her, but
decided he didn’t know her well enough.
There was going to be plenty of time for
that.

They made the airport at White Sands
without incident. There they were
picked up by UN guardsmen in a blaster-
armed aircar and flown at once to quar-
ters close to the spaceport itself. As
they emerged from the vehicle Miles
catched a glimpse, in the bright desert
moonlight, of the towering spire of a
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spaceship rising high against the black starry sky.

"Is that it?" he asked the subaltern in charge of their escort.

"That's it, Mr. Stannard," the young man replied. "Looks real pretty there, doesn't it?"

"Sure does," replied Miles, unconsciously imitating the Alabama drawl of the Guardsman. He had always been a chameleon when exposed to a southern accent. He glanced at Greta, who was studying the visible upper half of the ship, which towered over the rooftops nearby.

"It hardly looks—practical," she said softly.

"She'll get you there, ma'am," said the subaltern confidently.

"Maybe," said Miles, "but will she get us back?"

This the officer failed to answer.

A DEEPLY-TANNED young man barely five-and-a-half feet in height rose from a plastic couch on which he had been languidly reclining, viewing and listening to a tri-di-vidar entertainer. Outside of his tan he wore close-cut reddish hair, plastic gold espadrilles, a breech clout of scarlet satinylon, a gold-banded wristwatch, a gold dog-tag bracelet and a similar adornment on his left ankle.

"I'm Dino," he told them in a thin voice. "Make yourselves at home. Liquor's on the kitchen shelf, but I don't advise overdoing it, darling. We take off at oh-oh-five."

"I'm Greta," said Dr. Saari gravely while Miles was still trying to reconstruct his preconceived notion of the UN's most daring space-pioneer.

"I'm Miles Stannard," he said when Dino, having acknowledged her self-introduction with a nod, turned toward him. He had wondered why the subaltern who brought them here had not come in with them. Evidently he suffered a similar reaction to the effeminate rocket ace.

For a moment Dino's dark eyes narrowed. Then he turned to Greta and said, "I don't think Miles likes me. Well, that's all right, not many people do. But you and I are going to get along like sugar and cream, aren't we, darling?"

"I'm sure we shall," said Greta.

Dino said, "Well, I'm off to the land of nod. Have fun—but don't expect to sleep late, darlings." He wandered through a bedroom door, shut it behind him.

Miles, who seemed to have recovered from his shots, went out to the kitchen in search of a drink that would help him to recover from Dino. Greta followed him refusing his offer to make one for her. "I'd better not," was all she said.

He sat down across the kitchen table from her and said, "What in hell kind of a creature is that?"

"I wasn't surprised," Greta told him solemnly. "I expected him—or someone like him."

"Would you mind explaining that?" said Miles suspiciously! "I was ready for just about anything but—that!" He nodded in the direction of the bedroom.

"And he's the world's top space-pilot!"

Greta was silent so long, looking at him with something so close to sympathy, that he finally felt uncomfortable and said, "Well, for Pete's sake, what's the matter? Something wrong with me?"

"No," she said softly. "There's nothing wrong. But it's a little hard to explain. I don't wish to hurt your feelings."

"I'm over twenty-one," he said, growing annoyed. "I can take it, whatever it is, Greta."

"I hope you can," she replied enigmatically. Then, "It's all very recent, of course—only the last year or two that they found it out. And you've been—out of close touch much of that time." She paused, pushed dark-blond hair back from her face. There was a faint vertical line between her brows as she continued.

"When the first real space tests were devised it was believed the finest rocket pilots would naturally be the best fitted
to make the first trips. Those tests were very rough—as close to the actual conditions of space as human ingenuity and the results of actual flight records with instruments, tape recordings and laboratory animals could make them.

“The best terrestrial rocketmen failed to a man—and failed badly,” she said quietly. “Oh, they had the speed of reflex-action required to operate the controls and instruments in split-seconds—but they couldn’t stand the conditions, the lack of gravity, the living in cramped cubicles for weeks on end. They were too brittle.”

“I’ll be damned!” said Miles. “I didn’t know about that.”

“It’s not public property yet,” she told him. “Next women were tested. They had the adaptability, the stamina, the endurance—but they lacked the necessary neuro-muscular speed. So”—she shrugged shoulders broad for a woman—“a compromise had to be found.”

Miles whistled. “You mean,” he said, “they’re the only ones who can pilot spaceships?”

“Not quite.” The ghost of a smile appeared and vanished. “But it demands men with very strong feminine characteristics. You needn’t look worried. Many of the RAF heroes of World War Two, who fought and died against incredible odds in the Battle of Britain, were of much the same type as Dino. Effeminacy doesn’t imply cowardice.”

“What price the space-pioneer superman!”. Miles exclaimed, finishing his drink. He shivered, then frowned. “Incidentally, just what does that make me? I may not be a muscle-man, but to date there have been no complaints about my manhood.”

The touch of her fingers was cool and soft on the back of his wrist. She said, “Of course not, Miles—but you have female characteristics well above those of the savage male. Don’t take it to heart. The pure masculine type is generally as stupid an animal as the pure female. It is something that seldom occurs in either sex. The imaginative, the creative, the lovers, the composers—all of them fall somewhere in between.”

“I’ve been to school—I know all that,” he said roughly. “It’s just a bit of a shock, having it rammed home like this.” He got up and poured himself another drink.

Back at the table he studied Greta. In the high indirect light her cheekbones were sharply shadowed, as were the hollows of her throat, the cleft between her full breasts as she leaned a little toward him. With her long loose hair she reminded him a little of one of the twentieth-century cinema stars who were still considered the most beautiful of all women.

She said, “You want to make love to me, don’t you, Miles? You may if you wish.”

He slammed his glass down hard on the table. “I did want to make love to you until you opened your big mouth,” he said rudely. “When I make a pass at you, Greta, it’s not going to be in response to any offers given by you out of pity.”

She regarded him inscrutably as he pushed his chair back, got up and marched from the kitchen into an empty bedroom. As he did so he had a self-derisive and most uncomfortable feeling that his action in spurning her offer had been thoroughly feminine in nature.

IV

MILES was routed out of troubled slumber before dawn the next morning. For a moment he thought himself back in the Antarctic—but the soft coolness of the desert night was a far cry from the icy chill of the South Polar regions—and the non-com who woke him up wore only khaki clout and U.N. issue desert shoes.

Miles got into his clothes after a quick shower and discovered Greta and Dino de Frees awaiting him in the living room of the bungalow. Like himself they wore only the garments of the evening before, save that Dr. Saari had captured her
flowing dark-blonde hair in a blue-green mesh that italicized the light hue of her eyes.

"Come on or we'll be late," said the space-pilot, who was pacing the floor and puffing on a skinless cigarette. His eyes were ringed and betrayed a near-sleepless night. In his absurd scarlet clout, gilt espadrilles and various bracelets he looked to Miles even less ready for space than he had on their previous meeting.

"Nervous?" Greta asked him as Dino led the way to a waiting aircar outside. 

"I'll feel better with some breakfast under my navel," Miles told her.

"Hah!" The space-pilot's laugh was sharply derisive. "No breakfast before takeoff. You'll know why soon enough, loved one."

"Oh well," said Miles with what he hoped was a becoming casualness, "I can always throw up right here."

But he didn't—though the impersonality of the whole takeoff appalled him. There had been more ceremony in his boarding the rocket plane outside of London the previous Sunday. He didn't know what he had expected—but not nothing at all. Nothing at all for the first manned space-flight plotted to land on the Moon.

They were driven directly to the field, where the immense rocket seemed about to fall over on top of them as they pulled up beneath the huge pintled fins on which it rested. Save for a handful of unimpressed U.N. technicians there was no one about at all.

Their entrance to the spaceship was delayed briefly while a small hound, apparently the property of some member of the local high brass, was chased captured and removed from the takeoff danger area. During this wait Miles felt his stomach again begin to ground-loop.

He must have revealed his tension, for Greta gave one of his hands a squeeze and said, "Don't worry, Miles, we'll be off soon."
"That's just it," he replied in low tones. "It's all too fast—and too damned informal and businesslike. I thought Will Carter or someone would be on hand to see us off."

Greta lifted an eyebrow and nodded toward a low bunker about five hundred metres away on the edge of the takeoff field. "If anyone is around they're over there," she told him. "After all, this flight is supposed to be secret."

"On a project that concerns the whole world?" Miles asked.

"Of course." She nodded. "If someone—maybe something—is able to tap our oceans they must have agents here."

"Oh!" he said uneasily. He was used to considering hydraulic problems in a global focus but interplanetary, perhaps interstellar thinking, was new to him—so new it had not before registered. He added, "What sort of things do you suppose they are anyway?"

"If we're lucky," she told him quietly, "we'll find out soon enough. Come on, Miles, here we go."

They rode up in an open elevator that almost made him ill again—he had never been able to feel comfortable in high places when he could view their altitude outside of a sealed room or lift. The thought of coming into contact with the unknown was appalling—something he hadn't actually thought about before.

Nor did the fact that Dino de Frees, for all that he had successfully traversed space before, seemed frozen in an ecstasy of terror help much. The little space-pilot was actually shivering in the warm desert air, and Miles could hear the chattering of his teeth. Only Greta seemed calm.

What right, he wondered, did she have to be so damned brave? He felt inferior again and resented it as heartily as he had the night before. So he had been picked because he was effeminate! Out of this alarming explanation came new determination to be brave himself. It was of small help, however, when he tripped over a scantling on the gangplank and all but fell a hundred-plus meters to the desert below. It was Greta who grabbed his arms in strong quick hands and restored his balance. He said, "I hate you," and barely managed a smile.

She replied, "You'll get over it," with unexpected literalness.

Then they were in the spacelock of the ship itself. The oval door closed swiftly, automatically, beyond them, permitting Miles but a brief glimpse of the gangplank folding into the tower. The lock itself was a round room, close to the top of the ship, perhaps three meters from deck to ceiling, six meters in diameter. Its walls were hung with all sorts of space material—aluminum-cloth, temperature-proof coveralls, light space-suits resembling high-altitude flying suits, heavy spacesuits that looked like deep-sea diving outfits, magnetic gripper-boots, oxygen tanks in racks along the walls, racks of tools at whose nature Miles could only guess.

Once inside the ship Dino de Frees seemed to lose all fear. He said, "Come on, darlings—time's a-wasting," and led the way up a wall-ladder, through a trap-door to the chamber above. "Home was never like this," he went on, pointed out instrument and viewing panels, the tiny and highly unprivate lavatory arrangements, bunks on which rested anti-G harnesses. "Better get into them, children," he said of these last. "Ten minutes to zero."

He lay down on the couch closest to the viewing and instrument panels, rigged his harness quickly and deftly about him, was soon in two-way television contact with the bunker.

Miles had some difficulty with his harness. His thumbs seemed to get in all the wrong places and he wondered if there were still time to back out. But he glanced at Greta, found her watching him with grave solicitude, managed to finish getting his harness strapped and zipped according to directions on the wall at his side. Then he lay there and wished desperately for a cigarette and
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tried not to let himself itch too badly as Dino went through the takeoff ritual.

"... five, four, three, two, zero—and away we go," a voice chanted through the receiver.

They went. To Miles it was like being pressed under the steel door of some giant vault. He opened his mouth to shout and nothing emerged but air. At this he knew he was going to suffocate but he couldn’t seem to draw any air back into his tortured lungs. He was only vaguely aware of corduroy-road thumping sounds and sensations as his consciousness floated away from him.

He came to to find Dino, still flat in his harness, conducting his two-way conversation with the bunker experts as if nothing had happened. For one wonderful moment Miles decided that something had gone wrong at the last moment—that the monster ship had not taken off at all.

THEN he looked almost automatically at the television screen and saw the Earth whirling beneath them, no longer filling the entire screen, beginning to look like a school-teacher’s globe, then like something only seen in a planetarium. He turned his eyes away.

... And felt a moment of triumph. Greta, the imperturbable, the superior, the mighty Dr. Saari, was still out like the proverbial light. Miles regarded her with a mixture of male vindication and concern until a series of clicking noises brought his attention back to Dino, who had signed off, disconnected the set and was getting out of his harness.

"Better unfasten her," he said casually to Miles.

Miles got out of his own harness, somewhat less clumsily than he had gotten into it, crossed the cabin, got Greta out of hers. She recovered consciousness during the process, watched him solemnly, said a grave "Thank you, Miles," when he was through.

They sat up and nibbled at concentrated rations and smoked cigarettes until Earth was just another twinkling spot of light in the dark sky around them. Miles found himself feeling better by the moment. Now that they were actually out in space, now that there was no going back, he began to be glad he had come. For the first time he realised what a hell of an important person he was going to be when they did get back.

"So far so good, lovelies," said Dino, crushing his smoke out and swinging himself up off his bunk. He did a slow loop in the air, wound up gently bumping the ceiling. Looking down on them with arms outstretched in imitation of a bird he said, "Look, ma—I’m flying!"

Miles looked at Greta and opened his mouth to ask, "What’s the matter with him—is he crazy?" But before he could speak the usually solemn scientist took off herself in a swirl of shapely arms, legs and torso, laughing like a schoolgirl, and joined Dino against the ceiling, where she proceeded to rough-house with him.

"Hey!" cried Miles. "What goes on?" At which he tried to stand up and found himself rising alongside the others. Dino pushed him toward Greta, who butted him in the stomach and sent him slowly pinwheeling back. He managed to get hold of a stanchion and lower himself once more, found the other two returning to less exuberant postures.

"Sorry, child of sin," said the space-pilot cheerfully as he settled once more in his bunk. "It’s the combination of a switch to oxygen plus weightlessness. I bounced around like a penguin on my solo flights."

"How long does it last?"—Greta asked anxiously.

"It’s wearing off now," said Dino. "But until they learned to make the oxygen bursts short and automatic I nearly went off my rocker. A couple of minutes of it and you don’t feel like turning it off yourself."

Greta looked at Miles owlishly and said, I must have appeared very silly. I never did anything like that in my life."

"Out of each life a little brain must fall," said Miles and decided he too was
far from normal. Greta giggled, then told him, “That was not a very funny joke, Miles.”

“It stinks,” said Dino de Frees.

“I was going to say something like that myself,” Miles told him, feeling unreasonably hurt. “But you have no right to say it.” He suddenly felt like bursting into tears.

“Nobody appreciates me,” said de Frees. Large tears began to roll down his cheeks. Miles looked away in distaste, saw that Greta’s cheeks were wet. Then he noticed her whole face was glistening.

“Greta!” he said, surprised. “You’re sweating.”

“Perspiring,” she replied with dignity in her heavy accents. “And so are you—and so is Dino. It’s getting hot in here.”

“Nothing to what it’s going to get,” Dino told them.

“I wondered about our light costumes,” said Miles irrelevantly. “But how come space isn’t cold?”

“Because we’re still only ninety-million miles from the Sun,” the space pilot informed him as if he were a singularly stupid child. “We have no atmosphere to shelter us from its heat.”

“This ship is like an oven,” said Greta, looking concerned. “Why isn’t it better insulated?”

“Don’t worry, children—we shan’t cook,” said Dino cheerfully.

BUT a few minutes later, he too was feeling the increase in temperature. He got out chemical tablets to reduce perspiration and retain liquid in their bodies, but all three of them developed tremendous thirsts that endured throughout most of their remaining eleven hours of flight to the dark side of the Moon.

Greta continued to show unusual levity as she drank her special water, much to the annoyance of Dino, who expressed peevishness at having to allow weight for such a nonessential. All in all it was a most uncomfortable journey.

After a while they lay down on their bunks to save energy and the Finnish scientist said to Miles, “See, I told you this ship was not practical.”

The remark roused Dino to a voluble defense of the space-vessel, in whose design he had played a large part. And while the two of them bickered, Miles lay on his back and sipped orangeade out of a plastic globe and wondered what she meant by the remark.

He wondered suddenly at a lot of things. Greta’s presence, as well as that of Joyce Hartwick, at Juan Wister’s English house party, for instance. So she had gone there to meet himself—it seemed odd she hadn’t been able to arrange the meeting in some other way. Well, perhaps she had not had time.

The business of her special water was odd, too—especially in view of the fact that the whole project seemed to hinge so much upon water. But her behavior was certainly not in a class with that of Joyce—or of Wister, with his strange devices in the hollow hill. Still pondering the multiple problem, Miles drifted off to sleep.

He awoke to a sense of coldness, saw that Greta was slumbering while Dino, strapped into his harness, was back at the controls. “Anything wrong?” Miles asked.

“Not so far,” the space-pilot told him. “We’ll be coming in for a landing in half an hour. ‘Better wake Greta and both of you get harnessed in.’”

“I thought the harnesses were just for takeoff,” said Miles.

Dino said, without taking eyes or fingers off the controls, “They have lots of uses, bright boy. If we don’t come in right we may have to take off in a hurry. And even if we do we may not land evenly. You’ll be a lot better off strapped in if this wagon keels over.”

“I see what you mean,” said Miles, hurrying to obey. When he called to Greta she opened calm light eyes and set about harnessing herself to her bunk without a word. A strange woman, Miles decided—yet a damned attractive one for all her grave detachment.

Dino said, again without looking away
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from the controls, “How come water gives you such a charge, sweetie?”

Miles was puzzled as, briefly, was Greta. Then comprehension and something like anger shadowed her usually light eyes. She said slowly, as if struggling for self control, “So that was why I acted so foolish before. It wasn’t the oxygen—you tampered with my water.”

“Just wanted to see what would happen.” Dino was smiling maliciously. “You ought to try it more often.”

“I ought to have you sznarfed,” said Greta with a quiet vindictiveness that sounded almost deadly.

Miles wondered what sznarfing was, decided it must be some Finnish term for chastisement. He wondered also why Greta reacted so to untreated water. She’d behaved like a teen-age girl who had taken too much to drink. He looked at her, mentally phrased his question.

But Dino cut in with, “You might watch the screen now, loves. We’re within good viewing distance.”

“Careful,” warned Greta. Miles thought somehow that she meant to add something else, but she clamped her lips firmly and spoke no more. Instead she lay back on her bunk with her eyes closed. Miles wondered if the water had left her with a hangover. It was, he decided, a ridiculous thought.

“Blast!” he murmured. “I forgot my ice-skates.”

No one said anything to this rather feeble riposte so Miles decided he might as well be scared sick by himself. He felt a definite lurch of the tiny metal case that enclosed them—a case that had looked so huge when they stood beneath it at White Sands—caught a flicker as Dino switched from bow to stern visors.

They were actually on their way straight down—the first Earth folk ever to make a landing on the Moon.

He tried to tell himself that Dino, for all of his eccentricities, was the ablest rocket-pilot the human species had yet produced, that it was as much to his interest as to theirs to bring them safely down to the pitted, uneven, airless surface of the big satellite.

But it wouldn’t wash. He was simply too scared to rationalize. And then Greta’s remarks about aliens having achieved the syphoning of Earth’s water rose to add to his fears. Surely, he told himself, having put such an incredible project into operation, they would scarcely leave it unguarded. He almost began to hope they wouldn’t be able to land at all.

But they were coming down. The craters seemed to flee outward from the perimeter of the vision-screen, to fuse and become but one, like the eyes of another human close to his own. He caught a quavering view of a great patch of glacier-like ice off to one side of the screen, then all he could see was the rough surface rising to meet them at a terrifying speed.


Miles wondered what he had seen but decided this was no time to distract his
attention. Then the braking blasts blotted out the view and the frame of the ship creaked and shuddered as it struggled against the grip of the Moon's gravity.

He didn't black out as he had on take-off—but he wished he could have before it was over. The ship rocked first one way, then the other, while a suddenly dripping Dino pushed buttons so rapidly that his digits seemed to blur. Miles kept waiting for the crunch of metal, the jar, the list to one direction or another that would play prelude to a crash on the airless satellite.

IT WAS like waiting for the man in the bedroom above to drop another shoe that never hit the floor. For when they actually landed, there was but the slightest of bumps, a brief tottering, then a sudden sense of solidity as the pintsles were extended from the huge fins and gripped the surface beneath them to give the ship support in its proper vertical position.

Dino mopped his brow and turned off switches. "Well, children, we made it," he told them. "While we're here it's your show."

"Let's put it on the road then," said Miles. He glanced at Dino with newfound respect, added, "Hell of a fine landing by the way."

Unstrapping his harness Dino replied, "I'd never have made it if somebody hadn't put a nice smooth patch of fused surface right under us. It was as easy as landing at White Sands—no, easier, on account of the lighter gravity."

"You mean—there's a landing field already here?" Miles all but gulped out the question.

"It isn't a swimming pool, smarty," said the other.

"Come on, let us be about our work." Greta, unharnessed, was moving toward the trap-door that led to the airlock chamber.

"Just a moment, Greta." Miles was suddenly in the grip of fresh fear. "Dino, if there's a landing field here somebody must have built it—somebody or something. Have you considered that?"

Dino all but collapsed on his bunk, staring at Miles unhappily. Evidently he had lacked time to consider this aspect of what lay before them. He croaked, "Lordy, sugar! You mean—BEMs?"

"I mean we don't know what's out there," Miles told him.

Greta opened the door, looked over her shoulder, said, "All right, my heroes—there's only one way to find out. Do you want me to go out there alone?"

They went through the trap-door ahead of her, down the ladder. While they were squirming into their temperature-proof coveralls she did not appear. When she did, she slid down the ladder like a fireman and climbed into her suit with rapidity that found her ready to go outside before either of the men.

"Sorry if I kept you waiting," she informed them brusquely. "I had to go to the lavatory."

"Oh!" said Miles inanely, forcing himself toward the lock. At the moment he didn't care if Greta went to Timbuctoo.

THE climb down the two-hundred-metre ladder whose rungs were extruded by the pressure of an air-lock button from the side of the ship's metal skin was, for Miles, a cumbersome and frightening process.

In the first place, his spacesuit was a garment even more awkward than anything he had worn in the Antarctic. Luckily, since the satellite was airless, they were not required to wear the heavy armored outfits. But the ones they wore were bothersome enough.

Then too Dino, once again outside his ship, had lost the assurance that clothed him while at the controls. He was once more the rabbity, frightened creature of White Sands. His teeth chattered so loudly in Miles' earphones that he irritatedly asked Dino to cut off communication until he could control himself.

"Then I'd be alone!" the pilot replied
hysterically, pausing in his descent of the ladder to look with panic at the strange, eroded ground beneath them. At the moment they were three-quarters of the way down, Miles leading, Dino second, Greta topmost and last.

"Don't waste so much time," said the Finnish scientist. To Miles' horror she flung herself clear of the ladder, floated past him and downward, despite a clumsy one-armed effort he made to grab and stop her. She landed on her feet, lightly, was scarcely forced to bend her knees against the shock.

"The crazy thing—she's killed herself!" screamed Dino.

"I have not—you've forgotten the light gravity." Greta assured them both gravely. "Come on down. It doesn't hurt."

Miles hesitated, then let go, found the fall quite pleasant. The landing gentle—though he managed to trip on a lump of pumice and all but fell on his face. He looked up barely in time to dodge Dino, who was floating down directly on top of him.

"Well," he said to no one in particular, "there's our ice."

It rose less than two hundred metres from the ship, in a sharp escarpment like the edge of an Alaskan glacier, rising some four or five hundred metres to tower over the ship, extending from rim to rim of the shadowed edge of the crater. Looking at it Miles wondered how he could ever have considered it small, even from space.

The size of the operation all but took his breath away and again he wondered who or what had undertaken it, and why, and how. Uneasily he looked around for some clue of alien occupancy but, save for the ice itself and the fused landing field on which the rocketship rested, saw nothing but the Lunar landscape.

There was, of course, no Earth in the sky, since this was the so-called dark side of the satellite. But just over the jagged row of mountain peaks that rimmed the huge crater the Sun blazed unchecked by atmosphere of any kind.

Even though standing in eternal shadow, and despite the fact that the glass face of his helmet was polarized to protect his eyes, the echo of that brilliant glare made him blink.

HE LOOKED away to see Greta stoop quickly to drop something into one of the myriad small pits at the rim of the glassined landing field surface. He shrugged and looked away, for the Finnish scientist's behavior throughout the trip had beyond his deductive capacity.

Slowly at first he walked toward the barrier of ice, having trouble in keeping his balance on that light-gravitid surface. He heard Dino crying into his throat-mike, something about getting back to the ship while the getting was good. Ignoring it he went ahead, noted that Greta was following him slowly, Dino bringing up the rear.

He reached the ice, forced himself not to look up, chopped off a chunk with a pick, stowed it in a pocket of his coverall. It might have recorded as seawater when analyzed from space, but analysis in a laboratory might show it to be something else. He still didn't see how such a vast mass of material could be syphoned through space.

A half kilometer away a large chunk of the artificial glacier crumbled from its top and fell lazily to the arid surface beneath. Miles stopped, his eyes narrowed in concentration beneath the faceplate of his helmet, fear buried by interest.

A moment later another large chunk broke off—and there were other bits of fallen ice to make walking difficult all along the foot of the great barrier. Miles had worked among enough glaciers in Antarctica to know what these symptoms meant. This glacier was on the move, its mass being augmented somewhere behind it, at the rim of the crater, forcing its further edge to keep growing.

How—what agency was at work in this airless and therefore waterless world? He gave up, began to move doggedly along the wall.
Directly under the spot where the first chunk had fallen he found his first clue—a puddle of slush and melted ice. Some heat agency was at work. And heat, in this sunless crater, meant power, undoubtedly artificial power.

He scanned the massive wall and found his second clue—a cave or tunnel running into the heart of the glacier from a spot about six metres above him and slightly to his left. Below it the ice gleamed in the shadowy darkness and dripped steadily.

He looked around, discovered that Greta was at his elbow while Dino, apparently frightened away by the falling ice, had retreated perhaps a hundred metres away from them while following a parallel path. He put a gauntleted hand on Greta's arm, pointed at the cave with his free hand, said, "What do you think of that?"

"I wouldn't know," she said, her face inscrutable behind the plate that covered it. Then, as Miles prepared to leap, "Better be careful—you're not armed and you don't know what might be in there."

If she had suggested he go on in he might have hesitated, lost the impetus for discovery that was urging him on. But after what had happened between them in the White Sands bungalow, after the events of the trip, her remark was as good as a dare. He had to go inside.

As it was, so unused was he to space-suit navigation and the light gravity, that he overjumped the opening, barely hooked a foot within its room and managed, by dint of some extremely awkward acrobatics, to work his way inside.

He switched on his helmet-lamp, discovered himself to be in a tunnel rather than a cave, a smoothly carved tunnel that moved in a straight line into the fathomless heart of the ice-pack. It resembled a regular Earth-tunnel, carved of glistening ice. Its floor was flat, its walls and ceiling describing three quarters of a circle.

"I'll be damned!" he said tritely.

"Odd—isn't it?" Greta had leapt up beside him.

"Understatement of the century," he told her, stooped as he noted the shadow of some dark foreign substance just under the surface of the ice that made the floor. It resembled some sort of tape, laid flat to form the floor itself, after which ice had glazed it.

"You stand guard while I examine it," Greta suggested.

"No—you stand guard." Miles tried to pierce the darkness of the tunnel's interior beyond the range of his lamp. "I want to see."

She looked about to protest, finally agreed. Miles went back to the entrance, knelt down—an awkward process. He wanted to see how and why the tape flooring extended to the very rim of a growing glacier. There had been no mechanical evidence from the outside.

It was there, of course, like a huge roll of bicycle tape, turned under at its outer edge to keep unfolding with the glacier's growth and maintain the tunnel for access from without. There was some sort of motor within its spindle—for it was from this roll of tape that the heat came which caused the puddles and slush.

"Come on," he said, rising. "Let's follow this tunnel. It must lead to the machine that makes this thing tick."

She stood in front of him, legs wide, arms akimbo, temporarily blocking his path. "We aren't armed," she told him unnecessarily. "We don't know what's in there."

Miles stopped and studied her, wishing he could read her mind. Then he said, "You suggested some sort of aliens must be behind all this. You also suggested they might have agents on Earth. Well, if they do, these agents must be human or close to it."

"That's what I meant," she said and then, with a note of derision, "What did you expect—bug-eyed monsters? After all, the human is the deadliest of all living creatures we know."

"Maybe," said Miles, "but he's also
the homiest. Let’s go.”

He walked past her, following the beam of his helmet-lamp along the straight path of the tunnel, Greta following him reluctantly. From time to time she tried to get him to turn back, but now the bit was in his teeth. After all, Moon or no Moon, he was used to working in and around ice-packs bigger than this one.

THEY reached the hollowed-out dome after proceeding about a kilometre. Curiously, although the devices and engines within it were far different, it reminded Miles of Juan Wister and the hollowed-out hill behind his English lodge. It was a perfect half-circle, about a hundred metres across and half as high. Transparent plastic doorways barred entrance from their tunnel and from other tunnels that radiated outward into other parts of the glacier.

Its chief feature was an immense motor of totally alien structure that looked like a gigantic plastic spider, topped by a huge transparent vat, which seemed half full of water, half full of vapor. From it, pipes passed through the ceiling and out of sight. Through the transparent doorway Miles derived a definite impression of both air and warmth within. It was totally unmanned.

“So that’s how they work it,” he said softly. “They pull the water from Earth by some rhodomagnetic device, return it from vapor to water in the vat, then shoot it out to become ice. But why?”

“I wonder,” said Greta slowly.

“Certainly not to restore the Moon,” mused Miles aloud, “If they were there’d be someone about—and this whole damned contraption would hardly be concentrated in one spot like this. Hey—what if this whole ice-pack is being assembled, out of sight of any Earth watchers, for transportation somewhere else?”

“You’re being fantastic,” said Greta. She studied the machinery briefly, then turned to him and added, “Let’s go back now.”

“I’d like to get inside—there must be some way of opening that door,” he replied.

“If it were easy do you think they’d have left it unguarded?” the Finnish scientist countered.

Puzzled by her lack of scientific curiosity Miles said, “Maybe—or maybe they simply figured they didn’t need guards. After all, we’re the first people to get here in all human history.”

He poked and prodded at the transparent barrier but was unable to budge it. So, reluctantly, he finally turned and followed Greta back through the kilometre-long tunnel to the entrance. They floated back to the Moon’s surface together, Greta sullen and Miles too preoccupied with his own racing thoughts to be on the alert.

So he was caught entirely by surprise when Dino stepped out from behind the shelter of a lump of ice and said, “Stand just where you are, honey-children. Don’t either of you move.”

He was carrying a blunt but deadly looking machine-weapon in his arms, held it pointed steadily in their direction. When Miles started to walk toward him he said, “Stay away—don’t come close or I’ll cut you in two.”

Miles stopped, bewildered, said, “What in hell is this all about Dino? Put that damned thing down and be sensible.”

“One of you knows—maybe both of you,” the space-pilot said. “When you went into that tunnel and didn’t come out I went back to check the ship. Somebody’s s-s-sabotaged it.” His teeth rattled again through the earphones at the prospect of being marooned on the Moon.

“How in hell could anyone sabotage the ship since we’ve been here?” Miles asked, his bewilderment growing. Their vehicle looked as solid as a skyscraper tower against the black Lunar sky.

“S-s-somebody took out the central transistor,” said Dino. “I can’t fly a s-spacecraft blind.”

The ingenuity of the sabotage struck Miles. Without the virtually indestructi-
ble central transistor the ship’s vision screens were utterly useless. And because of the toughness and simplicity of this small object, plus the need to save weight during space-flight, only one of them was carried.

And someone had removed it.

MILES glanced quickly at Greta’s face, impassive as ever behind its helmet-plate, as quickly looked away. He recalled that she had been the last to leave the control-cabin, had uttered a needless excuse about the lavatory, had then dropped something in a pot-hole near the ship.

“Come on, Dino,” he said. “I think I can find it for you.”

“You’d better,” the space-pilot said savagely. “Why do you want to stick us here?”

“It’s not me,” Miles said grimly. He led the walk back to where he had first stood after leaving the ship. From his long Antarctic experience he had learned to check landmarks carefully, almost automatically, at all times. He found the right pot-hole in a matter of minutes, found the transistor lying within it, picked it up.

“Better drop it,” said a level voice from behind him. “And drop that gun of yours too, Dino.”

There was no mistaking the cool determination of Greta’s tone. She meant business. Looking around slowly Miles discovered she was holding in one gauntleted fist a tiny, utterly alien-looking weapon with an ugly flared muzzle. When Dino hesitated she pressed something and a fierce flare of light shot out, found the tip of his machine-weapon, fused it like a candle in a blowtorch flame.

Dino screamed like a wounded horse and let his gun fall to the ground. “Why?” he shouted. “Why are you doing this to us?”

When she didn’t answer Miles said, “I can tell you why, Dino—or make a pretty good guess. She’s one of them—an agent for who or whatever built that plant. Remember that special water business? Our water affects her somehow, so she has to have chemically simulated alien water.”

“What makes you so sure—I’m alien?” Greta asked him.

He laughed without mirth. “A lot of things, Greta—little things mostly. The way you said the ship didn’t look practical. What in hell are you, a rhodomagnetician, supposed to know about spaceship design. Your matter-of-fact attitude about the takeoff, the way you tried to keep me from exploring the tunnel, your lack of curiosity about the engines inside—and the fact I saw you hide the transistor right after we left the ship.”

“Very well,” she said, still matter-of-fact about it. “So I’m alien—but I’m also as human as either of you. And I’m in control.”

“You won’t be forever,” Miles assured her. “Sooner or later you’ve got to sleep.”

“We shan’t have to wait that long,” she assured them.


“My friends are coming,” she said confidently. “They will be here any moment.”

NOW Miles felt a curious detachment that spelled out any suggestion of fear. The time for fear was over. He had been frightened, but his fright had done nothing to halt the rapid and weird course of his recent personal life. He was caught in some web beyond human—or at any rate Earth—ken, and there seemed little he could do but ride along with the tide. Yet he did want to know what was happening. He said, “Suppose you tell us what it’s all about, Greta?”

“I doubt if you could understand—being Earthmen,” she said.

“Come on—try us,” coaxed Miles. “We may come from a poor but isolated planet, yet we too have our human moments.”

“Too many of them,” she replied enigmatically. “But since we have a little time and you are entitled to an explana-
tion...it all goes back to your incredible water."

"My dear," said Dino, apparently reviving somewhat from his catalepsy of terror, "what is the matter with our water?"

"It is an intoxicant to the human races of the organized galaxy," Greta replied unexpectedly. "As such it is intensely valuable and rare. It forms the basis of most of our—stimulating beverages."

"So that's why you kept your special bottle—and acted like a kid when Dino switched your water supply!" said Miles.

"That's why," she said grimly. "You see, you Earthmen aren't aware of it, but you live in a state of chronic intoxication. You are unable to go without liquid for long periods, not because your bodies dry up, but because they cannot exist without their accustomed stimulant. It is like taking whisky abruptly from a lifelong drunk."

"I'll be damned!" said Miles. He fought an impulse to scratch his head, concentrated on what Greta was saying.

"Furthermore, this state of euphoria and manic-depression has caused your world to take some weird courses of development," she went on. "You are always fighting and killing one another with utter irrationality. Yet your arts and entertainments and general culture level is far ahead of the rest of the galaxy—and at the same time you are only just rediscovering space-flight."

"I suppose the ship looks like a perambulator to the sort of things your people fly, lovey," said Dino.

"Perhaps—a little," she said. "Galactic missions have been studying Earth for some centuries now—ever since it was rediscovered. You were originally settled, of course, by some long-lost group of pioneers during the period of colonization, isolated for aeons from the main currents of galactic growth."

"When mission-ships found you and checked your length of colonization our sociologists and ethnologists were puzzled by the odd anachronisms of your civilization. All elements were tested and the water problem discovered. Tests were inaugurated and its unique effects established...and its value learned."

"So you just left us stewing in our own juice instead of getting us in with the rest of you," said Miles angrily.

"We didn't dare let you out," Greta told him gently. "We didn't dare take the chance of your stirring up trouble in a peaceful galaxy. It would have been like unloosing a madhouse."

"You mean there is no war anywhere else?" Miles asked.

She shook her head inside her helmet. "There has been no such conflict in many thousands of your years," she informed him. "Why should we destroy what we have built so long and so carefully, merely because of differences that can be settled reasonably and equitably?"

"But somebody has been making a nice little monopoly of our water," said Dino shrewdly.

"To the shame of some of us," Greta replied. "Yet the craving for various

[Turn page]
compositions based on Earth-water cannot be suppressed. Hence we have arranged a galactic monopoly which ensures your not losing it too fast nor any portion of the planetary league from receiving it in dangerous amounts.”

“Just where do you fit into this?” Miles inquired.

“I am an agent—my home planet is in the Centaurean group—sent to check on the progress of your science,” she said. “Now that you are approaching space-flight at last there is much concern lest you inflict your combative ways upon the rest of the human race.”

“But what about your rhodomagnetic discoveries?” Miles asked.

She said, “There were none really—I merely used what knowledge I possessed to make ‘discoveries’ your own scientists were already close to achieving.”

“Like a high-school kid in kindergarten,” said Dino. Then, “What are you going to do to us?”

“Nothing—as long as you make no trouble,” she replied. “When the discovery of this ice-pack was reported, the situation grew urgent. It was imperative I come on the trip. So I—”

She hesitated, paused, her gaze lifting skyward. Miles, on the verge of making a lunge to disarm her, found himself perforce following her look.

An immense shooting star seemed to be falling, falling toward them, leaving a trail of glittering light in its wake.

VI

MILES said to Greta, “Your friends?”

“I think so,” she replied.

“Look at that wonderful hunk of ship come in!” cried Dino.

Trailing its magnificent plume of light, the ship seemed to come within a few thousand metres of the crater valley. There it hung—actually hung in space—supporting itself on a whirling bright ring and resembling somewhat an artificial Saturn. For it had a globular center.

Greta lifted her small hand-weapon and flashed some sort of wide-angle signal of light, her eyes like those of her companions fixed upon the new arrival. There was a long moment during which nothing happened, either on the Moon or in the sky.

Then Greta gasped and turned to run toward the ice-pack, calling to Miles and Dino, “Run—run for your lives!”

“What the . . .!?” said Miles, bewildered.

“Run!” called Greta, making a bounding leap away from the landing field in the light gravity. “Hurry, Miles—it’s dangerous.”

Something in her voice, despite the distortion of the microphone and earphones, convinced him she was sincerely afraid, sincerely trying to keep them from harm. He grabbed Dino and shook him out of his trance, half-dragged him along as he followed the alien agent.

“Let go of me!” cried the frantic space-pilot.

“It’s your funeral,” said Miles, releasing him and taking off in full flight. “I’ve got a feeling things are going to pop around here.” He managed a pair of immense leaps that lessened the gap between Greta and himself.

Apparently Dino was finally convinced that peril might come from the hovering starship, for he too joined the hegira. The three of them reached the foot of the glacier beneath the tunnel almost together, turned to see what was happening.

“Good God! The nasties are wrecking our ship!” said Dino, his voice wracked with sudden strain and rage.

Even as he spoke a bolt of unbearable flame came from the globe in the center of the alien vessel, a bolt that briefly lit up the slender spire of the ship that had brought them from Earth. For an instant the spaceship glowed like a cathedral of gold in its glory. Then it turned red, then bright white, then began to run and within a few minutes, it was melting before their eyes.

“Quick—into the tunnel,” said Greta, leaping for its shelter.
THEY followed her and by the time they could look back once more their vessel was a dully glowing puddle of metal on the gleaming surface of the landing field. Its potential adversary eliminated, the starship drifted gently to the ground. Its ring of light slowly faded after it came to rest.

Miles said sarcastically, his helmet close to Greta's, "Are these some of the nice peaceful people you're afraid to let us bold bad Earthlings loose among? And pardon the preposition at the end."

"Don't joke," Greta told him. "A few of your Earth years ago there was an accident—a group of galactic pioneers, mining one of the moons of a planet of Procyon, was given a block of this ice for their water supply instead of our pure variety. Before it was discovered they had turned into what you call humans. We've been having a little trouble with them since."

"If that's your idea of a little trouble," said Miles, "I'd like to know what you'd call a real jam. It seems to me we're in a beaut—enemies on top of us, no ship, no food, nothing."

"I'm sorry," said Greta. "They—this other group—has been what you'd call hijacking the monopoly's operations. They have their own agents on Earth..." She hesitated.

"Isn't the timing a trifle pat?" Miles inquired. "I mean—everybody getting here at once? Reminds me of an old-fashioned movie."

She looked at him through her faceplate for a long moment. Then she said, "This is part of a much larger plan. Once Dino spotted the ice-pack on his first flight around the Moon and your project about the missing seawater got under way, my people had to move fast. We made plans to remove the entire pack to serve the galaxy until some new arrangement could be worked out."

"I see," Miles was still sarcastic. "And your job was to tag along with our silly little flight and make sure we didn't louse up the works. Right?"

"Something like that," she said tonelessly. "Meanwhile our Procyon friends must have learned of our plan and made a trip here to beat us to it."

"It all sounds to me like an archaic gangster plot—on a somewhat larger scale than Prohibition Chicago," said Miles. "You've heard of Archaic Gang, of course."

"What crazy sort of talk is this?" Greta asked bluntly.

"Oh, nothing much," Miles told her. "Just some stuff I learned at college when I thought I wanted to be a writer."

"A funny job for a grown man," said Greta. "That men and women make a living at it is one of the things that puzzle us most about Earth. To write a report so that others may learn your discoveries, to write a treatise explaining some important state of affairs..."

"Better lay off the literature, honeybuns," said Dino suddenly. "Company's coming our way."

HE HAD been peering out the tunnel mouth at the newcomers while Miles and Greta talked. Now he turned and moved past them, lighting his helmet-lamp as he moved toward the interior of the glacier. His voice came back through their earphones, saying, "You two can stick around to greet them if you want to—maybe they know some of the answers you want. Little old me is ducking into the briar patch."

"Is he crazy too?" Greta asked abruptly. "We can do nothing. Even if we could crash the syphon dome they'd find us. Our oxygen can't last forever."

"It's good for quite a while yet," said Miles. He squinted at the spacesuited figures moving toward their shelter across the surface of the dead satellite. "Must be six of them," he offered. "What about that little blaster you pulled on us?"

"It would simply arouse them to reprisals," she replied. "We might scare them with it and they would simply turn a heat beam on the tunnel and burn us out."

"You mean—like that thing they melted our ship with?"
“That’s right.” Her head bobbed up and down inside her helmet.

“And melt half of this glacier to vapor?” Miles was incredulous. “Now you’re talking crazy. If they want this stuff half as much as you say they do—and it’s a tenth as valuable—they’d risk a few lives before they’d try blasting their profits.”

“I forgot,” she said simply. “They have become like you Earthmen. Perhaps you are right.” She paused, added, “But I cannot use my hand-weapon on them. I am conditioned against violence.”

“You would have used it on us,” he said quietly.

“Never—if you had known how I was shaking you would simply have taken it from me,” she told him.

“A good idea,” he replied. With a gesture as rapid as his spacesuit permitted, he took the tiny weapon from her. It fitted neatly into the palm of his glove and the muzzle protruded over his forefinger knuckle. The firing button was pressed with the ball of his thumb. He said without looking around, “Better get back inside, Greta. This is probably going to be rough.”

“I stay with you,” she told him.

“All right, it’s your funeral,” he said. “But don’t get in my way. And obey orders. Yu may come from a superior civilization but my kind knows a little more about this sort of thing.”

Miles Stannard was an imaginative young Earthman, which meant he was prone to fear. He was also a scientist of artistic tendencies, which meant he tended toward a sedentary life. But the turns of his career had led him into some of the remaining rough portions of his home planet. In a pinch, when the chips were down, he could handle himself competently and coolly, even turn his imagination to good account. Especially when, as now, things happened too fast for his imagination to turn his nerves to jelly.

The six pursuers had split into two groups of three. One of them had moved further along the glacier wall, apparent-
ly obscene curse Miles ducked back into the tunnel. He ceased fire, skidded on suddenly wet ice, brought involuntary pressure on the alien weapon and fired again.

For an instant it was like standing under Niagara Falls. Water poured all around him, from the sides, from the ceiling, and ran from the floor beneath him. It ceased as abruptly as it had begun, and for a moment Miles thought he was still suffering from flash-blindness. But the circle of light cast by his helmet-lamp was clear-cut and he realized that the ice had frozen before it could flow away as water, forming an almost-complete shield or stopper across the mouth of the tunnel.

Miles laughed and retreated further, firing further short bursts as he backed into the ice-pack. The barrier became complete and gained thickness with each burst of flame he sent at it. Ultimately, he knew, the moving tape of the floor would melt it or cast it outside—but since the tape was geared to the movements of the glacier around it this might be a matter of months.

True, their assailants could burn their way through, probably faster than he could thicken it—but that too would take time. And at the moment time was all he could fight for. Furthermore, their reluctance to tamper with the precious substance might make them hesitate to start blasting.

“What are you doing?” Greta asked him.


She whispered, “I’m glad you didn’t kill anyone.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” he told her. “How in hell do you set this damned thing anyway?”

“Turn the screw by the barrel,” she replied.

“Not now,” he said, giving his barrier another thickness. “How soon will it burn out?”

“It won’t,” she said. “Its beam is atomically generated.”

“Yipe!” he cried and would have dropped it like a hot coal had Greta not insisted it was perfectly safe to handle.

“It is completely shielded except when you fire it,” she told him. “Even then its radiation is directed away from the firer.”

He added another twenty metres of thickness, then said, “Come on, let’s find Dino. They don’t seem to have started yet and they have another party headed for one of the other tunnels. Maybe they’re all planning to outflank us.”

They moved at a trot, aided by the light gravity of the satellite. And though Miles was well aware of the desperation of their plight, of the improbability of their staying either alive or at best free much longer, he found his thoughts wandering to the supposed Finnish scientist running steadily, silently, ahead of him.

A S AN Earthwoman Greta had both repelled and attracted him. Her undoubted attractiveness had been tempered by the humorless pseudo-Finnish solemnity of her personality. Yes, he had wanted to make love to her—but not so badly that he hadn’t sought the first excuse not to when she professed her willingness to oblige.

Now, as an alien, he found himself thinking more of the charm of her broad, well-cut features, of her slim but full figure, of her courage and steadiness in crisis. There was an even more direct thought-nagging at him as well. What, he wondered, would it be like to make love to an alien woman?

He wished now that he hadn’t turned down his chance. It didn’t much look as if he was going to get another. He wondered—then told himself he was being disloyal to Joyce. And then he wondered just why he should be loyal to Joyce anyway—she had hardly been loyal or even generous toward him—and resented the little brunette back on Earth for intruding on his private thoughts at
a time like this.

They reached the transparent barrier and looked at each other in bewilderment through their face-plates. For they had found no sign of Dino de Frees. Yet there was nowhere else the space-pilot could have gone. Miles spun about, peered through the doorway, and spotted Dino’s booted legs on the other rim of the central machine.

“How in hell did he get in there?” he asked Greta. Then, recalling that Dino was wearing earphones, “Hey, Dino—open up.”

He got no response despite repeated calls to the pilot. For a moment he felt betrayed, and then Dino strolled into full view. He had his helmet hinged back and his space-suit unzipped, revealing his tanned torso and a bit of the scarlet clout. Although Miles hammered on the door with the butt of his weapon, Dino paid no attention.

“The so-and-so!” growled Miles, furious and expecting to be shriveled by a heat-blast from behind any second.

“He can’t hear you,” said Greta. “The dome is soundproof and he’s not wearing his helmet.”

“My God!” said Miles, aghast as this fact sank home for the first time. “He’ll suffocate—he’ll explode in there.”

“Hardly,” said Greta. “The atmosphere inside the dome is maintained at close to Earth sea-level pressure. And the temperature is always kept at about twenty degrees, centigrade.” As she spoke she pressed what looked like a random bit of the ice on the left wall. A partition slid open in front of them and they stepped into what proved to be a white-metal-walled partition between two similar transparent doors—in short, an airlock.

After a reasonable interval, the inner partition slid back and they stepped into the dome. Miles said, “Thanks, Greta.” Then, to Dino, “How in hell did you get in here, you red-headed slob? And why didn’t you keep an eye out for us?”

“I was looking backward when I hit the outer door and skidded into the wall,” Dino said with a long-suffering look. “When the thing slid back I popped through—and so on into here. I got interested in this place, dearies—it’s like a sort of crazy spaceship.”

“It is,” Greta told him. “It was flown from a Centaurian planet almost in one piece.”

“Okay,” said Miles, “but can we bar the doors?”

“I’m afraid not,” Greta told him. “We had no reason until lately to expect an attack.”

“Well, if they get here I can threaten to wreck the works with this.” He tapped the hand-blast he had taken from Greta.

“You wouldn’t!” She breathed the words as if he had spoken sacrilege.

“Dig that crazy plumber!” cried Dino. “Smash that gorgeous hunk of machinery? Man, you’re crazier than I thought you were.”

“I didn’t say I’d do it,” said Miles. “But I will if they force me to. It’s the only play we’ve got left.”

THERE was a long miserable silence, which Miles expected to be broken at any instant by the arrival of one or more teams of their pursuers. But then Greta said, “He’s right, of course, Dino. It’s the only chance we have left.”

Dino started to protest and then Miles said, “I’d still like to know why you didn’t keep an eye out for us, sugarplum.”

“I told you I got in here by accident,” he replied defensively. “If I didn’t know how it worked there wasn’t much I could tell you about it, was there?”

“Oh, Okay.” Miles gave up battling against Dino’s inverted logic. He turned to Greta, asked, “What’s the most vulnerable spot on this bloody syphon?”

She had her helmet back, as did he, and he could watch the play of expression across her broad-cheekboned, neo-Slavic face, the play of light on the waves of her net-caught hair. She said, “Up there, I think,” and pointed to a sort of bottleneck in the machinery that di-
vided vat from engine. "If you fuse that area nothing will operate. But get into your space-helmet first."

"Right—thanks, honey," he said to Greta. Then, to Dino, who had resumed his absorption in the machine, "How did you know there was breathable air in here, sonny?"

"Easy, honey," was the reply. "I could feel the pressure against my suit. I've been wearing these damned things off and on a long time. I figured it was probably okay because the aliens we've seen so far looked mighty human to me"—he actually leered at Greta as he said this—"and anyway, I figured if it wasn't it didn't matter much. How'd you stop our friends anyway, back there?"

"I don't think I did—for very long," said Miles, his fears returning with a rush.

"It's taking them quite a while," said the space-pilot. "I've been rooting around here a good half-hour and it's been more than fifteen minutes since you two followed." He looked at the golden watch on one of his gauntleted wrists.

"He's right, Miles," said Greta quietly when Miles hesitated. "If they were coming they'd be here by now."

They looked at each other in silence and then Miles said, "But how in hell are we going to get off the Moon?"

"I've got a hunch our chauffeurs are coming in now," said Dino, who had been looking at the other side of the dome. "Unless they intend to leave us here for keeps."

Startled, Miles followed the space-pilot's gaze, felt his heart go into a power dive. A pair of figures in what could only be alien spacesuits were standing in the airlock of one of the plastic doorways, not the exit from the tunnel he had blocked. They had evidently done as he had feared they would, simply outflanked them by coming through another tunnel.

He reached for his space-helmet, pulled it over his head, locked it into place. Then he set the button on the hand-blaster for narrow-beam fire and moved to take up his post under the vulnerable part of the syphon Greta had pointed out to him.

VII

A BODY crashed into Miles from behind and spacesuited arms locked about him before he could fire. He struggled to maintain his balance, failed, crashed to the floor of the dome, finally managed to wrestle his opponent around.

It was Greta.

He said, "What the hell are you trying to do now? Let me go!"

"You mustn't," she said quickly. "Those are my friends."

He said, "Oh!" and relaxed for a moment. Then, struggling free of his attacker, "How can you be sure? Maybe they're—"

"You idiot! I know them," she retorted simply.

By this time the two newcomers were inside the airlock and advancing upon him with a definite air of menace. Miles noted that their spacesuits were of some gleaming metallic cloth, that shone like new-minted silver, rather than the duller aluminum sheen of the Earthman's space costumes.

Greta scrambled to her feet and greeted them with a stream of utterly unintelligible sounds. They listened warily, then relaxed and removed their helmets, which were larger than those of the Earthfolk, completely transparent and packed with an incredible number of complex gadgets. First one, then the other, gave Greta a hug and laid a cheek against hers.

This greeting concluded, Greta introduced them to Miles and Dino, serving as interpreter. They were, she explained, a leading hydraulic engineer and space rhodomagnetician of her own planet. "Only," she concluded a trifle lamely, "it's a lot more than rhodomagnetics. There just isn't any Earth word for it. You might say he deals with attraction
between any non-solids in space."

"Space currents," said Miles, feeling both baffled and respectful. The concept was a staggering one, but did much to explain the possibility of tapping a planet for water from its satellite.

"Something like that," she replied. Although she was obviously glad to see them, glad to be rescued from probable death — and though the two rescuers were obviously of the same mind — yet all three were gravely unemotional about it.

Both of the newcomers were, like Greta, of medium height — taller than Dino but inches shorter than Miles. One was a silver-blond with strong, rather sensitive features. He was, Greta explained, the space-magnetism one. The other was almost negroid in appearance save for a pair of startling grey eyes. Evidently galactic biological dominants and recessives didn't always work out as they did on Earth.

"He looks like a photographic negative of a black-eyed blonde," said Dino of the latter.

The ghost of a smile upturned the corners of Greta's full lips. But all she said was, "We've got to get out of here. They want to start clearing the ice at once."

They walked, helmeted, through another kilometre-long ice-corridor, a twin to the one Miles had blocked with his hand-weapon. Miles and Dino brought up the rear — Greta went ahead with their two rescuers, talking quietly in their alien tongue. Miles felt oddly left out of things. Apparently so did Dino, for he said, "I'd like to get a chance to get even with those thugs that melted my shop."

Miles, who was suffering from let-down, said somewhat brutally, "You wouldn't have the nerve to come near them if you did have the chance — and you know it."

"Listen, honey." The space-pilot's voice bore a cutting edge. "I know I'm no prize most of the time. Nuggets, I shy away from my own shadow. People have been terrifying me all my life. But put me in the cabin of a spaceship and I'm not afraid of anything."

Miles did some swift thinking. He recalled how quickly Dino had lost all symptoms of fear once they boarded the ship at White Sands — how skilfully he brought it in to a landing on a strange satellite's surface. He remembered Dino's panic before takeoff, his fear of leaving the ship, his arrant cowardice on the Moon.

Dino had been coolness himself while they were trapped in the dome — because it felt to him like a spaceship, because, as it turned out, it was a spaceship. He considered his companion, marked by his girlish manners for a lifetime of bullying, achieving physical triumph as the ablest hero in the most dangerous new sport on Earth — or rather off Earth. From this viewpoint Dino made sense.

He said, "Sorry — I've been too wrapped up in my own personal panic to have much time to consider anyone else. I hope you get your chance. I'd like to be on hand to watch it."

Dino said nothing, but the look he shot Miles through his face-plate was eloquent. Miles had a hunch he had made a friend. He also had a hunch he was going to need all he could get. He wondered again about Greta. She remained a mystery — but why not? After all, she was an alien.

They emerged from the mouth of the tunnel and leaped easily to the ground. Dino grabbed Miles' arm, said, "Aunt Jemima, look at that, will you?"

It was something to see. If the hijackers' starship had looked like a miniature Saturn, the Centaurian rescue vessel could almost have doubled for a not-so-miniature Jupiter. It was a tremendous globe, rising higher than the ice-barrier itself. A number of ramps extended to the surface from oval ports just below its middle and men and vehicles and self-propelled machines were swarming down on them.
"Holy mackerel!" was all Miles could think of to say. Already complex and utterly mysterious-looking devices were moving rapidly toward the ice-barrier, clustering about each tunnel-mouth. Every square millimetre of suit or vehicle or machine gleamed silvery in the reflected light of the crater's shadow, golden in the yellow light that surrounded the starship itself.

BENEATH a transparent bubble in a multi-legged machine that pulled up against the tunnel-mouth they had just vacated Miles saw a brown haired operator wearing a bright blue clout almost as brief as Dino's scarlet one—and nothing else. These people—and they were definitely people for all of their lack of emotion—used their machines themselves as space-suits.

Greta saw him watching as the machine extended a curved arm that suddenly developed a gleaming fist which filled the mouth of the tunnel. She said, "It will reroll the carpet back to the dome. We could do the job with robot machinery, but considering the size and importance of the operation we're using live operators instead."

"Yeah, I see," he replied, nodding inside his helmet. He felt a bit dazed, like a country kid being taken to see his first big city. There was simply too much for a mere Earth-engineer to take in at a glance—or, he suspected—in a year of glances.

"The carpets react to heat and roll back to the dome," Greta explained. "The arm of the mrzlek—sorry, but I can't translate it for you—will extend all the way to the dome, melting and refreezing the ice it comes in contact with as it does so. After that it will send out multiple—spikes is the best I can do—in four directions to the length needed to hold and lift the ice from the surface without actually cracking it."

"You mean," said Miles incredulously, "that you're going to lift the whole damned ice-pack at once?"

"That is correct," Greta told him. "It will take two of your days. We'll have to insulate it, of course, since sub-space temperatures frequently run high."

"Good idea," he said, feeling like an idiot. "But how are you planning to transport it? What will you use for power?"

"The ship, naturally," she told him, gesturing toward it. "We have tractor-beams to keep it locked."

"Quite a deal," he said, for once even at loss for a pun. And then, as they approached the immensity of the star-ship, "What are you going to do with
us?” He had suddenly remembered that
Greta and her friends were also the
enemy.

“Give you a chance to get out of your
spacesuits and rest for a while,” she
replied.

“And also to keep us out of the way?”
he suggested, sensing a certain con-
straint in her tone.

“That too,” she informed him, non-
committally.

They rode up a swift gleaming esca-
lator to a spic-and-span airlock, where
they got out of their suits after Greta
had informed them the atmosphere was
safe. “We’re even giving you Earth-
water instead of our own,” she said
greasily, though with a faintly reproach-
ful glance at Dino, who returned it
unblushingly. Nodding toward a stocky
yellowish man in green clout and weird
looking shoes with pointed toes remin-
sicent of a Turkish slipper, she added,
“Skarmpo will see you to your quarters.
I’m afraid I must leave you for a while.”

“Greta,” Miles said suddenly, “what’s
your real name—I mean what are you
called on your own planet?”

A small spot of color appeared high
on either of her cheeks. She said, “The
nearest I can come to it in your language
is Greya Sahrina. So you see why Greta
Saari.”

“I think I prefer Greya,” said Miles.
“So do I,” she told him. “But it would
have been too unusual for me to use
as an agent on your planet.”

She left them then and the yellow-
skinned Skarmpo led them silently along
a succession of moving corridors, up a
fast-moving ramp, to an oval, silvery
door that stood open. There he ushered
them into a comfortably large hexagonal
chamber furnished with odd-looking but
functional-appearing couches, chairs
and tables.

HE TURNED on a switch and one wall
became a vision screen, showing the
activities outside. In clear but accented
English he said, “This connects with
the ship’s viewer.” He moved to another
wall from which a gleaming shelf pro-
truded at waist height, below a translu-
cent panel, picked up an extension cord
with a pad at its end, pressed the pad
against a temple, told them, “Think of
the food you want, then hold it to your
throat and say it. Release it thus”—he
did so—“and you’ll have whatever you
wish. Steak, sauerkraut, baked Alas-
ka.”

“Sauerkraut!” exclaimed Dino in hor-
ror. As he spoke the translucent panel
lit up, revealing the odd combination of
Earth-foods on a glistening tray, com-
plete with eating utensils, napkins and
a built-in fingerbowl. Skarmpo lifted the
panel, pulled the tray partway out,
pushed it back.

“You don’t like sauerkraut?” he
asked. He pushed another button and
the panel became cloudy once more.
“Press this button—” he did so—“and
the order is returned. This food synthe-
sizer is adjusted to more than a hundred
of your foods. If you wish some of your
water”—his eyes gleamed as he men-
tioned it—“all you have to do is push
this button over here.” He pushed, a
round, weighted tumbler popped out and
water entered it from a tube that ap-
peared just above.

“Have a drink, sweetie,” said Dino,
speculatively.

Skarmpo struggled with himself,
finally won. “I am on duty now,” he told
them. “Perhaps later, when I am
off...?”

“We’ll have a ball,” the space-pilot
told him.

The remark obviously puzzled
Skarmpo, but he bowed out. At the door
he said, “We are asking you to remain
in your quarters for the present. We
cannot risk your getting hurt. If there
is anything else you wish, press this.”
He showed them another button, flush
with the wall, beside the door, then de-
parted.

“Dig the crazy jail!” said Dino. He
went to the food synthesizer, ordered
himself mushroom soup and a Waldorf
salad, got them. Carrying his tray to
the broad arm of a low-slung couch-chair he said, "Hey, Miles, aren’t you hungry?"

Miles, who was devouring the vision screen with his eyes, unable to stop watching the incredible engineering achievements it was unfolding, snapped out of it, discovered himself to be famished. He ordered a couple of chops, julienne potatoes, asparagus and peaches. To his surprise they were all of excellent texture and flavor, perfectly cooked. But he forgot about their taste, ate automatically as he continued to watch the gigantic operations disclosed on the screen.

The mrazleks were still at their burrowing into the tunnels to clear the immense artificial glacier for space-travel. But other works were proceeding apace. What looked to him like super-bulldozers with immensely wide low blades, were lining up between the long-armed mrazleks along the foot of the ice-pack. He noted certain small movements of the ice above their blades, decided these machines were digging under the mass of ice to separate it from the frozen surface of the Moon. Still others scooted about the top, apparently packing and smoothing it for its journey through sub-space.

For the moment all Miles felt was a vast exhilaration. He might have been kidnapped; he might actually be in custody of a very comfortable sort—but he felt a tremendous sense of privilege at being the first Earth-engineer not only to see this tremendous human development but even to know of it.

ALTHOUGH he knew it would take him more than his lifetime to understand the concepts behind most of the machinery and gadgetry on view, yet as he watched he began to have a faint sense of the engineering techniques, the know-how, that lay behind this incredible achievement. In a way they weren’t so different from most Earth engineering concepts—they were simply developed to an immense degree.

"Hey—you going to sit there like a goon all day and get oyster eyes, honey-bun?" Dino was standing over him, blocking his view of the screen, looking thoroughly bored.

"Sorry," said Miles, forcing himself out of his mood of wonder. "I should think this ship would keep you happy."

"It would," said Dino, "if they'd let me see how it works—maybe fly it. But this—" he gestured at their luxury-cell—"this is death, darling."

Neither of them were aware the door had opened until a charmingly accented young voice said, "I hope I do not intrude—no?"

She was a perfectly delightful young woman, a slimly opulent, dusky brunette with blue-green eyes, curly blue-black hair nestled closely around her head, a grave assurance of movement that did at least as much to emphasize the fine points of her long-legged coltish gracefulness as did her costume of green-gold skirt-clout, peekaboo bolero jacket and trim green pointed-toe slippers.

"You do not intrude—yes!" said Dino. Any doubts Miles may have felt as to the space-pilot’s manhood—and he had felt quite a number—vanished at sight of the way his cellmate ogled the newcomer.

She bobbed her head, said, "Thank you, sir." Then, in the manner of a little girl reciting a speech at a party, "Mr. Stannard, Mr. de Frees—my name is Mreya Cloru and I have been assigned to instruct you in the language of the galactic union. I hope you will find my services desirable."

Miles and Dino simply stared at one another and then Dino said, "Baby, do you suppose this is on the level?"

In spite of himself Miles burst out laughing. Dino grinned crookedly and shook his head. The girl colored and dropped her green eyes behind a barricade of long dark lashes and said in her singsong accents, "I am sorry if I have offended, Mr. Stannard and Mr. de Frees."

"Call me Miles," said the engineer.
“And his name is Dino. Come on in and relax. We—” he cast a look at his cellmate who was still goggle-eyed—“are very grateful for your kindly services.”

“I’m not sure grateful is just the word,” muttered Dino.

“You have said something?” the girl asked anxiously.

“Nothing that can offend you—quite the reverse,” said Miles, suddenly feeling like a chaperon. “Suppose we sit and chat a bit and let you practise your English before we get to work.”

Hesitantly the girl sat down on the edge of one of the low chairs. Dino offered her a drink of Earth-water which she regretfully refused—but the offer seemed to break a little ice. Soon the two of them were chattering between silences of increasing length, while Miles returned his attention to the screen.

He didn’t make much progress with the lingua franca of the starways while the operation outside was being completed, but neither of his companions seemed disturbed. The removal of the Lunar ice-pack grew increasingly miraculous to the Earth-engineer.

They treated the multi-billion-ton artificial glacier as if it were one large ice-cube, stuck in a refrigerator tray. They chivvied it, chipped it, shaped it—and finally, when all the machines had performed their functions, lifted it in toto a few hundred metres from the surface of the crater by means of some incredible gravity-defying force.

It was shortly after this had been done that Greta-Greya paid them her first visit. In skirt-clout and bolero of some metallic greyish material, her long dark-blonde hair falling softly about her shoulders, she looked far more natural, far more beautiful than she had ever looked on Earth or during the Moontrip.

She sank into one of the chaircouches, regarded Dino and Mreya, who were huddled together on one of the couches with a quizzical but apparently approving eyebrow, said, “Well—fin-ished at last, Miles. Would you please pour me a drink? Your water.”

“Why shore,” said Miles, trying to conceal his surprise.

Apparently he was not too successful, for Greya actually laughed softly and said, “The job is done—it’s time to celebrate.”

“May I have one too, mother?” the girl asked unexpectedly.

“Mother!” Miles and Dino spoke together.

“Certainly,” said Greya with quiet pride. “Mreya is my oldest.”

“She’s perfection,” said Dino.

“But you have different names—last names,” said Miles, recovering the tumblerful of water he had almost dropped.

“Isn’t it the custom to give children their father’s name on your world too?” she asked. “Mreya is my oldest—she’s being trained to be an Earth-agent like me. Aah!” she sipped half the water. “This tastes magnificent.”

“How—how many do you have?” Miles asked, stuttering.

Greya, beginning to feel her drink, caught his confusion and laughed merrily. “Don’t look so surprised, Miles. I have never lacked for men. There are two others—a boy ten by your counting and a little girl eight—waiting for me on Malno.” Then, turning to her daughter, “Sing for us, darling. I’ve missed your voice.”

“I’ll get my zankya,” said the girl, darting quickly from the room. While she was gone Miles could only stare at Greya.

Finally he said, “Are—I mean do they all have the same father? Your children?”

“Hardly,” she replied in matter-of-fact tones. “You must remember, Miles, that interstellar travel doesn’t make for a very enduring domestic pattern. Your world will find it so when you take to space. Then too, without the effect of your water, we are hardly capable of the exaggerated emotional attachments that make monogamy possible. Our system works very well.”
"If your daughter is an example," said Dino softly, his eyes aglow, "it works magnificently."

"Thanks," said Greya. "I was hoping you two would strike an affinity. It will be well for her to unite with an Earthman. And I think she will be very good for you."

Dino got up, crossed and kissed Greya on the lips, said, "It's the first time any mother ever gave me her blessing—darling."

"You stick to Mreya," said her mother tolerant.

"Tell me," said Miles a trifle desperately, "why you aren't taking the synthon dome back to Målno with you—I should think it would be a temptation the hijackers couldn't resist."

Greya studied him briefly, then said, "That is exactly the idea. don't you see?"

"Oh!" said Miles vaguely. "A trap."

"Certainly. We drove the one ship off, but others will return. Since we removed the whole supply they must. Then..."

The girl returned, bearing a strange instrument that reminded Miles vaguely of a theramin but with the tone of a lute. She held it in her lap and sang strange melodies in strange tongues quite charmingly. What with one thing and another the party grew very gay.

Suddenly Miles looked at the vision screen, saw it reflected a dark greyness, nothing else. "Hey!" he said, "What's wrong?"

Greya looked at it, replied, "Nothing, we're in sub-space."

Dino sat up, almost depositing Mreya on the floor. "Nugats!" he exclaimed. "I never even felt us take off!"

**VIII**

WHEN Miles awoke Dino was still stretched out on his couch, snoring gently in the sleep of the happily and emotionally exhausted. The engineer stretched, visited the utterly alien but extremely compact and well-equipped shower and lavatory adjoining their cabin, then switched on the vision screen.

As he got himself a breakfast of kidneys and sausage, accompanied by the rather flat galactic coffee, he decided he had not felt so good after a party since reaching adolescence. On the other hand, he had seldom had a less exhilarating time. Earth-water might knock peoples of other planets on their collective ear, but it did nothing for him. Nor did it hand him a hangover.

Greya had been full of surprises—gay, laughing, mischievously naughty. He had forgotten that she was the mother of three different children, including the delightful Mreya, by three different mates. Certainly she had been about as unlike the grave Finnish scientist as any woman could be.

He glanced at the screen, almost spilled food from his fork. No longer was the great globular star-ship imbedded in the greyness of sub-space. Instead it appeared to be hovering a few thousand kilometres above the nightside of an immense dark-blue planet, upon whose surface gleamed the lights of a thousand cities connected by spider-web thin traceries of gold. Great unlit masses he judged to be oceans, though even these were dotted with islands aglow with the lights of civilization. Behind the planet lay the star-dotted blackness of deep velvet space.

*Målno*, he decided, marvelling at the speed of their voyage. And then a beam of light, apparently from the ship itself, blossomed through space to reveal something more marvelous still—the Lunar ice-pack, floating in nothingness and seemingly being maneuvered into place for a pickup by tractor beams from the planet itself.

IT WAS an intricate bit of engineering and Miles didn't know Greya had entered until she slid onto the arm of his chair and put a warm hand upon his cheek and let her long hair fall against his face. She said, "Turn it off. I feel terrible."
He looked up at her, ran head-on into her lips, which were soft but hot, then said, "If you people had some alcohol I'd have a lot more sympathy for you."

"Poisonous stuff, your water," she said. "Why should we use a soporific like alcohol when we get so much more enjoyment from the stuff?"

"Better have a hair of the dog," he suggested.

She shuddered, then got to her feet. "What a horrible thought!" she exclaimed. Then, wrinkling her short nose, "I shouldn't—we'll be coming in shortly and it would never do... but perhaps a very short one won't hurt."

She had it, felt better. Dino woke up and then Mreya drifted in and the four of them watched the ice-pack transfer completed, then enjoyed the view of the huge planet growing larger in the screen until only spaceport details were visible.

"What a plant!" exclaimed the space-pilot, noting its area and the endless rows of globular star-ships, clustered like innumerable gasoline cracking globes, over its glassined area. When they were about to land Greya rose and motioned her daughter to get up too.

"We'll have to leave you for a little while—we must go home and see the rest of the family," said the dark-blond mother of three. "Skarmpo will take care of you until we return."

"Let me go along," pleaded Dino and Miles put in a like appeal.

But Greya was firm. "It would waste time during which you should be observing our people and civilization—and learning our language," she told them. And, with a slightly parental glance at her daughter, "You have many words still to learn."

"How long will we be here?" Miles asked.

"That's up to our Procyon friends," Greya replied. "We have brought you here only because we could hardly leave you stranded on the Moon. It is our intention to take you back to Earth with us. But I have an idea you will have chances to return—if things work out as we hope they will."

It was a sorry leave-taking, especially for Dino and his new-found love. But Greya promised the separation would be short and left them to the yellow-skinned Skarmpo, who finally consented to take a drink of Earth-water with them and revealed himself to have a fund of quite remarkable stories about some very remarkable creatures to be found throughout the galaxy.

They didn't see the women during landing, had an idea that emotional leave-takings were not au fait among the normally staid hosts. It was still night when they were sped in a compactly functional aircar to an apartment high in an ovoid tower of shining plastic materials, one of many similar towers that constituted the city.

With daylight, Skarmpo took them on a tour of the vast metropolis, which he claimed held some half-billion souls in comfort and safety, then gave them an air-tour of the surrounding countryside. That evening they were feted at a party before a large group of important notables, given food and speeches neither of which they understood. Miles felt half-dead before it was over and Dino looked ready to drop.

They were taken the following day on another tour—to some of the vast manufacturing plants of Malno, where self-running machines worked silently, efficiently, night and day, turning out the incredible synthetics that supported the vast population. Everything on the planet, as on the Malnian star-ship, was spic and span, without trace of oxidization. Miles found himself spellbound.

That evening, however, Greya and her daughter were waiting for them in the apartment. They dined together and Dino wanted to have Mreya take him out on the town for the evening to see some nightlife. Her mother shook her head and told them, "I'm afraid you'll do better right here. You see, we have no entertainment here as you have it on Earth. Everything we do is for use."
She stroked a beautiful cat she had brought back from her home, a long haired gentle creature twice the size of the average Earth tabby, with pistachio fur and ruby-red eyes. Miles, who had been looking out the window at the lights of the city said, "I'm beginning to understand why you find our water so irresistible. But I'm damned if I understand why we should be the only planet to have fun."

"Oh, we have fun—or thought we did until we began tapping Earth-water," Greya told him. She had imbibed, along with Mreya, just enough of the imported intoxicant to lighten her normal gravity. She added, "Perhaps you also see why Earth-assignments are so highly prized throughout the rest of the galaxy—in spite of the fact that they are highly dangerous, even distasteful in some ways."

"When you say that, smile," Miles said. "If I'm distasteful, sprinkle me with deodorants, powder me like a baby, drench me in rare perfumes. Don't be my best friend—tell me."

Greya sighed and shook her head. "You see, if I hadn't spent some years on your planet I'd think you were crazy. The rest of us don't know how to joke." She leaned forward, making a thoroughly enticing picture, added earnestly, "We may have surpassed you in material achievements; we may have won the galaxy—but while we don't have your tragic social inequalities and strife we don't seem to be living. And it's all in the water."

"What gets me," Miles told her, reaching down to stroke the purring cat, "is why you haven't been able to synthesize our water. You seem to be able to synthesize everything else."

Greya smote her forehead in mock distress, then said, "If you don't think our ablest scientific minds haven't been puzzling over that problem for centuries now you're mad, man—mad! Seriously, Miles darling, it is literally the puzzle of the universe."

"They'd better come up with some-thing pretty soon," he said gravely. "Our water isn't going to last forever, no matter how sparingly you draw on it or how much you adulterate it."

"We know that too," she told him, resting her dark-blond head against his arm.

Miles looked around for Dino and Mreya, discovered they had vanished, but heard the pleasant gurgle of young-girl laughter drifting through the open door to the next room, followed by the low tones of Dino's voice. He added, "Sooner or later some gang of hijackers like our Procyon friends are going to stage a real raid. Then where will your galactic peace be—and where will Earth be?"

"What do you think my assignment on Earth was about—partly at any rate?" Greya countered. She scratched an ear of the great green cat, which chirruped its approval.

"Come to think of it," said Miles with sudden excitement, "we could just possibly help you out—temporarily at any rate. You know about Project Antarctica. Well, the problem there is too much water rather than too little. Why couldn't you step up that Moon syphon of yours and get the problem off our necks? That would give you a supply that ought to last until your scientists could do something in the way of synthesis."

She said, not looking up, "I was wondering when you'd get around to thinking of that."

"You're ahead of me on that, too?" he asked. And, when she did not reply, "Of course! I've been stupid, even for me—a schmoe named Joe! That's the real reason you left the syphon on the Moon."

"Partly," she told him. And, looking up at him directly, "It was also the reason I had you brought here to see something of our side of the problem. We can do a lot for your planet, you know, if we don't rush things. I wanted some-one, someone high on the Project, whom
“So it’s a little rusty . . .” he began, then paused, his eyes narrowing, added, “You must have seen plenty of rust on Earth.”

She shuddered deeply, told him, “I know—that’s one of the reasons the assignment is considered distasteful and dangerous. We eliminated rust from the rest of the galaxy entirely—save for a few outlawed planets—after the great tetanus epidemics of the Age of Illness. Please, Miles—get rid of it. I’ll get you a better one.”

“Okay,” he said. “Anything for a lady. But a lot of good comes from rust. All our antibiotics came from mould—which is merely vegetable rust. And they have saved millions of lives.”

“Lives which would never have been endangered had the rust itself been wiped out first,” she said solemnly. “Rot or rust or oxidation or whatever you choose to call it is one of the chief sources of illness in the universe. That is why our scientists wiped it out, destroyed it, abolished it completely.”

“Hey!” he said. “Take it easy.” He dropped the watch through the disposal slot. All at once he was desperately homesick for a world that was not so serious, so perfect, so rigidly sterile, so utterly without emotion and passion. He thought longingly of Joyce Hartwick, unpredictable, treacherous Joyce, with the alluringly non-perfect body and the utterly unpredictable temper.

THINKING of Joyce caused him to think of Juan Wister—and thinking of Wister made him think of something else. He said, “You know, Greya, there was an odd item I noticed in the English lodge where we met. Though it was in a damp climate and right next to the sea it was spotless in your sense of the word as well as mine—without a trace of mould or mildew or rust or decay. Tell me, is Wister another Malnian agent?”

“Juan Wister?” she said slowly. Suddenly she sat up straight, added, “What makes you think he might be?”
THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

"Oh—" he gestured vaguely—"perhaps because his place was so spotless. Perhaps because like yourself, on Earth at any rate, he was—is—a man of obscure origin and wide repute."

"That's very odd," she said, putting her glass down firmly and leaving it alone. "Very odd indeed. I remember I liked his house because it was so remarkably free of rust and mildew, when I'd been expecting the worst. He's certainly not one of our agents. There are really only a handful of us and we all know one another."

Miles stared at her, but he wasn't seeing her. Instead he was seeing again, in his mind's eye, the hollow hill behind the garden hedges, the hollow hill and the strange device inside it. At the time, because Wister was known to be an oil man, he had taken it for granted that the great globe was a cracking device for some secret experiment the billionaire was conducting for his own profit.

Just recently, however, he had thought of oil-cracking globes again—while coming into a landing at the great starport on Malno, where the huge globular ships had been lined up in row after row, as far as the eye could reach.

Greya was evidently doing some thinking of her own. She said, "That was the night your little friend went through my room."

"You don't know that," Miles countered with a sudden attack of loyalty where Joyce was concerned.

"Perhaps I have no proof that would convince one of your law courts," she replied with a faint smile at his vehemence. "But I am certain enough for my own judgment. I wondered at the time why—and thought perhaps it was because she was jealous of me on account of you."

"At that time," he said stoutly, "Joyce had no cause to be jealous of either of us." He paused, added, "Are you sure you had nothing with you that might have given information as to the time of our takeoff? You seem to have known a lot more than I about the whole damned trip."

"Damned trip?" she asked quietly. "I am sorry."

"So'm I," he said with contrition. "It's been a wonderful—an incredible experience."

Greya was frowning. "I don't think I could have been so foolish," she said, more to herself than to him. "Yet I had received a call that afternoon and scribbled some notes on a bit of paper. But they would have looked like mere doodling to an Earth-person."

"Wait a moment." Miles was recalling the thrumming sound, the rasping beep-beep that he had heard from within the hill, had tried to decipher as Morse code and failed. He said, "But if Wister is a Procyon agent he might have been able to read your notes."

"Of course," said Greya. "But what makes you really think he is one?"

HE TOLD her, somewhat sheepishly, about his nocturnal adventure, about the hollow hill and the sounds that might have been communication of some sort coming from within it. Then he added, "And I feel pretty certain now that he has or had some sort of space-ship inside the hill. At any rate there was a big ball of something that looked like a junior-sized copy of a Malnian star-ship."

"Grolznartz!" the dark blonde exclaimed, rising swiftly to her feet. "Of course that's the answer. I thought it was odd your little friend should know him at all. It was she who got you there—and because you were there I went—and it was from me, thanks to her, that he was able to get the message to Procyon that caused you to lose your ship on the Moon!"

Miles didn't want to believe it, but it sounded like a damning case against Joyce. Then he thought of something else, said, "You've forgotten one thing, Greya—as a U.N. secretary Joyce knew all about our little trip to the Moon."

"Not all about it," said Greya, strid-
ing the floor. "She didn’t know the take-off date—until she got it from my notes. I shall never take notes again.”

Miles felt lower than the bottom of Greya’s discarded tumbler. Since his return from Antarctica two attractive women had showed interest in him, His ego had been blooming nicely until first Joyce became involved with Juan Wister—no wonder she had discarded him once she had obtained what she was after—and Greya by her own admission had loved him for purely practical reasons.

She sensed his unhappiness and came close to him and gripped one of his upper arms with firm strong fingers. “I am sorry, Miles, to cause you so much unhappiness,” she said.

“It’s not just you—it’s Joyce,” he told her bluntly.

“But I’m responsible for that. I almost wish I hadn’t been so honest with you. It would have been very nice for me.” Her voice was very low, very sultry. “Perhaps it can still be nice—if you will only meet me on my own ground.”

He looked down at her, put an arm around her, held her close against him, chinned the top of her dark-blond head, “Don’t think I wouldn’t love to, Greya. I would make all the sense there is—but I’m just one of these damned fool Earthmen that goes around drunk on ice-water all the time. Old ice-water veins, that’s me.”

“When you are hurt you joke,” she told him as if he didn’t know it. “It is hard for me to understand, but I admire it greatly.”

“Great,” he said. “You go ahead and admire my sense of humor. A poor thing but mine own.” He paused, pulled her around, grabbed both her shoulders, said, “Greya, if Wister has communications and a ship—listen, they must have checked on what happened to us from Earth by now. And he’ll know you’ve removed the ice-pack. Hadn’t we better get the hell right back there and see what’s going on without waiting for word from your Procyon agents?”

Her eyes widened and for a moment she looked frightened. Then, again, she was cool efficiency. She said, “I believe you are right. I made a bad mistake about Wister. I shall ask that we be returned at once!” She moved from him toward the corner communicator, marching, not walking, toward her destiny.

IX

BACK once more in the Moon crater, Miles felt even more keenly than during his first brief visit the almost fairy-tale ugliness and alienness of the big satellite. Then he had been largely concerned with the professional problem of the ice-pack and, subjectively, with his own fears. Events had moved far too rapidly to give him much opportunity for absorbing the strange and fearful barrenness of that airless globe.

Now, of course, the ice was gone, save for the minuscule beginnings of a new pack about the syphon. The vast machine itself, with its huge dome and its great rhodomagnetic discs, looked puny and vulnerable against the jagged backdrop of raw mountains behind it. The erratically cracked crater floor, with its millions of potholes, the sharp demarcation between blinding light and ink-black shadow, the star-studded, airless sky—all made him realize that though the Moon might be Earth’s familiar next-door neighbor in space, it would always be alien to man.

Even Malno, in spite of its exotic culture and architecture and social customs, seemed almost homelike in retrospect compared to the Moon. Wearing a Malnial spacesuit and standing on a low spur at the base of the mountains close to the syphon, Miles had never felt so alone, so pitifully insignificant, in his life.

He turned and moved carefully back toward the space-hut, which sat carefully concealed in the deeper shadow at the heel of the ridge. Momentarily he was looking forward to hot food and
liquid and companionship. Some of the little party might not come from Earth—but at least they were human.

They had been on the Moon a mere twelve Earth-hours, yet already it seemed to Miles an eternity. They numbered but five, Greya, Skarmpo, Dino, Mreya and himself—unless Pootz, the great green-furred cat was counted. Lacking a pleasant place to leave Pootz on Malno at such short notice, Greya had brought him along. The beast had adapted easily to conditions of interstellar travel. According to Greya many of Pootz's ancestors had flown the starways.

Miles had expressed surprise, not only at Greya's bringing the cat along, but for allowing her daughter to make such a potentially hazardous journey. And the erstwhile Finnish scientist had replied, "It's high time Mreya had a taste of field service, Miles. Very little of an interstellar agent's work is glamorous—quite the reverse. And some of it is dangerous."

Feeling scarcely competent to play the critic toward other-world parental custom, Miles had let it go at that—and certainly the enraptured Dino was the happier for the dark-eyed girl's presence. Yet in Miles' mind a lurking worry persisted. He had a strong hunch, based on their previous experience, that the Lunar portion of their mission might well again prove dangerous.

They had reached the Moon in comfort aboard another of the huge globular star-ships. And when no sign of enemy activity was detected in the crater it had been decided to leave the five of them there in a space-hut, well concealed, as multiple triggers for a trap against either Juan Wister or his Procyon fellows.

THERE was two-way communications equipment in the space-hut, sufficiently powerful to make contact with Earth or to flash a signal instantly to the huge Malnian star-ship that hovered within a mere hundred and fifty thousand kilometres of the barren satellite, ready to pounce swiftly the moment Procyonic activity was reported.

The hut itself was vastly ingenious, virtually a small house. If not quite luxurious, it was extremely comfortable in its compact way, possessed its own atmosphere-making machinery, food synthesizers and temperature regulators. Thanks to the cleverness of its camouflage it could scarcely be detected from fifty metres away.

"If we keep the ship here we'll never catch anyone," Greya insisted when he tried to explain that he thought the isolation of their party offered a definite risk.

"Okay," said Miles, "but what if our friends send a fleet? What good will our one ship be then?"

Greya pushed dark-blonde hair back from her smooth forehead. "They won't," she said confidently. "They're risking enough in a single-ship expedition. To send more would invite punitive action by the entire civilized galaxy. They aren't that stupid."

He hoped she was right—yet they had scarcely settled in the space-hut when a message from Earth gave him further cause for worry. Juan Wister, it was reliably reported, had disappeared. Thanks to his power and connections on the planet, the authorities were reluctant to issue warrants for a search of his English estate. Furthermore, there was great perturbation over the fate of the unreported Lunar expedition.

These messages were exchanged by the static-like galactic code with an interstellar agent in London. Miles urged Greya to have Skarmpo key them on a UN code so that he and Greya and Dino might give reassurance as to their survival and location—but Greya turned thumbs-down on the idea.

"We'd be giving ourselves away," she told him patiently. "Don't worry so, Miles dear—you'll soon be back safe and sound, fighting foolishly with your Joyce."

He could sense the wistfulness in her
Now that the Martian population trend, recovered from its brief upswing following the first colonization, was back in the decline that would mean the end of the race within a thousand years, two clerks at Nagaha were able to handle the census routines. Of the two, Lief Knutsen did his job efficiently and with speed. The pregnancies report came in to him on an afternoon when the belated sirocco common to this part of the planet was throwing dust into Nagaha beyond the power of the extractors to handle. It eddied outside, and drifted into the office.

He whistled briefly at seeing the entry under the column reserved for “Tribe of Father”: Human father. He called across to Ted Ashton at the other side of the room:
“A cross-marriage and it’s pupped.”

“Like hell,” Ashton said lazily. “You mean she’s gone back to her old boy-friends.”

“Human standards,” Knutsen told him, “Martian women don’t go on the loose. They never have done. Don’t you read your ‘Martian Behavior Patterns’?”

Ashton flicked the stereo onto another channel.

“The cross-marriages don’t pup, either. Don’t you read your ‘Study in Martian Biology’? I’ll take the biologists rather than the behavior boys any time. You know I thought of making biology, one time?”

“The only thing you were ever keen on making was outside the curriculum.”

He wrote on the form: “Formal notification to Genetics, Washington.” Then he threw it over to be snapped by the magnets that clipped onto the iron particles in the paper and drew it down into Ashton’s in-tray.

“To you, for action,” he said.

Watching the stereo, Ashton said: “To think that little number is a cool seventy million miles away. The colonial life . . . What’s a fat pension? It isn’t worth it.”

It was three Martian months later before he reached the bottom of his in-tray, picked out the form and, after scanning it curiously for a moment, pushed it in the file for Genetics Division.

Estro said: “It will be today,” and Peter did not go out to the fields with the others. He sat outside the cottage, his mind busy with the apprehensions of parenthood, the terrors of uncertainty and waiting. He had thought, in marrying Luara, that he was renouncing this. But what was supposed to be impossible was happening now,
“This.” Wister lifted the spacesuit over his arm. “I’m leaving it in the airlock. You can’t get at it without dying because I’m emptying the lock. I hardly think, however, that you want to die that uselessly.”

Miles looked wildly about for a weapon. His numbed senses were just awakening to what a superb opportunist his former host was. His plan, apparently conceived on the spur of the moment, revealed no loophole. And Miles could find nothing in the little chamber that might serve against the unwavering blaster his captor held. Once Wister was outside he, Miles, was helpless. Involuntarily he turned his eyes upward toward the ceiling above.

Wister smiled and shook his head. “No good, Stannard—the trap is locked. Better sit this one out.” With which he backed through the airlock door, leaving Miles alone with his thoughts and imagination, neither of which could be termed roseate.

Although he knew the airlock doors must be sound as well as airproof, Miles waited a brief interval before taking the only course of action that remained open. He climbed the companionway and pushed against the bottom of the trap-door that led to the deck above. Like the rest of the ship, like all star-ships, it looked tightly sealed. Hopelessly he pushed up from beneath.

To his astonishment it opened easily and he emerged into a much larger chamber that occupied the full belly of the ship. A combination of living and control quarters it was brightly lit, well furnished and, if far smaller than the honeycomb apartments of a full-scale star-ship, showed the same functional livability.

But for the moment livability was secondary with Miles. For, seated on the opposite side of the ten-metre chamber was Joyce Hartwick, in the act of lifting a forkful of food to her mouth—which was open not only for purposes of ingestion, but from an astonishment that equalled his own.

ONLY then, as he scrambled to his feet, did Miles realize how ably Wister could manipulate people like puppets. He had told his captive that the door to this chamber was locked, thus ensuring his opening it and being surprised to find Joyce. Almost—almost—he felt sorry for the girl he knew was a traitor to her home planet.

She said, “Miles!” and dropped her fork.

Miles let his actions reply for him, marched across the room, swept her tray from her lap, grabbed her by the lappets of her dark red bolo and yanked her to her feet. She beat at his hands ineffectually, tried to twist herself free, finally stopped wriggling to stare up at him mutinously.

Only then did he say, “Where’s the communicator?”

She jerked her head toward a battery of buttons beneath a round-cornered screen on the wall. Trying again to break his grip she said, “Don’t worry—it won’t work. He did something to it.”

Miles drew her close against him and found the close proximity unsettling to his anger—so he flung her down hard onto a couch-chair, enjoyed watching her bounce. Apparently he jolted some of the anger out of her. She said, “Miles, don’t be so rough—you don’t understand.”

“I understand too damned well,” he replied flatly. “You found the notes in Greya’s—in Greta Saari’s room at the lodge that gave Wister all he needed to get us into this mess. Now you’ve taken a powder with him. If you knew what you were up against even you’d have had more sense.”

“But, Miles—I was only doing what—”

“—what you thought would keep you in good with Wister,” he finished for her. “You cute, three-timing little witch!” He strode to the communicator, fiddled idly with the buttons, decided she must have been telling the truth about the communicator at any rate. He added, “I see Wister doesn’t even
He got hold of himself, said, “Do you know how to make this damn space-buggy work?” And, when she stirred, “If you do, get busy and obey orders or I’ll break that lily brown neck!” He wondered, with frightening detachment, why he had to use such adjectives at such moments.

Perhaps this very flaw was what softened her. At any rate she said, “I’m not sure—I’ve watched him. I can try. But without being able to see where we’re going . . .”

“All I want is to get this ship out of this cave so the Melanian detectors can pick her up. Now get moving—I’ll be right in back of you and I’ll break your neck if you try anything. Now, get moving, you!”

Sitting to keep herself as far from his long arms as possible, Joyce rose from her couch-chair and moved toward the controls. She glanced over her shoulder, saw Miles almost on top of her, read his determination, pushed a button. Nothing happened. She hesitated, pushed a second. There was a faint hum and the vision-screen sprang into life, showing the mouth of the cave clearly.

“So you couldn’t even tell the truth about that!” he said.

Her backward look was piteous but he shoved her head roughly around toward the screen. She pushed a third button and the ship rose with startling suddenness to grate against the roof of the cave. His fingers closed tightly about her neck and she gave a strangled squawk and gasped, “I’m trying, damn you—can’t you see I’m trying?”
ter of minutes. No one was hurt except Wister, who had tried to break loose and knocked himself unconscious against an edge of the outer airlock door. Skarmppo, who now held the hand-blower, looked down at the Procyon agent with overt satisfaction.

There was a brief council of war in the main cabin. Wister was in no shape to answer questions and Joyce stubbornly refused to talk. Despite the intransigence of her attitude, Miles got a distinct impression that the girl was inwardly laughing at all of them. It was not a comfortable feeling.

Greya, who had safely conveyed Pootz under her spacesuit, held the pale green animal in her arms and said quietly, "I don't believe there's much use in going on with this. Our unconscious friend here has evidently communicated with Procyon. So the trap is spoiled for the present."

"Okay," said Miles wearily, "but what next? Dino doesn't know how to fly one of these wagons and neither do I."

"Skarmppo does," said Greya. Then, to her daughter, "Mreya, will you pay a little attention?" She dropped the huge green cat, which leapt to the back of a lounge-chair and settled there, apparently satisfied the unpleasantness was over.

"What about the star-ship?" Miles asked.

Greya nodded toward Skarmppo, who was already busy at the communications. After a moment he turned to Greya and spouted a rapid stream of Malnian. When he had finished she said to Miles, "Our superiors agree. They will stay here to guard the syphon. We are to go directly to White Sands and present our mission to the United Nations."

"Swell!" said Miles. "I'm dying to get home. But what about our prisoners?"

"We'll lock them below until we reach Earth," said Greya. "I'm sure the authorities there will know what to do with them once the situation is clarified."

"You're not going to lock me up with him?" Joyce broke in silence suddenly, glared at the erstwhile billionaire.

"Why not?" Miles countered heartlessly. "You don't seem to have minded coming up here with him."

WHEN the Wister spaceship was within a thousand kilometres of Earth a message came through that the United Nations authorities wanted the landing to be made on Dewey Field, Long Island. This request followed a lengthy interchange of messages during which the Earth leaders were informed that with such a ship there was no danger of blast radiation, which would require her to come in at White Sands.

Miles had spent the brief journey in a growing state of emotional turmoil. While he had felt a certain triumph in condemning Joyce to the lower cabin, yet every time he thought of her locked up there with Juan Wister, he smoked like a piece of dry-ice.

Greya, for once, seemed neither sympathetic nor interested. Her entire being was concentrated upon the difficult task that lay before her—the presentation of the Malnian proposition before the U.N. Council. She commandeered her daughter to serve as her secretary and the girl dutifully obeyed, leaving a sulky Dino to his own devices. But Dino quickly interested himself in the working of the ship, with Skarmppo a willing tutor.

So Miles was left pretty much to himself, and his fertile imagination got to work with a vengeance, dreaming up various sorts of causes for jealousy in the situation below. Why, he wondered, did he have to get emotionally involved with an interplanetary traitor?

In view of the change in landing orders he was not unprepared for the spectacle that awaited them on the smooth, sleek surface of Dewey Field. In view of the reported suspense which had followed the destruction of their spaceship on the Moon he rather expected that
Dino, the three Malnians and himself would get the hero treatment.

But what he didn’t expect was that Joyce would receive the same. He had mentally geared himself to playing a leading role in magnanimous defence of the girl who had betrayed a planet, rather fancied himself in the part.

So when Skarmpo brought the alien vessel down to a perfect landing and the airlock doors were opened, Miles stood at a silent Joyce’s shoulder, ready to make sure she was not manhandled by the U.N. guards. Wister, still groggy, seemed scarcely up to any escape antics.

They emerged to find a cavalcade of swift aircars settling down around them, aircars bearing all sorts of official insignia and from which a stream of guardsmen and officials poured. Wister was whisked off under guard almost before he could set foot on Earth.

But Joyce got the royalest welcome of all. Miles found himself standing to one side with Dino and the Malnians while the slim brunette was hugged by a half-dozen members of the highest brass, Will Carter among them. He caught the mocking gleam in her dark eyes as she sent a sidelong glance in his direction.

IT WAS Carter who finally wrung Miles’ hand and said, “Congratulations on a great job, Miles—and especially for rescuing our Joyce from that heel Wister.”

“I—er—uh—it was nothing,” Miles managed feebly.

“It was a hell of a job!” Carter protested. “When we found out Wister had kidnapped her... I don’t mind telling you there was the devil to pay.”

“Kidnapped her?” Miles could barely get the words out.

“Of course—in front of a couple of witnesses too,” Carter told him. “How like her not to tell you once the situation was in hand! She just told us how you got her out of the mess.”

“Er—uh—well...” Miles stammered.

“The best she-agent the U.N. ever had,” Miles went on. “If you hadn’t man-

aged to get her out of it I don’t know what we’d have done—her uncle would have raised absolute hell, of course.”

“Joyce’s uncle?” Miles finally gulped.

“She doesn’t like it generally known,” Carter gabbled on. “but she’s old Freeman Craven’s niece—you know, the Grand Old Man of the British Commonwealth?”

“I know,” said Miles weakly, wondering why he was receiving this information only now.

To his mixed relief and embarrassment he found himself sitting beside her in the aircar cavalcade that took them back to the city. She regarded him coolly but without words. Finally he whispered, “Thanks for not telling them how I messed things up for you.”

The flick of her eyes was like the flick of an Australian bullwhip. She said, “To use a twentieth-century expression, Miles, you are probably the biggest square that ever lived.”

“I know,” he said humbly.

“Well, if you do it’s a step in the right direction.”

With which she proceeded to leave him entirely and wretchedly alone. How, he wondered, was he supposed to know who she was when neither she nor anyone else took the trouble to tell him. It didn’t seem fair. After all, he was fresh out of a couple of years in the Antarctic. When he thought of some of the things he had done and said to the niece of Freeman Craven, the last living Premier of the British Commonwealth, he felt his ears grow red.

They were rushed into secret session at U.N. headquarters, to explain what had happened to their ship and themselves, as well as the unexpected presence of two additions, in the form of Mreya and the yellow-skinned Skarmpo, to their number—to say nothing of Pootz.

Greya suggested that Miles, as the more articulate of the two Earthmen among them, act as spokesman at this meeting. Under the careful chairmanship of Mohammed ud Din, Miles told
their story in straightforward fashion—successful flight and landing, the ice-pack and syphon, Greya’s unexpected declaration of her alieness, the near-dreadful raid by the Procyon hijackers, the rescue by Malnians, the removal of the ice-pack to Malno, the return voyage to the Moon, the fracas with Wister and the return trip with the Malnians to Earth.

His listeners were white-lipped, stunned, when Miles finished. A Russian delegate proposed that the entire story was a ridiculous and pernicious hoax on the part of the American members of the U.N. to obtain control of the South Polar expedition. He also insisted that any persons claiming extraterrestrial origin should be liquidated as a potential peril to humanity. He also added, that if they proved to be aliens after all, the Russians had guessed it first. It was very confusing and very typical of U.N. sessions.

Mohammed ud Din spoke quietly from the chair, said, “Until we know more fully just what Mr. Stannard’s remarkable statement implies, I suggest we suspend all judgments. Certainly this is news compared to which Columbus’ great discovery is extremely small change.”

The Russian member then demanded a sample of Pootz’s pistachio fur in order that laboratory tests could prove the coloring artificial.

Willis Carter silenced him temporarily by suggesting that Russia had not contributed a half of one percent to the costs of the blasted Moon-vessel, that the ship in which the travelers returned was a great advance over the one destroyed and that it had cost the U.N. nothing at all.

Mohammed ud Din then suggested Greya explain herself. The one-time “Finnish scientist” rose slowly, soothingly stroking the huge alien cat crouched on the arm of her chair. She explained something of the basic galactic situation, of the immense value of Earth-water.

At this a Brazilian member rose to ask if it was his understanding that she implied all Earthfolk were lifelong drunkards. When she gravely replied in the negative there was brief pandemonium. And then Greya went on to say, “I stand before you now as an official representative of the Galactic Union, prepared to put before you a proposition which can scarcely help but benefit Earth.”

When asked to continue she told them, “My people are prepared to syphon off the South Polar cap by means of machinery already set up on the Moon, this obviating the immense problem of damming off the water released by the melting of the Antarctic ice sheet. Furthermore we are willing to give you in return the secrets of safe and economical space-travel and, ultimately, when you are ready, of interstellar travel. It is the hope of our leaders that you will see fit to accept this proposition, which they believe to be generous.”

It was Willis Carter, representing North America, who put the question Miles was waiting for. He said, “The proposition sounds extremely interesting and, at least for the present, highly beneficial to this planet. But what of the future? Once your people—or peoples, have obtained and used up the water obtained from our South Pole they will want more.” He paused.

“Suppose we allow directed tapping of the North Polar ice cap, including the glaciers of Greenland, the Arctic Islands, Alaska and Siberia—what will happen? The effects upon our climate will be incalculable and require drastic measures if the benefits are to be enjoyed. And when these waters are used up what happens?”

Greya said quietly, “The supplies you mention will keep the galaxy stocked for at least two of your centuries. By that time it is almost a certainty our scientists will have attained synthetization.”

Said Carter, “It is my understanding that they have been striving for this synthetization for at least that long—
without success. So by what right can we, as responsible Earthmen, expect such a result in the foreseeable future?"

"We cannot promise it, of course," said Greya reluctantly, "but we can protect the planet."

"As you protected our spaceship on the Moon?" a lady-delegate from South Africa suggested.

Mohammed brought the meeting back to order, suggested the matter was one which the entire U.N. should hear, set a date for the hearing two days from then. "Since it involves the entire planet," he concluded, "the entire planet must know about it and its representatives have an opportunity to vote. Until then I suggest all those who returned from the expedition remain as guests of the United Nations."

In a way Miles was grateful for the fact they were held in custody, however luxurious. Judging by the vidar newscasts they would have been almost literally torn to pieces by journalists and eager fans had they been left to their own devices. They were put up in a former millionaire's country estate on Long Island, not far from Dewey Field, where they were handy not only to the U.N. in New York but to the spaceship, which was being investigated by Earth-scientists.

Greya made her speech and Miles, along with the others, listened as she laid the Malnian proposition before the entire council of the U.N. It was done impressively and simply and won a vast round of applause when she offered membership in the Galactic Union as part payment for use of the Antarctic ice-cap.

LATER Miles and an exhausted Greya had dinner together in one of the private U.N. restaurants, overlooking the East River. So clear was the late afternoon that they could actually see the tiny globe that was Wister's spaceship, some twenty kilometers away to the southeast. Looking at it Miles said, "How small it is from here—yet it brought us back comfortably enough."

"It is really a space-yacht," said Greya. Then, resting her chin in hand, "Miles dear, what do you think they'll decide?"

He said, "I don't know, Greya. They are frightened, of course. This is all frightfully big and frightfully sudden for them. I'm beginning to feel the whole problem hinges on synthesis of our water. Otherwise your people are asking ours to take an appalling gamble. Frankly, as it is, I'm doubtful."

Greya looked at him gloomily, then nodded toward the flask that lay between them on the table. "I'm thirsty," she said. "If I ever wanted a drink of Earth-water, I want it now—but I don't dare risk becoming intoxicated at a time like this. Miles, I tell you, our scientists have tried everything—without any real results. Synthesis of Earth-water has become the riddle of the universe."

"Funny," he mused, recapping the flask and laying it back on the table. "It shouldn't be such a problem."

"There must be some unknown element or catalyst that belongs to Earth alone," she told him. "Something that doesn't exist on any other planet. If it did we would know what it is."

"And if it existed, every thing and every one of us would be a lot more freakish than we are in a humanoid galaxy," Miles reminded her. "I've got an odd hunch stirring around in the back of my head that the core of this supposed 'secret' is something right out in the open for anyone to see—if they could only see it."

"Are you implying our scientists may have forgotten something?" Greya asked with a trace of stiffness.

"Don't be so huffy about it," he said, covering one of her hands with his. "After all, something is rotten in Denmark."

They were seated thus when Willis Carter came in, followed by Joyce. Miles hastily retrieved his hand, but not before the dark-eyed girl sent a snappish glance of anger his way. The newcom-
ers dropped into two empty chairs at the table. Carter, Miles thought, looked tired and unhappy. He asked, "How'd it go, Will?"

The U.N. official shook his head, said, "They're scared out of their wits. It's going to take some time and selling to convince them they really aren't on the only inhabited planet in the universe. I know—I know—there's nothing new in the idea as scientific theory, but theory is a far cry from mass emotional acceptance."

"Miles didn't seem to have any emotional trouble accepting the alien idea," said Joyce cuttingly, eying him and Greya.

"You didn't seem to have much yourself," he countered. "Remember Wistful Wister?"

She colored faintly, loftily replied, "That was duty and—"

"—and you loved every moment of it," Miles told her.

"Cut it out," snapped Carter. "This is no time for personal squabbles, kids. We've got the biggest problem in front of us Earth has ever faced. Save your fighting till school's out." Then to Greya, "I hope you understand how our people feel."

"You forget, Mr. Carter," she replied, "that I have lived on Earth many years. I am well aware of your—human problems." This with a look at Miles and Joyce, who were glaring at one another, quite oblivious of their surroundings.

Joyce said, "You could have let me explain I was a prisoner."

"After the way you behaved at the lodge?" Miles countered.

"I couldn't help that," she replied loftily. "I was on assignment to see you didn't get in trouble—also to see that the time of the Moon-trip didn't leak out."

"Some job you did, kid," gibed Miles. Carter made a move to stop the squabble, but Greya with a half-smile, motioned for him to leave them alone.

"That was hardly my fault!" Joyce exclaimed. "How did I know Dr. Saari was going to write down the information I was supposed to protect?" And to Greya, "Doctor, I did search your room. I wanted to destroy your notes in case any existed, after I learned about your getting the call. But I was too late. One of Wister's servants had photographed it before I got there. I found a print-paper tab in the waste-basket."

"I'm sorry, my dear," said Greta mildly. "I'm afraid I misunderstood your purpose."

Joyce regarded her for a long moment, then said, "I don't think I misunderstood yours, Doctor. I've thought all along there was something phony about you."

"Ladies!" said Will Carter miserably. There was a long and sharp-edged silence. . . .

The big vidar-screen on the wall flashed into sudden life. A good-looking girl announcer appeared, announced a special bulletin. There was a picture of the Wister spaceship landing two days earlier at Dewey Field, of Wister, bandaged, emerging and being taken into custody.

Then a male announcer said, "Juan Wister, the erstwhile mystery billionaire and alleged alien interstellar agent from Procyon, has just managed to escape from United Nation's custody at gunpoint. The prisoner wounded one guard and was able to make his getaway in an aircar. He was last seen heading due south over the Atlantic."

"That's an odd one," said Carter. "I wonder what he hopes to gain by that. Sooner or later he's bound to come down and be caught."

"Maybe he is heading for a hideout in Brazil," said Miles.

"Hardly." Cool contempt edged Joyce's accents. "The dispatch said 'due south'—remember? That would take him right over the South Atlantic Ocean."

"You mean the South Pacific," said Miles happily. "Remember, longitudinally, New York is actually East of Santi-
 ago de Chile.”

“Don’t be technical—please,” the girl retorted.

Greya said, “I have what you call a hunch that we shall have another new bulletin very shortly. I don’t for a moment believe that Mr. Wister would make such a move unless he had a definite destination in mind. And there can scarcely be any place on Earth that would be safe for him very long.”

“You mean . . .” began Miles. Then, “But he only took an aircar! He can cruise around Earth all he likes in it—but he can’t get clear of the planet.”

“Correct,” said the scientist. “Yet he might be flying toward a rendezvous that could take him safely into space.”

“You mean the Procyons might send one of their ships here!” Miles was incredulous.

“Why not?” Greya countered. “We’ve managed to foil them everywhere else. Direct action is all that’s left for them.”

Greya rose, her face white, resting her knuckles on the tabletop as she stared at the screen. “The marzinks!” she exclaimed softly. “The vreestampt marzinks.” Then, to the others, “They’ve brought a syphon with them from Procyon. They’re planning to lift the ice-cap from Antartica themselves!”

Willis and Carter exchanged glances. Carter said, “But that means . . .” He paused, seeking words.

“It means,” said Greya ominously, “that unless they can be stopped or destroyed they may wreck this planet. They’re going to have to move quickly before our star-ship can intercept them. It means removal of the ice-cap and at least some of the mountains as well. It means planetwide earthquakes, perhaps worse.”

Carter got up hurriedly, spilling his drink. “I’ve got to see steps are taken to destroy it,” he said, his own face white. He left them, hurried from the room.

Greya, looking after him, said, “I hope your weapons are of some avail—but I am doubtful. Come on. We must get to Wister’s ship and communicate with our own star-ship. Miles, don’t forget my flask.”

He put it in his pocket as they hurried after Carter, outdistancing a waiter who pursued them vainly with the check. On the roof they found an aircar, got in, took off for Dewey Field, passing almost unnoticed in the confusion of that great establishment.

U.N. patrolships, capable of attaining tropospheric altitudes, were taking off, one by one, as they got there. They looked like semicircular bats as they whooshed up into the air, leaving loud tails of rocket-fire behind them.

Skarmpo, Dino and Mreya arrived moments later. Skarmpo looked even grimmer than usual and Dino had reverted to his state of funk at the prospect of action and his teeth were chattering with fright. Mreya looked half in love, half alarmed. A call to Carter got them past the U.N. guards and into the spaceship.
There Skarmpo tried vainly to make contact with the Mahlian star-ship, hovering somewhere outside of the Moon. He quit after a few minutes, said quietly, "They’ve got a jamming blanket around Earth. I can’t get through."

"Then what shall we do?" Greya asked, and it was the first time Miles had ever seen her at a loss.

"We’d better see what happens anyway," Miles offered.

They warned the field they were about to take off, made a smooth ascent with Skarmpo at the controls. He took them up about a thousand kilometres, then sped toward the South Pole. The Earth was a weird gray-green, cloud-spotted medicine ball in the vision screen.

When they approached their destination, the huge Procyon starship, with its ugly syphon attachment, showed up clearly on the screen, hovering low over the great southern continent. Greya said, "We’d better stay well out of the way, Skarmpo, or they’ll be after us. And we can hardly compete."

Skarmpo nodded and then Mreya gasped and said, "Look! That must be Wister now—see that tiny speck? It’s an aircar!"

They clustered in front of the screen and watched the drama unfold. The fleeing agent guided his transparent little vehicle directly toward the immense underbelly of the star-ship. It looked like a gnat making a landing on a soccer ball—or trying to.

For suddenly there was a flash of brilliant flame from the round hull of the Procyon vessel. The aircar dipped, sidslipped to get out of its way, then was caught full in the blast. A few tiny glowing specks could be seen dropping slowly toward the ice-covered ground after the flame had vanished.

"Good Lord—what was that?" Miles asked.

"They turned the engine discharge on him," said Skarmpo.

"Poor Juan," murmured Joyce. "After all, he was only doing his job. And they did this to their own agent! What a heartless bunch of so-and-so’s they must be!"

"No." Greya shook her head. "Not heartless, just afraid. I doubt if they knew who he was. Remember, he was not in his ship. So how could they recognize him?"

"Here come our ships," said Dino, who had kept his eyes on the screen. He put an arm around Greya, held her close to his side. Now that he was again in a familiar cabin, his fear seemed to have vanished.

"Go in and get ’em!" said Miles.

"They haven’t a chance," Greya told him unhappily.

It didn’t look as if anything could stop the U.N. squadrons that came streaking through the troposphere. Hundreds of them, in perfect three-dimensional formations, moved at speeds of more than sixty miles per minute. They swept down from the north like a cloud of gigantic geese, almost darkening the sky.

At first the Procyon ship simply ignored the attack of spurting rockets and cannon. Flame splashed off the sides of the globular star-vessel as if it were rainwater, not even leaving a scar. Formation after formation discharged truly awesome firepower at the unwelcome visitor, then zoomed over or dived under her to return to base, their ammunition exhausted.

And the Procyon ship simply hovered unmoving, ignoring them.

It was the seventh attacking squadron that, seeing the ineffectiveness of its predecessors, adopted other tactics. Instead of discharging their weapons while still well clear of the enemy, they held their fire until they were within a matter of mere metres.

"They’re going to ram!" cried Joyce. "The poor angels!"

It was the most heroic act Miles had ever seen—or heard of. The entire squadron, as if driven by a single rocket, crashed as one plane into the thick hide of the star-ship, firing all weapons full blast as they did so, actually smashing
into their own fire.

“They’ve got her!” cried Miles as the big Procyon vessel heeled partway over beneath the impact and the added unwieldiness of its improvised syphoning equipment.

BUT Greya shook her head. And even as she did so the huge globe of a ship righted herself once more while the charred remnants of her attackers fell to Earth like ashes from a cigarette tray. A magnificent effort—but an utterly useless one.

Miles felt sick.

He felt sicker yet at what happened next. For the Procyon hijackers evidently wanted no more ramming. Flame flickered out at the next squadron of attackers, and the next, and the next, destroying them utterly. After that the U.N. rocketships left the big invader alone, evidently on orders from higher up.

“Good God!” cried Miles suddenly. “Look below!”

Joyce gasped and he was not even aware the girl was clinging to him, thanks to his absorption in the horrendous spectacle of what was beginning to happen to the southernmost continent. Great cracks were beginning to show in the surface of the snow-white cap and the water around its edges began to reveal tremendous activity.

“You see?” said Greya needlessly. “They are simply pulling it off by the roots, not diving beneath as we did on the Moon. They are going to shatter the entire continent.”

“We’ve got to stop them,” said Joyce in anguish. “They may destroy the entire world!”

Miles looked at Joyce. “Honeycomb,” he said, “you traveled with Juan. You heard him communicate. What was his code signal?”

Joyce looked puzzled and Greya said, “What are you planning to do, Miles?”

“I don’t quite know,” he replied honestly. “But we’ve got to do something about this—this....” He gestured at the screen, on which the picture of continental destruction was increasing. “I just thought that if they destroyed Wister because they didn’t know who he was, they might think we were Wister. After all, we’ve got his ship.”

“I think I can give Skarmpo the code signal,” Joyce said promptly, her dark eyes lighting up. “We’ve got to take the chance.”

“They’ll screen us for sure,” said Dino doubtfully.

“Maybe not,” Greya told him. “It’s a fair chance they’ve got all their screens directed on the operation and are using only sound to pick up anything else. We’ve got to take the gamble.”

“No me,” said Dino. “I’m planning a little vine-covered hacienda for Mreya and me, and no screwballs are going to foul it up.”

“If we don’t do something fast there may not be any haciendas—or any vines either,” snapped Joyce. She went to Skarmpo, who had been listening without comment, told him what to do, giving passable imitations of Wister’s tones as she did so.

He glanced at Greya, who nodded, then gave the signal. Then they waited in silence, a dreadful wait during each instant of which Miles expected them to be blown to atoms. Finally Joyce looked up at him and said, “If—if anything goes wrong, Miles, I want to tell you I’m sorry we missed our chance.”

“If we get out of this, let’s give it a try,” he said.

“If you hadn’t been so damned stupid....” she began.

“Shut up,” said Greya sharply. “There’s no time for that sort of thing. Not now....”

She paused as the ship shuddered and the star-ship grew visibly larger in the vision screen. Mreya gave a brief squeal of alarm and the others exchanged grim glances. “What is it—what’s happening?” Dino asked in alarm.

“They’ve put a tractor beam on us,” Greya replied simply. “They’re going to pull us aboard.”
Far below them the entire ice-covered continent seemed to split in two as the kilometre-deep ice that had covered it for ages was torn apart from end to end under the tremendous pressures exerted on it by the instruments of the Procyon hijackers. But none of them gave this disastrous phenomenon the attention it rated.

For they were almost in contact with the star-ship from Procyon. The vision screen revealed only a small portion of the gigantic curving hull and from close up they could see that the air-attack had left its scars on the tough plastometal hide of the alien visitor—but no weapon had been able to pierce its meteor-resistant surface.

WITHOUT warning, an oval port suddenly opened in front of them. They were going to be sucked up into the hijacker’s ship and left to the tender mercies of these most earthlike of all galactic humans. Miles, after seeing how they operated on the Moon, felt small hope for mercy. He hadn’t foreseen the tractor beam when he suggested they get in touch with the invader.

It was then that Dino went berserk. He gave a sudden cry of, “Nobody’s going to make me go in there—nobody’s going to take Mreya away from me! Nobody’s going to...” He stopped shouting and sprang into rapid action, leaping on Skarmpo and bowling him over and taking charge of the controls himself.

As his fingers began to play a rapid tattoo over the control buttons the yellow-skinned Malnian suddenly cried, “No, Dino—no, Dino! Not that one. We’ll all be blown to bits!” He scrambled desperately to his feet, made a lunge to knock the space-pilot clear of the usurped controls.

But Dino hung on with unsuspected strength and continued to punch buttons. And, watching him, Miles realized he was not punching them aimlessly. He was seeking some definite combination. The engineer recalled that Dino had spent almost the entire trip back to Earth learning from Skarmpo how to operate the alien vessel.

Skarmpo finally knocked Dino away from the controls, but as he staggered back the Earthman was smiling a little smile of triumph—and Skarmpo gave a little cry of alarm as a look at the instrument panel revealed to him what had been done. He yelled something in Malnian, but before Greya could translate it things happened.

There was a slight lurch as the port of the huge star-ship began to envelop them, then a feeling of push-and-pull as if they were on the handle-end of a pneumatic drill. Then, without warning, the vision screen seemed to explode into a sheet of flame and some tremendous propulsive force sent them spinning outward, away from their “mother” ship.

What seemed hours later, Skarmpo got the rugged little space-yacht back under limping control. They had been blown high above Earth and the vision plate, now flickering and obviously in trouble, showed Antarctica far below them.

But it showed something else, something more wonderful and far more terrible. The Procyon ship still hovered over the South Pole. But where it had been a defiant gleaming silver in color, it was now a brilliant white—the white of molten heat. Obviously nothing human could hope for survival in such a gigantic oven.

While they watched, a little aura of pale blue flame seemed to flicker around it and it began slowly to turn cherry red. Above it the syphon gave out great clouds of steam from the water it had already absorbed, like some gigantic piece of dry ice.

The great vessel was falling, slowly, as some of its powers resisted the forces of gravity, then more rapidly as they succumbed to the molten death within. No one in the smaller ship spoke until the immense star-ship splashed its smoking ruins over a goodies portion of Little America.

Then Miles said, “What the devil did
you do, Dino?"

Dino, who looked like a chattering ghost and was obviously suffering a near-sick reaction from his achievement, said unsteadily, "Why, I directed our engine discharge straight into her midsction. I saw what it did to Wister and his aircar and thought it might make them sorry they were taking us in."

Greya shuddered and added, "It put their tractor beam into automatic reverse and spewed us out to safety." She turned to Skarmpo and said coolly, "Now see if you can contact our ship."

XII

THREE days later Miles was loafing around a suite belonging to Willis Carter, high in a Manhattan tower, awaiting a call from Joyce as to where and when they were to lunch together. He still felt groggy following his first real night's sleep since the near-disaster at the South Pole, wandered into the trim kitchenette and eyed a bottle of fine old scotch.

He uncapped it, then put it back. This luncheon date with Joyce was going to be it. They had had no time alone together, no chance to talk out the various things that had happened since their weekend at Juan Wister's English lodge. Miles was in love and he knew it, wondered how Joyce could feel the same toward him. A look at the mirror above the sink was scarcely reassuring. He was not, would never be, a male beauty.

There had been hell to pay as a result of the attempted hijacking of the Polar ice-cap. Though the Procyons had been stopped and destroyed short of their goal, yet they had done enough to make plenty of trouble. Severe earthquakes had plagued Southern California and the coasts of Japan and Portugal. Tidal waves had wreaked destruction in Buenos Aires, Capetown and Sydney. Resultant shifts had caused unexpected volcanic eruptions in Hawaii and the Mediterranean.

As to what would have happened if the depredations had not been checked, Miles hated to think about it. Willis Carter had said just the evening before, "It might easily have destroyed civilization even more completely than another World War. We're still trying to figure out a way to thank this marvelous party of yours."

"Just make me rich for life," Miles had replied. "I want to lie on a white coral beach and watch the hula skirts wave."

"You're much too valuable," Carter had retorted, thus putting an end to Miles' dream. He wondered now, what you had to do to earn a life of idleness and luxury. Apparently be born rich and stay idle.

The doorbell pealed and Miles went to answer it and admitted Greya—a Greya who was miraculously both sober and aglow with happiness. She said, "I've just come from the meeting, Miles. They're going to let us clear off the ice-cap. We're halting syphoning operations in return."

"Swell!" he told her, offering her a smoke. He had found, he realized as he looked at her, a very warm and real friendship with this alien woman. He added, "It was nice of you to come right here afterward to tell me about it."

"Who has a better right to know?" she countered. "Dino and Mreya are going to be married tomorrow. He wants you to be best man."

"He'd better look out," warned Miles. "Often a bridegroom but never a bride. That's an old Earth saying."

"That's a very old Earth joke," she retorted. "And a very—what's the word?—corny one."

"All right, so I can't be witty all the time," he told her, letting himself look aggrieved.

SHE gave him a quick hug and said, "I don't know what the women of Mal-no would make of you and your sense of humor, Miles. You'd either be the best hated or best loved man on the planet."

"Wait till they've all been drunk on
“Earth-water for a while,” he told her. “Then they’ll know what I’m all about.”

“How is it with you and Joyce?” Greya asked him, watching the ashes dissolve from the end of her cigarette. “Now that my mission is successful I want everyone else’s to be.”

“Keep your fingers crossed, honey,” he said. “I’m waiting for a call from her right now.”

“Then I’d better be going,” said Greya. “Actually my mission is only beginning. It looks as if I’ll be on Earth the rest of my life. I’ll have to send for the other children.”

“Maybe you’ll actually get married,” he said with a half-grin.

“Maybe,” she said quite seriously. “I think your Willis Carter likes me. He might make a very good father for my fourth child.”

“Don’t be so primitive,” said Miles. “He might even make a damned good husband. Remember, you’re not on Malno now. And on Earth it’s quite a trick.”

“What is?” Her light eyes widened.

“Getting your daughter married before you do,” he replied.

“You’re an idiot, Miles—but a nice one,” said Greya. Then, “But I came here for another reason. I think you still have the flask I was using when Wister made his escape and everything happened. At least I hope you still have it. I haven’t been able to find it anywhere else.”

“I’ve got it,” he said. “It’s in the kitchen.” He led the way out there, lifted it down from the shelf, handed it to her.

“I’d be lost here without it,” she said. “I haven’t the head for Earth-water.” She uncapped the flask, took a healthy swig of its contents, added, “Remember how I acted on the way to the Moon? I was so ashamed.”

“You needn’t have been,” he said frankly. “It was the first time you acted—well, human, in my company.”

“Perhaps I should have stayed what you call plastered on it,” she said, half mischievously, half ruefully. “You may not be as important as Will Carter, but you’re lots prettier.”

“You’re crazy,” he replied. “The mirror says so.”

“Mirrors are for women—and shaving,” she retorted. She came close to him, looked up closely at his face, said, “We don’t look for skin beauty in the men we love. We care a lot more for personality force and fineness. Remember that always, especially when you’re with a woman.”

“I forget everything sensible when I’m with Joyce,” he said, intentionally planning to bring Greya out of it. She was getting alarmingly personal.

“That for Joyce!” she said, snapping her fingers. “I’m five times the woman Joyce is and I’ll prove it right now.” She looked around, added, “Isn’t there some place a little more comfortable?” Her eyes gleamed dangerously.

“Greya!” Miles said sharply. “Are you sure you haven’t been drinking Earth-water? You’re acting sort of drunk.”

“Haven’t been drinking any Earth-water,” she replied with a headshake that sent her dark-blonde tresses flying. She pushed them back from her lovely face and said, “If I have, it’s because you put some Earth-water into my flask. Haven’t had anything else to drink since I left my rooms.”

“You wouldn’t play a mean old trick like that on Greya, would you?” she asked unevenly and large tears began to roll down her cheeks. “I’ll lay odds you would. You made Greya drunk!”

“Wait a minute.” Miles frowned. He was puzzled. He had taken a sip out of the flask here in the kitchen, just to remind himself how flat alien water could be. But he hadn’t put Earth-water into it. What in hell, he wondered, could have happened.

He tried to remember. There had been something—he studied the sink, noted the iron dish-towel holder that had been screwed to the side of one of the cupboards alongside. He had banged the flask against it before putting the cap back on and a large flake of rust had been knocked off the typical makeshift bachelor feature.
Some of it might well have fallen into the flask. He looked at Greya, who was still weeping silently, shook her hard to bring her out of it. She pressed herself against him and he found himself enveloped by a pair of soft, warm, experienced lips. Involuntarily, his arms went around her.

Naturally that was when Joyce came breezing into the kitchen. Miles sighted her over Greya’s left shoulder and, freeing his lips with some difficulty, said, “I thought you were going to call.”

“I wanted to surprise you,” said Joyce coldly. “Apparently I did.” She turned and walked toward the front door.

“Wait!” cried Miles, you don’t understand.” He raced after her, tripped over an unexpected ottoman, slid along some fifteen feet of fine plastic flooring on his chin, fetched up against the door ahead of her. Looking up he said, “When gentle methods won’t work, use force, I always say.”

Her lips twitched and then suddenly she was saying through her laughter, “Don’t think for a moment I’ve forgiven you, Miles.” But he knew the worst was over.

He got slowly to his feet and discovered no bones were broken, but that he had a bare spot on his chin which would scarcely be useful for a goatee again, informed Joyce of the fact. When she had subsided he said, “Go sober Greya up, will you, honey? She got taken drunk quite unexpectedly. It looks like a click between her and Will Carter, so hold your fire.”

“It looked like quite a click between the two of you just now,” said Joyce acidly, but she went. Greya came out of her jag quickly with nothing worse than a headache and apologized to Joyce.

“I don’t know how it happened,” she said, “unless Miles put Earth-water in my flask.”

“I didn’t,” Miles said quietly. “But here’s what did happen . . . .” He told them about the bit of rust falling into it. Greya looked as if she were going to be sick at the idea. But Miles said, “Tell me, Greya, when you scientists tried to synthesize our water did they ever think of using iron?”

She shuddered, said, “Of course not—it would have been virtually a criminal offense. You know rust is utterly forbidden among the civilized planets of the galaxy.”

“I think I’ve got news for you,” Miles told her. “If your people have been drinking Earth-water, they’ve been imbibing plenty of rust. And if your scientists have developed such a blind spot toward oxidation that they haven’t tried it in their efforts to make a synthetic Earth-water—well, I’ve got a powerful hunch that’s the so-called secret element that’s been missing.”

“You’re joking!” said Greya.

“I think he’s probably right,” Joyce put in. “He may look funny and he may say ridiculous things, but he usually is right. It’s enough to drive a woman out of her mind.”

“I hope I drive you enough out of yours to marry me,” he said.

“Oh, that!” Joyce was casual. “I decided to marry you the first date we had when you came back from Antarctica.”

“Rust!” Greya exclaimed again. She was still bemused. “I suppose it would be safe to produce rust—under laboratory conditions.”

“Listen,” said Miles, unhitching himself from Joyce for the moment, “when your people outlawed rust you were facing a plague you couldn’t control—right?” And, at her nod, “But now you have positive methods of preventing a recurrence of the plague—right?”

Greya nodded, said, “I think so—we must have.”

“Then,” said Miles, “when you finish removing our Polar Cap, start making your own rusty water. I hope you’ll be very happy.”

“I hope you’ll be very happy, too,” said Greya, still a little under the effect of the intoxicant.

“Don’t worry about us,” said Joyce. “If we don’t kill each other the first week we’ll be fine!”
Affair of State

No war, you may say, is unavoidable, but Jerrold would disagree, and he was one of the two people who knew the secret debacle of that first and last attempt at peace-making before worlds clashed.

In Captain Jerrold’s time, The Alliance of Inner Planets, encompassing every habitable world and bit of rock from Mercury to Mars, had grown to ten billions of people. The rag-tag, numerically inferior Jovian Empire should have presented no real threat to its sovereignty, but the planets of the Alliance, under its youthful First Coordinator, had basked for generations in the warmest rays of the sun and an inbred sense of security. Their defense system, as Jerrold frequently observed, was “damned inadequate.”

The First had but one wife to give for his country

73
The Empire, based not upon Jovian, but Callistian suzerainty, consisted of exiles from a dozen worlds. Hard-bitten Earthlings mingled with slightly scaly Venusians. Carapaced Martians played rith with horny Mercurians at Ganymedian gaming tables, and raided the colonies at night. And the humanoid Uranians, who looked distressingly like kilt-clad sturgeons, when you met one face to face, kept the shops and plied their cutthroat interplanetary trade with the blessings of the Emperor that few of them had seen.

The peoples of the Outer Planets were inventive, ingenious and admirably suited for life in their cold worlds where even breathable atmosphere had to be manufactured through sub-atomic processes, and heat generated in a like manner to keep it fluid.

In the larger cities people decried the limitations of the space helmet, wearing instead small crystalline disks in their throats which adapted a heavy, sticky atmosphere to a dozen kinds of lungs. This often made people hoarse, lending a disagreeable rasp to their voices which (according to Jerrold) was frequently in keeping with venomous personalities.

On the uneventful voyage of state, from Earth to Callisto, Jerrold had painted the treachery of these people in darkest hues, for the benefit of his companion. Now that planetfall was at hand, new misgivings assailed him, and he looked with growing irritation upon the untroubled features of the First Co-ordinator. He would give anything, he thought perversely, to shake that calm just once.

The First, he thought sourly, was just like his father had been, ram-headed as they come. The Old Man had been his C. O. for twenty years, so he ought to know.

The boy, now, had a brain so complex that it had appalled the psychologists when he won the competitive exams that had made him leader of four worlds. But, like everybody else, he had his weaknesses, and the worst of these was the way he trusted everybody he met. Three days ago the emissary of the Jovian Emperor had brought an invitation from that devious monarch to visit him on Callisto, hinting that war might still be averted despite all the signs of growing unrest.

"If there is a chance of preventing the destruction of our worlds," said the First Co-ordinator, "I shall have to go. Jerrold can accompany me—if he wants to. Otherwise I shall go alone."

"As your aide," Jerrold had growled, "I advise against this damn foolishness. Supposing they hold us for ransom? I say if we've got to go, take the whole fleet along and—"

"And start a war?" the First finished coolly.

"You can't make deals with cut-throats," Jerrold had answered.

BUT here they were, ten million miles outside of Saturn, and hell-bent for God-knew-what. Over the protests of Cabinet and Congress they'd come, and the secret bitterness that Jerrold had contained since the inception of their journey suddenly bubbled over.

"Sir," he said, "there's something I've got to tell you before we contact these here Jovians."

"Yes?"

"It don't seem right, but I take my orders from the Defense Department, and I got orders not to let us fall into enemy hands, if you know what I mean."

The First Co-ordinator grinned.

"I mean if they take us prisoner, we can't take no chances of any Alliance secrets leaking out. I got to make sure we don't live to spill the beans." He patted the needle gun in his breast pocket grimly.

"I suggested it to Defense," the First said. "But why worry about it? We're not prisoners yet."

Might as well shoot my own son, thought Jerrold, but openly he gave his chief a withering glance.
The scanner abruptly screamed, its thousand-mile warning and the alien ship flickered huge and black on the viewplate.

Jerroid whistled. “Half a mile long, if it’s an inch. Do we run or fight?”

“We alter course, and make contact,” the First Co-ordinator said. “Unless I miss my guess, it’s our welcoming committee.”

The capital city of Callistoport was a startling admixture of civilizations. Steel skyscrapers fingered the black sky over the towers and minarets from a hundred ages and modes of life. The white pillars of air-car platforms rose near space stations, and the quonset-type Saturnian hive-homes nestled side by side with the transparent silicon houses of the Venusians, shining Mercurian columns and the curious, subway-like entrances to the homes of native Callistans. A tapestry of ingenious transportation and communication systems, the advantageous commingling of a dozen kinds of genius. A bizarre perfection in steel and stone and plastic.

“One good broadside from our eights,” said Jerroid with morbid satisfaction, “would blow it to hell-and-gone.” He’d felt acutely uncomfortable and edgy since the alien warship had collected their own craft in its magnetobeams and brought them here; all through the elaborate reception ceremony and the tube-trip to the palace. Now they’d waited for an hour in the reception hall, and the irony of two representatives of the Alliance awaiting the pleasure of a brigand made him boil with ill-suppressed rage.

“Our friend, the Imperial Minister, is finally returning,” the First Co-ordinator said mildly, nodding at the squat figure who approached.

“Damn Venusian flunky,” said Jerroid darkly. “With your permission, sir, the heads of two states are supposed to meet as equals. Not like this.”

“I know my protocol,” the First chuckled, “but we’re in the minority here, you’ll admit, and ‘when in Rome—’”

The Venusian bowed and smiled, just as though Jerroid and he hadn’t hated each other every moment since that first meeting they’d had at the spaceport. “You will please follow me,” he said.

They stepped upon a deep piled rug that whisked them endlessly along the hallway, through a dozen steel doors that opened and closed noiselessly behind them.

Soon they were in a corridor that seemed to stretch to infinity beyond them, and the carpet accelerated until the dead air brushed past their faces.

The portal at the end of the corridor was first apparent as a tiny pinpoint of light, but it soon grew to formidable dimensions, a gateway for a giant, as they stood, open-mouthed before its opening. On the other side they saw an immense cavern of drapes and statuary, of gold-crusted pools and shifting, colored lights; of marble columns and exotic, changing wall scenes. The vaulted roof was of the purest blue, where a synthetic sun burned and pseudo-clouds drifted aimlessly. It was a sybarite’s dream. But an earthman’s dream, Jerroid found himself thinking.

“It’s barbaric,” said the First Co-ordinator, under his breath.

Jerroid tried to step into the room. An invisible wall slammed him flat on his back on the floor. “Force field,” he growled, struggling to his feet. “Shy fellow, this emperor.”

“We will have to wait until His Excellency shuts off the screen,” said the Venusian. He pressed a button, waited a moment, then walked cautiously through the aperture. “His Excellency gives you audience, gentlemen,” he said.

“The Throne Room.”

“Damn nice of His Excellency,” Jerroid growled.

The Venusian bowed. “His Imperial Majesty, the Sovereign of Jupiter and Callisto; Regent of Saturn, Uranus,
Neptune and the Colony of Pluto. Ruler of Ganymede . . . Your Highness, the First Co-ordinator of The Inner Planetary Alliance and his Aide.”

Captain Jerrold sighed audibly.
“'You’re an Earthman,” the First Co-ordinator said. “I was sure you would be.”

The slight man in the blue robe bowed slightly and surveyed them for a long time with a hint of amusement in his dark eyes. He appeared to be indeterminately middle-aged, and there was an erectness in his shoulders that bespoke authority. “An Earthman on Earth,” he said at last, in an amiable voice. “A god here . . . I am happy you could come. You can remove your throat adapters here; the air is as pure as any on Terra.”

“We hadn’t expected such medieval magnificence,” the First commented.

The Emperor laughed. “It’s a front. Quite necessary, you know. One cannot rule these mongrels in the manner of your weak democracy. It is accomplished only with pomp and circumstance—and power.”

“We’ve got power too,” Jerrold said.

“Of course. I meant temporal power. But let me welcome you properly, with refreshments; then we can discuss the reason for your invitation to my stronghold.”

THE Emperor, Jerrold decided reluctantly, did himself proud. The immediate results of mixing Earth wines and Martian nectars he found not unpleasant—and mildly soporific.

The First Co-ordinator drank very slightly—a fact which the Emperor seemed to regret.

“You are not enjoying yourself,” he said sorrowfully.

“I can think only of the business at hand,” the First said. “Our nations may be at war in another week. If you’ve an idea, I’d like to hear it.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Jerrold said, but no one paid any attention to him.

“A merger,” the Emperor announced. Jerrold jumped to his feet. “A merger! We’d as soon sleep with a rattlesnake.”

“I’m afraid our political viewpoints differ too much for that, as you must certainly know,” the First Co-ordinator said. For the first time he was beginning to show anger. “Our two forms of government can never compromise on such basics as personal freedom. If you have nothing else to offer we will return home.”

“But I have!” The Emperor smiled twistically. “You misunderstood me. I referred not to an alliance of states, but of first families. In short, a marriage of state.”

“You can’t be serious!”

“I am. War is a spendthrift business, and I have no wish to increase my empire.”

Jerrold snorted.

“My nation,” continued the Emperor, “is technically superior. You, on the other hand, outnumber us. Admittedly we cannot agree on politics, but what I propose cannot fail to have a soothing effect on our troubled worlds.”

“But a marriage!” The First was aghast. “How could such a thing be arranged? Who—?”

“Who, but the First Co-ordinator of the Alliance, and—?” The Emperor pressed a button on his desk. “I do not believe you gentlemen have met my daughter, the Princess Altha Ra.”

Like a Mycenaean goddess the girl came from among the columns with slow assurance, and even the crusty Jerrold could only stare. She wore a flowing, simple robe obviously intended to enhance, to shape, rather than conceal her charms. The false sun in the synthetic sky shone down and made a rainbow of her hair, and when she smiled the great throne room seemed a small and cozy place indeed.

Jerrold growled the low, wary growl of a suspicious old bear.

“The Princess Altha Ra,” her father
said, and there was a possessive pride in his voice.

She took the First Co-ordinator’s hand, murmuring something polite and altogether friendly, and reserved for that moment her most radiant smile.

The First’s mouth opened and closed several times, but no sound came out.

“Cat’s got his tongue,” Jerrold said irreverently.

“I—I didn’t know you had a daughter.” The First Co-ordinator sounded strangled.

“You like her?”

“She’s—you’re very beautiful!” He remembered to bow, an archaic expression that seemed fitting here. A lock of brown hair got in his eyes and he brushed it away impatiently.

“My daughter also approves,” the Emperor said. “The decision is yours. You may have until morning, and I charge you, to think only of our people. The Princess will show you your quarters. There are no servants in the palace, for we are mechanically self-sufficient. You will find that the vendors in your suites furnish everything you want.”

There was a calculating smile playing about the lips of the Emperor when he left them.

“It’s a scurvy trick of some kind, sir,” whispered Jerrold. “I’d swear to it. The girl’s a spy, and I’d lay odds on it.”

The First Co-ordinator appeared to hear none of this. He was still drinking in the Princess Altha Ra. “The proposal is barbaric,” he said softly to himself, “yet, to avert a war I would—”

Lost in speculation he let the sentence dangle.

Altha Ra sat upon the edge of the conference table. Her Venusian robe fell away, revealing an exciting expanse of satiny leg.

The First Co-ordinator looked, and the cut of his jaw, thought Jerrold for a split second, was not unlike a leer.

But of course that was completely impossible.

SOME three days later, the marriage took place, amid ancient pomp, a parade, a Terran ceremony, Callistan rites. Even Jerrold, though he would never have admitted it, felt his suspicions weakening. The ether hummed. The Alliance debated hotly; then, finding it too late for mandates, sent its consent and blessing over 500 million miles of space.

The honeymoon, at the Emperor’s invitation, was held in the spacious confines of the palace.

Captain Jerrold languished about the palace for a long week brooding through the pale mornings, drinking himself stiff each evening. He rarely saw the First Co-ordinator since the marriage, of course, and it was just as well. Jerrold was of the old school of hard-knuckle diplomats who cannot bear the ignominy of appeasing scoundrels, and if there was still a tinge of romantic blood coursing in his ancient veins, it was the old-fashioned kind which sickened at the thought of commercialism. So Jerrold drank and brooded.

It was almost midnight of the seventh Callistan day since their arrival, and he sat nursing his glass, as sleep stubbornly refused to come, when his door burst open.

The First Co-ordinator’s face was pale, but his eyes were aflame as he stood there for a moment, breathing hard in the doorway.

“What the hell?” said Jerrold thickly.

“We’re leaving at once. Hurry and get ready before they find out I’m gone.”

“I’ve been ready for a week,” Jerrold said, staggering to his feet with joyous incredulity. “What happened?”

“You were right; we’ve been tricked. If I had only listened to you, my friend—but there’s no time for that! There’s an aircar on the parapet. We’ll have to take it to the spaceport. Once there, our diplomatic visas should get us near a ship.”

“Leave the details to me,” Jerrold said.
THEY fled along the passageway to an archway that opened into the balcony, Jerrold leading.

A squat figure barred their way to the aircar that waited there. It watched their discomfiture with a trilling sound of amusement, and spoke with alien irony in its voice. "Is it the Earthman? I saw you leave your suite. Would you desert the lovely princess?" And it laughed with a sound like the rustle of dry, old parchments.

"It's the Venusian!" the First said.

But the silent flame from Jerrold's needle gun had already lanced out. The figure sucked in its breath and collapsed in a shapeless heap. "I enjoyed that," Jerrold said. "That son-of-a-so-and-so has been spying on me all week." They made the car without further mishap, and were soon aloft.

There was no sound of pursuit as they set down the car and boldly made their way to the gate, displaying their visas.

The Control Officer, a Callistan, showed more than passing interest, but he let them through. The Earth ship rested where they'd left it.

"We've got to hurry," Jerrold said, climbing the ramp. "In a minute he'll think of calling the palace." He was sobering by this time, and the coolness that made him a first class spacer in the old days was returning.

He listened for the sound of the First closing the hatch and pulled the blast-off switch.

The great metal spheroid trembled slightly, moving upward, and suddenly leaped with a mighty acceleration that sent them into blackness as the fission plant took hold and bucketed them into deep space.

SO IT'S war, said Jerrold, with deep satisfaction, "but if you don't mind, sir, how'd you find out these renegades were pulling a fast one on the Alliance?"

The First Co-ordinator's face was white and sick. "That, Captain," the First said, "no one will ever know. Not even you."

"Sure," Jerrold said. "I ain't one to pry. Have a drink, sir?"

"I will," the First said emphatically, and took a large one from Jerrold's hip flask.

"It don't pay to do business with scoundrels," Jerrold said. "The only kind of business they understand is the kind I give that damn Venusian." He was feeling better and better; supremely vindicated, in fact.

The First's lip curled slightly. "Ingenious devils to use her," he said suddenly.

"Your wife?"

"My wife." He accepted the proffered flask from Jerrold once more.

"She was in on it, sir?" said Jerrold incautiously.

"I would have given up an empire for her," the First Co-ordinator said simply, "if I had an empire." And belched.

"It's too bad it had to happen that way."

"She was so innocent, and sweet and good. I felt she was good, apart from her beauty, and with her I was in paradise." A fat tear rolled down the young man's cheek.

"If you don't mind my saying so, sir," Jerrold said, "you ain't used to this Venusian stuff."

"I will be," promised the First, and sampled it once more. "You are my very old friend, Captain, and yet I hesitate to tell even you—"

You don't have to," Jerrold said.

"But a man's folly should be recorded," the First said, nodding sagely. "For four days and nights we knew nothing but each other! You know, Jerrold? Blissfully unaware of the outside world, and even now I can't say she lacked anything a perfect wife should have." He shook his head mournfully.

Jerrold nodded, comprehendingly.

"But you cannot know, my old friend.
Dare I tell? Yes, I will, I will, because I saw it with my own two eyes.” The First pointed to his eyes which, by this time, were slightly bloodshot. “We were never bothered, you know, at any time, because inventive genius of these people—well, we had everything at the push of a button, and if it hadn’t been for the damn ticking!”

“Ticking?”

“That damn ticking, Captain Jerrold. Every night! And twice I got up, but I couldn’t locate it. I thought of bombs, and clocks and cameras and I couldn’t find anything. She was standing there in the light of the vanity, and I could see her reflection in the mirror from my room. I had mentioned that there was an eight o’clock reception in the morning that we had to attend, and lay there thinking of the trip home, and what we would do the rest of our life together on Earth, and then, for the first time, I saw it!

“She stood there, smiling at her own reflection in the mirror and agreeing with everything I said. Then she pressed the place under her left breast with her thumb, and the door flew open! The ticking was loud, and I could make out the bright recording crystals that would never forget a sound, or a sentence, or a secret plan of war, and I could see the battery, and the other shining things inside her. She twisted a dial, and closed the door, and came to bed, still smiling.

“I lay there, and the thought kept running through my mind, escape! Escape! And I knew I could, Jerrold, because my wife had just set herself for seven-thirty in the morning!”

**Featured in the Next Issue**

**THE MECHANISTS**

A Novel of the Future

By DWIGHT V. SWAIN

and

**THERE IN THAT INFINITY**

An Interplanetary Novelet

By CONAN T. TROY
A zinc-cloud was moving toward him.

The arsenic mists of Mercury were nothing ... compared to the poison that stirred in the heart of ...
THE *Gamow*, trans-solar redball freighter, had come all the way from Pluto on a single orbit. She cut a tight path around Mercury, reducing speed, and settled on her tail on the exhaust-glazed surface of the interplanetary terminal at Ferrous City, in Mercury’s south-pole region. She touched with a gentle bump that meant a planetary landing to experienced space-travelers.

That happened on Monday, April 3, 2615 A. D., about 4400 by solar decimal time, or shortly before noon Earth time. The bump as she sat down alerted Gar Daniel, stowed away in one of the upper foreholds. He was half-frozen from the cold in the unheated storage-space, and half-blind from three months in complete darkness, but he recognized the bump; he’d waited seven years for that. He shrank back still deeper among the bales of dried food, and waited tensely until most of the clamor of planetfall had died away. Two hours later he drew a deep breath of relief when the dull clank of leaden hoofs on duridium plates, felt through the *Gamow’s* magnesium frame, indicated that the ship had begun to discharge her cargo of prison-made mining machinery.

Gar Daniel stayed where he was and listened cautiously for a while longer—until the clank of iron-soled hoofs became a steady rhythm. Then he slid stiffly but warily out of the storeroom.

He climbed the ladder to the ship’s nose. All lights were out, and only a dim glow, coming through the quartz noseplates, illuminated the executive quarters—about the same amount of light, Gar Daniel noted with an automatic scowl, that would reach Pluto on a “sunny” day—but it gave his eyes a chance to get adjusted.

He walked cautiously on the magnesium paneling, and that wasn’t
easy, for surface gravity on Mercury was only one fourth of that on Pluto and there was a tendency to let his feet slam. But he reached the captain's quarters, found the captain's emergency locker and pulled out the insulated pressure-suit that carried a scintillating ringed-planet on the fishbowl and on the shoulders. He didn't want a weapon; that was the surest way to get in trouble on Mercury.

He got into the suit. It had been made for a big man; Gar Daniel filled it.

He'd rather not have taken the suit, but his fluorescent prison clothes would give him away the minute he stepped into the fierce radiation of the sun on Mercury. He wasn't worried about the serious penalties for impersonating a space officer; in the twenty-seventh century there was no capital punishment, and a man with three hundred years over his head had nothing to lose.

Anyway, a man could not travel on the Hot Side of Mercury, even at aphelion, without protection from the heat, which at its lowest was above the melting-point of lead. Either on the Hot Side or in the cataclysmically tornadic Belts, a man did not dare to travel in the open and expose himself to the cloud-masses of arsenic or mercury vapor that might sweep down without warning. And the pitifully few interplanetary dollars—some two hundred—that Gar had saved in his seven years on Pluto, would not buy even a second-hand pressure-suit on Mercury.

With reasonable luck, however, the suit would not be missed for two or three days; with more luck it would be a couple of days before the Patrol could put a finger on him; by then he would be somewhere in the wilderness around Vanadium Village, hunting the partner who had maneuvered to put him three and a half billion miles away in the stinkhole of the system.

Gar Daniel fastened the chest of his suit and threw the fishbowl back on his shoulders. He found a depilatory light and disintegrated his black whiskers. He went to the zigzag stairway that ran down through the longitudinal axis of the ship, and started down the six hundred steps to the afterhold.

The fires of revenge were burning within him almost as fiercely as the sun was burning outside the ship. He was remembering, as he went quietly down, how well he and Crawford had worked it out, how they had protected their treasure from everybody but each other. There might be a lot of argument as to exactly what happened, but it ended up with Gar on Pluto.

Myron had written him regularly; he could afford to. Myron had been back to Earth a couple of times, but according to recent postmarks he was now on Mercury, prospecting.

Gar wondered how Myron had lost the huge amount of money he must have gotten for the tungsten. Myron was the ideal prospector for a planet like Mercury. He was incredibly tough, emotionally stable, and always alert. Also, unlike the usual prospector, he had a practical head on him. Nevertheless, it was obvious he had lost the money, for few men in their right minds would prospect Mercury except with the hope of making a quick fortune.

Gar Daniel reached the cross-section deck in the bottom end of the afterhold. He stood for a moment watching the two streams of Lead-Eaters coming and going on the long ramp. He tried to look like a space captain while he scanned the interior for workmen and guards.

The huge chisel-nosed Lead-eaters of the Antimony Range rolled by like ponderous toy moles on hidden rollers. They were brownish-purple, with small, sharp-nosed heads and huge, pink, shimmering eyes. Their twelve legs were so short that a man might not have noticed them at all but for the clank of their iron-soled hooves. The Lead-eaters were heavy even in Mercury's gravity, for they were almost forty per cent lead. Not even a dead specimen had ever been dissected, for the Conservation laws
were iron-clad and enforced at any cost. Radiation spectograms, taken at a distance, had shown something of their makeup, including the fact that tungsten was present in small quantities—probably as a catalyst or hormone.

ON THE backs of the Lead-eaters were big frame-works of magnesium, and riding their necks like mahouts were the mysterious two-foot Mercurian bipeds. Mercurians were known to have a halogen metabolism of some nature which left their skins silver-blue in color; they wore metal-mesh garments and talked in odd tones that seemed to gurgle through water. Their language had not been translated, for under Conservation rules contact with them was almost nonexistent. It was known that they liked salt, and when a trans-solar ship arrived, they would swarm to the IP terminal with their beasts. But even salt had a limited appeal, and scientists would have given considerable to discover some commodity that would entice them close enough for study.

Gar Daniel was not concerned with the bodily economy of the Mercurians. He walked by the loading-dock, simulating calmness. An Earthman handling a magnetic winch glanced at him but went on with his work. Gar took a deep breath of relief.

He followed the outgoing stream, striding down the ramp. He went through the side of the ship and stood for a moment in the shade of the upraised skin-section, near the edge of the ramp. An Earthman’s voice came from below, “Better not stand there, sir, those lead-eating rascals get playful.”

Gar did not look down. He nodded briefly and descended the ramp. At the bottom he came face to face with a third guard with a heat-gun. Gar stared at him coldly and went on by. He went around the corner toward IP (short for “Interplanetary”) Customs, but the instant he was out of sight of the guards he changed directions.

He had passed for the captain three times; that was enough. He walked fast through the weird twilight and the dry, burning heat that was fairly constant at the pole. He entered a rest-room and tore the captain’s insignia from his shoulders. They were put on with a plastic glue that gave way without tearing the fabric. He didn’t dare leave the insignia anywhere; he stuffed them in his outer pocket. Against the turned down edge of a metal tabletop he scratched the painted insignia from the fishbowl and then scratched it all over.

He went outside. The IP guards, now that the ship had been in dock for some time, and probably not believing it was possible for a man to stow away on a space-freighter anyway, had assumed he was the captain making a surprise check and apparently had forgotten him. He walked by the granite IP-Building, through the confused traffic of many entities, and joined the Lead-eaters again. He went with them to the warehouse.

A while later he stopped a monorail car going to the Beltport, a smaller field outside of the IP area and used for planetary transport only. He got on, pulled the plastic cover down, and the car shot away. He glanced around him. The only other rider was a wizened, leather-faced man of indeterminate age who had been too long in the heat and radiation of Mercury.

“Where you working?” asked Gar Daniel. The first word started as a whisper from a throat unused to speech for long weeks, but the question ended in a strong, deep voice edged with acidity—a hard voice.

The little man said, “I been up Fuming River, but I’m changing location. I’m going over west of Vanadium. I hear there’s been a strike of rubidium over there. That’s my line—potassium, rubidium, caesium.” His brown eyes, deep-sunken in his wrinkled brown face, looked mildly speculative as he turned them on Gar Daniel. “What’s yours?”

Gar hesitated an instant. Then he said, “Selenium, tellurium, tungsten.”
The little man nodded, "Good line—but tough going," he said.

Gar released his pent-up breath slowly. He looked back at the Gamow, standing on her tail like a flying-fish in a calm sea—but the Gamow wasn't a fish and Mercury wasn't a sea and it was far from calm; it seethed always with unbearable heat and tornadoic winds and rainstorms of molten zinc, volcanos belching blue fire and clouds of vaporous arsenic, rivers running deep with nitric and sulphuric acids, earthquakes that turned the Hot Side upside down and made the planet tremble, and lakes of boiling mercury.

Of the Cold Side little was known except that its near-zero-Kelvin winds constantly kept the planet's thermal balance in turmoil, and even of the Hot Side it was said also that they knew little, really, except that the violence of the planet bred violence in men's minds and in the minds of every System entity who fought it. They fought it because the Hot Side was the momentary source of the System's metals. Jupiter's gravity was still giving trouble, and the other planets—aside from Mars—were so far from Earth that they had not yet been exploited.

TUNGSTEN, the key metal of industry, was the precious metal of the twenty-seventh century. Long exhausted on Earth and never found anywhere in quantity, it was fabulously valuable in 2615. Gar Daniel and Myron Crawford, kids together, had been thrilled by the tales of exploration on far planets and had made a pact to hunt tungsten on Mercury. They read everything available on tungsten, worked with scheelite and wolframite, learned how to reduce the ore in a parabolic mirror to produce the crude metal. They worked, saved their money, and went to Mercury.

Crawford reasoned that their best chance would be in the least prospected area they could get into, so they picked the wild and forbidding Antimonies. There were only forty days during a planetary revolution when a man could safely travel the Parboil, but they found a deep cave where they could stay the year around. They refracted the ore and stored it in the cave, where it was fairly safe, for the only other non-Mercurian entities in the Solar System who could stand for any length of time both the heat and the full radiation that poured down on Mercury's Hot Side, were, oddly enough, the ten-foot Batmen from Neptune's farther moon, and the Batmen were not dollar-minded; most of them were Space Patrolmen.

So the metal-mesh bags of the brittle steel-gray element piled up. The metal came from the parabolic mirror in the form of radishes the size of the end of a man's thumb; the metal was heavy, and each radish was worth roughly a hundred dollars U.S. There had been a little quiet skirmishing with the Lead-eaters, but they had solved that without trouble. They had protected themselves from everybody and every entity, Gar thought bitterly, except each other.

According to Crawford's figures, they had almost two tons of the stuff after four years in the Antimonies. The ore was still plentiful, but their boyish ambition had been one ton apiece. They had been about ready to close the books when Gar, making a trip down the tunnel with two of the small, heavy bags, had found a Mercurian, strangled, near the storeroom.

He assumed Myron had done it to protect their cache, but, man-like, never accused him. Myron persuaded him to take the body to Conservation officials, but the officials unexpectedly turned the tables on Gar. He had thought Myron would step forward and confess, but Myron didn't. Gar was sentenced to three hundred years on Pluto for killing an extra-terrestrial entity, but such was his boyhood faith in Myron that he had not realized he was being railroaded until he sat out the long orbit to Pluto in a tiny cell.

He reached Pluto bitter with life. He made trouble. In fact, no solar entity
THE CYANIDED MAN

In the hundred and fifty years' history of the prison-planet had received as low a total of degrees Celsius of heat as he.

Perhaps the rankling and consuming fire of indignation over the injustice dealt him kept him alive in the open prison-pits of Pluto, where the sun was hardly more than a bright star and where the temperature on the surface, where there was only snow and ice and eternal silence, usually hovered around fifty degrees above absolute zero. Down in the pits this was boosted by warmth from Pluto's radioactive core, and the prisoners were protected by pressurized suits, but it still was a fact that the intractables learned to live and work in minus-one-hundred-degree temperatures. Most of them ended up in the hospital, but not Gar Daniel.

He never accepted his sentence and he never adjusted himself to it. He fought it unceasingly for seven years, consumed by the intensity of his desire for revenge. He climaxed it with escape from a supposedly escape-proof planet. Now he was back on Mercury. He would have somewhere from three to ten days before the Space Patrol could catch up.

Watching the Gamow disappear over the horizon and trying to realize that the impossible part of his long trip had been accomplished, Gar tried to relax—but it wasn’t easy. Recollection of the cold years built up a pressure within him that made it hard to breathe. He got control of himself and began to ease off the pressure, but his mouth was still hard when he got off at the Beltport and moved out fast, mixing in with the crowd, losing the little man whose line was rumidium—for even on Mercury men could be curious.

II

The Beltport was a sprawling supply camp in a deep valley somewhat sheltered from both Hot Side and Cold Side blasts but with both ends open for approach from the air. The control-tower for the ten-kilometer runway was the only modern chrome-and-glastex building; the rest were one-story asbestos shacks occupied by traders, commission men, professional grubstakers who took their legal one third and usually another illegal third, saloon-keepers, gamblers, electronic-dice runners and women.

There were black and white Earthmen, mostly bearded, and Saturnian Turtles, and the ten-foot Neptunian Batmen. A few Batwomen were in the dusty streets; they were easily spotted, for they were eight feet tall and light brown in color where the males were black. It was strange, Gar Daniel thought, that of all the species in the System, the females of only two came to Mercury.

A tall blond Earth girl, young and full of juice, stepped down from the door of an asbestos hut and said to Gar in a husky voice, “Come in and have a drink, big fellow?”

Gar shook his head brusquely and kept going.

She suddenly metamorphosed into a harididan with a shrill voice. “Too good for me, eh?”

He glanced again at her, his lids low, his eyes veiled, “You’ll be here when I get back,” he said brutally, and left her behind. A moment later he paused to scan the traffic behind him. Even in Beltport he could look over the heads of the crowd. A hundred yards away came a little entourage of giant one-eyed Cyclopses moving in formation around a litter that, Gar Daniel knew, held an indestructible, transparent belljar containing one of the Jovian entities who were the financiers of the System—a tiny brown Butterfly. Behind them the little man of the rubidium strike was darting through the traffic, his deep-set black eyes shining with intensity.

“A grubstaker will get him,” Gar thought. But the little man veered toward the blonde’s hut. She met him outside and they stood for a moment, bargaining.

Gar chuckled for the first time in seven years. Women came first, grubstakers next; Mercury hadn’t changed.
Then he cut the chuckle off short and hard. He swung left and started up a steep path. Abruptly he was almost alone. He gained height and looked back once more to be sure he wasn’t followed. From above, the entities in the street took on an aspect of sameness, for in the Belt every entity but a Mercurian who got a hundred yards from his own shelter wore insulated pressure equipment for protection against the sudden driving zinco-storms. Even the Turtles and the Batmen wore them, for nobody wanted to be galvanized with molten zinc.

Gar reached a hut in the deep shade under the antimonies cliffs. A nasal voice said, “Lookin’ for somebody?”

“A ride to Vanadium Village.”

“How much will you pay?”

“A hundred credits, U. S.”

A snort. “Cost you two hundred.”

Gar was making out the face of the man, gray-whiskered, with sharp eyes like those of a rodent. “Too much,” Gar said.

The man settled back. “Then you ain’t in no hurry. The walkin’ is fine if you can get across the Antimonies and up on Parboil. The Belt is tougher, but if you take it slow you might make it.”

Gar’s jaws hardened. “I’m no greenhorn. I’ve been on Parboil.”

The man looked at him curiously. “Then you know,” he said finally, “there’s only one way to get to Vanadium—and you know you can’t do it for less than two hundred. Beltline will charge you three-fifty—but I got a load of powdered prunes and I can take one man to fill up.”

Gar took a deep breath. “One-fifty.”

Unexpectedly the man shook his head. “I don’t know where you’re from, Mister, but I’m not licensed for passengers. You’ll go as cargo and you’ll go for two hundred.”

That would leave Gar less than twenty credits, U. S., but he had no choice. “When are you leaving?” he asked dully.

“Let’s see your money.”

Gar counted it out, his big hands swelling with the injustice of trading almost seven years of his life for a ride to Vanadium. But it would be worth it. He’d see that it was.

The man took the money. “Strip Four at 8400,” he said. “She’s a freighter—the Desert Hawk. The pilot will know you. And don’t be late. We fly under orders.”

Gar said coldly, “Mercury is not a very big place. Don’t leave without me.”

Something in his voice at last got to the other man. The man looked at Gar an instant and then moistened his lips uncomfortably. He nodded and went inside. . . .

Gar was killing time in the crowd, always moving, when the Desert Hawk rolled down the track and stood for clearance. Gar scowled. She was a local jet-freighter a hundred years old, and patched from stem to stern. A ragged, discolored weld along the forenoon showed where she’d run into a Venusian lightning bolt. She’d probably lain at the bottom of the Great Sea Swamp for years. Gar shrugged and crawled in beside the pilot. The port officer said to him, “You’re freight, you know. This ship isn’t licensed for live cargo.”

“I know.”

Gar strapped himself. The two jet-engines began to roar. The ship lurched forward, sinking Gar back into soggy, lumpy cushions. The ship slanted up the track and left the valley. She kept climbing into full, blinding sunlight. Gar closed his eyes, but the sun, four times as big and four times as bright as when seen from Earth, seemed to penetrate his eyelids and he could even make out the pilot’s silhouette beside him. The pilot dropped an extra shield over the cockpit and looked sidewise at Gar, who was just opening his eyes.

“Been here before?”

“Yes.”

“What’s your line?”

“Tungsten series.”

The pilot studied Gar for a second. “I
take it you found some."
Gar grunted.
"And you lost it—or you wouldn’t be back."
Gar started to speak but decided against it. It was a popular pose to affect disdain for one’s surroundings but to be expected to defend them if necessary. That sort of pseudo-sophistication was not attractive to Gar. He wondered briefly if that dated him.
He knew it was hard—perhaps impos-
sible—to explain how a man could be homesick for the Belt and the Hot Side. Mercury had been his first great experience. He had not hated the heat of the Parboil or the fumes of the Sulphuric Acid Swamps of the East Belt where Earthmen seldom went, or the great swirling clouds of arsenic, or the sudden drenching zincstorms that swept down the Antimony Mountains and up along Fuming River coating everything with thick layers of heavy metal that froze like sleet and didn’t melt until the sun came out. He had even felt friendship for the mysterious Mercurians who lived in the heart of the moun-
tains but who could work in the sun without injury even at perihelion and who never seemed to sleep—for with Mercury’s Hot Side always turned to the sun, there was no night. Gar Daniel had not minded even the endless daylight that seemed to light up a man’s brain and that drove many men mad. He was young and strong; he fitted himself into the planetary economy and became one with it instead of fighting against it; that was the only way an Earthman could survive for long.
Four years of that; four years in which he had become older and stronger. He had missed in one respect only, he thought now; he had not become hard. It was a hard planet for hard men, but he had had strength and youth and hadn’t learned hardness. It had taken seven years on Pluto to teach him that.
He glanced quickly at the pilot without moving his head. The pilot was trying to get more velocity out of his right-hand jet. "This tub," he said disgustedly, "should have been named the Mud Scow."
Gar relaxed with his own thoughts. The pilot’s questions had been from idle curiosity. . . .

III

VANADIUM VILLAGE was a little north of Mercury’s equator, about the middle of the West Belt. They crossed the Antimonies at Dead Man’s Pass, sixty-thousand feet high and less than a hundred miles from Gar Daniels’ old cave. The high mountains had been created by the stresses of a single great mass of metal that tried to equalize temperatures of zero Kelvin and eight hundred degrees Celsius, and up there many of the metals that ordinarily stayed molten or vaporized down on the surface lay in flat sheets or huge clumps; there were zinc, tin and lead, dull streaks of cadmium, and occasional glistening yellow rivulets of hardened sulphur. There were billions of tons of raw metal up there, but as yet the in-
accessibility and primeval violence of the twenty-mile-high mountains had precluded mining activities.

They shot along high over the Fuming River, a violent torrent of acids marked by clouds of brown vapor that drained the plateau but ended in lakes of frozen aqua regia near the cold edge of the Belt.

From above the river there was a good view of Mercury. Behind was the plateau and the incredible Antimonies; off to the right and the north and east was the Hot Side, a region of volcanic and earthquake violence that had defied exploration; even robot-manned mappers had never been able to cross it. Ahead and to the left was the West Belt, a comparatively narrow, melon-shaped slice of territory that, because of the planet's libration, offered some alternation between heat and cold. The North Pole region was an area of corrosive gases, and so the West Belt and the southwest quarter of the Hot Side were, so far, the only portions of the planet accessible to the restless inhabitants of the System.

He saw the towering icy mountains of the Cold Side far ahead, revealed by a feeble glitter from reflected light. Then the freighter went into her glide ... and presently Gar Daniel stepped out on the matted runway that formed the main street of Vanadium, and into the withering heat of the Belt.

Vanadium was a great deal like Beltport except that it was in the open, for, with the sudden extreme variations of temperature common to the Belt, no height of land could be depended on to stay in one place. Therefore the buildings here, being exposed, were more substantial than those at Beltport, and more firmly anchored. Nylon guy-wires were used, two to every corner (steel was as brittle as glass at Kelvin temperatures), and the buildings themselves were of limestone imported from Earth, hugely braced to avoid collapse under the metallic rains, and heavily insulated with asbestos and silicon-glass to avoid being eaten away by showers of acid.

This was Vanadium. It had changed its face a little in seven years, but it was home to Gar Daniel, and it looked good.

He glanced up and down the street. He didn't dare be recognized yet. But Vanadium had few loiterers; the climate did not encourage them. Most men came to town for oxygen or dehydrated food or explosives; they bought those supplies, hurried to the places of entertainment for relaxation in huge doses, then went out again.

Gar relaxed a little. A small passenger-jet was idling on the other strip, and a huge, sleek rocket-job with "Inner Planet Mining Co." in bold letters on its side, was standing at the far end. Pressure-suited workmen with their fishbowls thrown back on their shoulders were unloading equipment with an electric hoist.

Gar walked across the open space to the row of heavy buildings fronted with garish lights. The old signs were gone, and he was not astonished; they never had lasted long. He picked out a place with a shimmering lime-green fluorescent front; the sign said "The 88," referring to the number of days required for Mercury to circle the sun, in cerise letters two feet high. Gar went up. The door opened like a round camera shutter as he crossed the beam. He stepped in. The door closed behind him with a sound like the shuffling of a deck of cards.

THE ceiling was low. The light was soft and seemed to come from nowhere. The cooled air, hitting him after the heat outside, weakened him for a moment. Then strength began to flow through his veins. He glanced around. There were a few scattered Earthen at the bar. A Bat-couple sat in a corner, with their heads almost touching the ceiling, their wings folded in. A Saturnian turtle, huge in his pressure-suit, was sipping at a concoction of stewed
bugs. Gar strode to the pink-glass bar. It was long and set with lights and mirrors. The coolness of the place repelled him, for it suggested Pluto. Then he remembered how welcome that coolness had been when he had come in after weeks across the Parboil, and he was all right.

“What’ll it be, friend?”

Gar looked at the bartender, a florid-faced man, a little too fat for Mercury. “Yes?” the man asked impatiently, his white, soft hand fluttering behind the bar as if hunting a place to alight.

Gar considered. With sixteen credits in his pocket, conservatism was in order. He was hungry for bourbon as he had seldom been, but at two credits a shot for whisky imported from Earth—he shook his head. “A shot of prussic acid,” he said.

The bartender’s face went blank; his white hand quit fluttering. “Pardon?”

Gar felt momentarily safer. The man must have come recently from Earth; it would not be too dangerous to ask him questions. “Native stuff,” Gar said patiently.

“Oh.” The man’s hand settled on a large glass. “What’ll you dilute it with?”

“Straight,” said Gar.

The bartender paused just an instant. His eyebrows raised a trifle. Then he got a small glass and went to a plastic keg. Gar scanned the Batman through the mirror and saw he had an SP insignia on his shoulders. The bartender filled the glass and set it before Gar with a flourish. “Twenty-five demi-credits.”

Gar spun a heavy silver Earth credit on the counter. “What’s the big ship unloading?”

The man picked the credit off the counter deftly, soundlessly, while it was still spinning. “Tungsten machinery,” he said. “Big strike in the Antimonies.”

Gar froze. Then he tossed off the drink and asked care fully, “What part of the Antimonies?”

“Somewhere north of Dead Man’s Pass.” He turned away.

—but Gar stopped him. “Keep the change,” he said. “What’s the story?”

The man turned back, tossing the credit up and down in his white hand. “Reports been coming in for some time of a cache of pure tungsten back in the hills,” he said. “Inner Planet made a spectrogram survey and found out the Lead-eaters from one section of the range were running above their normal tungsten content. They sent out a surveying party and at the same time ordered new machinery in from Mars.”

“What’s the dope on the survey? What did they find?”

The bartender looked away, uninterested. “Nobody knows.”

Gar shoved the glass back. “Again,” he said, and reached into the chest-pocket inside his suit for another credit. He heard the shuffling snick of the shutter-door behind him, but he was watching the bartender. The man had punched out a sale and had placed the silver credit in a receptacle at one side. He had raised his white hand to punch the activating button, but he didn’t punch it. His arm hung in the air for an instant as a curious low-pitched buzzing came from the machine.

Gar began to feel as if a cold blast had hit him. He watched the man quickly and deftly extract the dollar from the receptacle. The buzzing stopped. The bartender got a quarter from his own pocket and dropped it in the receptacle, then quickly punched the activating button as a man came across the floor behind Gar, his expensive tungsten-soled boots making a characteristic short-lived, gritty, sliding sound on the plastic floor.

The bartender turned back. He looked at Gar and his florid face was a little white. He shoved the credit back across the bar. “It’s on the house,” he said in a strange, clipped voice.

Gar covered the credit with his big hand. The man coming in behind him moved up to the bar a few feet to one
side. Gar’s head did not move but his eyes looked up at the bartender. “What’s the matter with my money?” he asked in a voice that he knew would be lost at a couple feet in the electronically sound-absorbent room.

“You’re new here,” the man said hastily. “The drinks are on the house.” His eyes twitched as if he wanted to raise them to the corner where the Bat-couple were, but didn’t dare.

Gar said harshly, “Why did my credit make that sound?”

The bartender’s white face looked waxy in the indirect light — almost, thought Gar, like the face of a man in a coffin, surrounded with flowers. Then the man leaned forward and whispered, “Not many know this, friend — but somebody slipped you a credit from Pluto — and all money paid to prisoners out there is irradiated so it can be spotted. They used to have the alarms only in big banks, but there’s a new law that requires them on Mercury. They say,” he said in a still lower voice, so that Gar could barely distinguish the words, “That a man finally escaped from Pluto a few months ago, and they look for him to show up on Mercury, so the Conservation officials were here a while back and installed these buzzers.” He looked back at the machine and tried to be casual. “First time I’ve ever heard it,” he said. “Naturally we don’t get much of that marked stuff on the inner planets.”

“This isn’t your first job away from Earth, then,” Gar noted, thinking hard.

“No. Served a hitch on Venus— in one of the Uranian dives in Aphrodite.” He shuddered as if with distaste. “No more of that for me. They’re tough in the Mixed Quarter.”

Gar, watching him, said coldly. “They’re tougher in the West Belt.” He put the credit back in his pocket.

The bartender hastily filled the glass, keeping his eyes lowered. He set the glass down before Gar. “Don’t worry about the credit,” he said. “It probably changed hands a dozen times before you got it. You just happened to get stuck with it. That’s all.”

Gar downed the drink, still watching the bartender’s eyes. The native Mercurian booze smelled like distilled skunk-cabbage and tasted like raw acid — all the way down. It hit his stomach and began to burn, but he didn’t care about that. He wanted to keep his eyes on the bartender. The man had made a serious omission: he had not asked for another credit; he had taken a quarter out of his own pocket to pay for the first drink; he had poured a second. and now he was not waiting to be paid; he passed it off with a flourish of his white hand.

Gar held the man’s eyes. “I suppose there’s a big reward.”

The man nodded uneasily.

Gar turned the small glass in his big fingers and asked casually, “Did the reports say whether the escaped man had a heatgun or anything like that?”

The man’s mouth opened, then closed. “They didn’t say,” he answered, but a glint of fear came into his eyes as he looked up to meet Gar’s.

“A man like that,” Gar said, “with maybe three hundred years over his head, wouldn’t care much for anything.”

The bartender nodded. “I wouldn’t think,” he said, “that anybody would want to tackle him, myself.”

A heavy voice at Gar’s left said, “New here, mister?”

As Gar turned slowly, the man who had come in behind him closed up along the bar to his left. He too wore a pressure-suit with the fishbowl back on his shoulders. He was also a big man and he had a peculiarly purple face that would have marked him anywhere, for its color was ugly; and his broad, protruding lips, dark red, were an obscene-looking slash. Gar drew a sharp breath. They called the fellow Purple Phillips; he had been on Mercury for ten years; he’d been forced down in a private jet and walked halfway across the Parboil one year while Mercury was at perihelion, and the terrific radi-
ation had turned his face purple even through the polarized fishbowl.

Gar's answer was guarded, "Some-
what."

Purple Phillips looked closely at him. "I heard you asking about the reward. Don't you know that no Hot Side miner wants the reward? Everybody's wait-
ing for this fellow to show up and lead them to the tungsten."

Gar backed up against the bar. "What tungsten?"

"This fellow and his partner had two tons of the stuff cached away in the Antimonies. They don't figure it's been moved. They figure that's the stuff that Inner Planet Mining is after."

"His partner must have moved it by this time.
"They say the partner never did."
"Where's the partner now?" Gar asked.

"In the Antimonies."

Gar sneered. "Why don't they follow the partner then?"

"They've tried," said Purple Phillips. He turned to the bartender. "Give me another shot of that Venussian bug-juice, and give this—newcomer here, another drink."

He stared at Gar. "Mighty white skin you've got."

Gar said shortly, "I don't always burn."

Purple Phillips studied him through sharp blue eyes. "Mighty good suit you got there," he observed. He stared at the shoulders. "Officer's grade. Where can a man buy a suit like that?"

Gar felt the man's implied accusations closing in around him, and he began to tighten up. He was already in a trap, but he had found out what he wanted to know: Myron Crawford was still up in the Antimonies. He looked back at Purple Phillips' ferret-like eyes and said flatly, "Wherever they'll take your money."

Phillips turned to the bar and began to sip his drink through a siphon. Gar stood facing him, keeping one eye on the Batman and one eye on the barman and trying to watch Phillips for any sign of a signal. But Phillips said, "I figger like this. There must be ten million dollars worth of tungsten up there somewhere. If I was a man from Pluto I wouldn't take a chance on leaving a hot trail." He paused. "They tell me even the money and the clothes on Pluto are fixed so they can be recognized anywhere. So I think I'd hole up and let somebody else handle details. Then I'd come out when everything was ready, dash across the Parboil to the cache, get even with my partner, and get away with the metal like nothing."

"What if a man like that had no money?"

"He must have had. How'd he buy his way out of Pluto?"

Gar swelled up. "You don't buy—" he started.

Phillips looked up at him sharply, and Gar stopped.

"If he has no money," Phillips went on, "he could let the other fellow do the financing for, say, a fourth."

Gar was angered. Purple Phillips was trying to cut himself in for three fourths of the tungsten. Gar considered for a moment. He had not returned for tungsten; he did not believe there was much there anyway; he had come back to Mercury to face up to his ex-partner and deal out retribution. For a moment he was tempted to lead Phillips on and use him, but then he remembered that he had, in the seven long years on Pluto, come to one definite conclusion: he would not go back to Mercury with the idea of using subtlety or diplomacy or just plain finagling. He was going back to beat the living hell out of his double-crossing partner, and that was not a situation that called for finesse.

He glared at Phillips. "What if he didn't trust the other fellow?"

PHILLIPS shrugged, but Gar saw that he was stung. After a moment Phillips said, without raising his eyes, "I saw a man running from a Uranian spider once, down the main street of
The Pass. One door was open. He could have gone in there. But he didn’t.” He raised his eyes. “In the hospital, before he died, he said he saw the door open—but he didn’t know what was inside.”

Gar felt the pressure from Phillips beating at him relentlessly. Gar hardened. He hadn’t come three and a half billion miles to be pressurised. “Maybe,” he said, “there was a bad smell coming out of the door.”

He saw the man’s purple face darken a shade. Phillips finished his drink and glanced at the untouched glass on the bar. “Drink up,” he ordered.

Gar’s eyelids began to flatten across his pupils. He saw the Batman had sensed the tension in their voices and was looking at them. Gar turned his face away as if to look at the drink. In the reflection from the glass he saw the Batman stir. Gar turned and started for the door.

Phillips’ voice was ominous with suppressed anger. “You running out on me?”

Gar felt the man’s heavy hand on his shoulder. He spun. The Batman was starting to unfold himself from his seat at the far table, and for a second or two he would be helpless. The SP officer was not, of course, concerned with a private fight, but his interest was to be avoided at all cost.

Gar jerked away from Phillips and hammered two big fists into Phillips’ middle. The man met him with equally hard fists in the face and drove him back. Gar saw the purple face before him and pushed through to it, smashing the man back. The Batman was coming toward them slowly for he had to keep his head down to avoid the ceiling.

Gar felt Phillips’ hard fists in his face and stepped back. Then he drove forward with all the power of muscles toughened by long years in the prison-pits, aided by Mercury’s light gravity as compared to Pluto’s heavier-than-Earth gravity. For a moment there was only the thud of fists on pressure-suits and the silklike rustle as they slid off, the grunts of big men as they swung, a whistling of breath through Purple Phillips’ heavy lips, the smack of a heavy fist on hard bone, and the soft, gritty shuffle of tungsten-soled boots on the plastic floor. Then it was too much for Phillips. He gave way. Gar saw his arms begin to fall. It was easier than Gar had expected. He put both big hands on the floundering man’s chest and hurled him into the Batman. He had one glimpse of Phillips’ black face and the surprised, beady-black eyes of the Batman as they both went down. Then he made for the shutter-door.

It opened as he dove through. He had a shoulder-patch in his hand and slapped it on one of the beam-projectors at the side of the door. He heard the shuffling whirl of the door behind him as it began to open and close with great rapidity—too fast for a man to get through. Gar shot around the corner, taking huge steps. The door would stop them for a minute or two. . . .

FOUR hours later he was afoot on the Parboil. He had vaulted into the idling jet on the runway, whose pilot had been inside a saloon having a last drink, and had taken off, only to run out of pentane and crash-land in the middle of the great plateau.

He swore for a minute and then he shrugged. He had not expected any picnic. He flipped the fishbowl over his head and fastened it securely to the neck-ring. He dropped down his telescoping gloves. He turned on a small flow of oxygen, for he was going to travel fast, and Mercury’s atmosphere, though it would be filter-cooled for breathing, would by itself be too thin. With the fishbowl over his head it was like night. He swung back the double polarized canopy and stepped out into the blinding radiation of a huge yellow sun.

He paused for a moment, getting used to the glare, and half expecting, as he
had a thousand times, that the furnace-heat of the Parboil would roll over him in a singeing wave. But of course it did not; only a faint breath of warmth came in upon him from all sides, only a hint of the four-to-five-hundred-degree temperature on the plateau.

The Parboil was not really a plain, but a great area of predominantly reddish ore which had been eroded by the violent winds of a thousand of Mercury’s short years, distintegrated by the ceaseless radiation of the Hot Side’s never-ending day, corroded by the drenching hot acids of the Corrosion Belt, and ground into fantastic other-world shapes by the sudden pounding zinctorms of aphelion. The top of the area was flat and level, but that largely was an optical effect.

The plateau probably had been a level plain to start with, but under the corrosive influences of Mercury’s Hot Side it had become gouged and pitted with gulleys and small gorges, and he had been lucky to land safely.

He could have made good time on foot, in Mercury’s light gravity, if he could have stayed on the level top, but that wasn’t possible; it was necessary, a large part of the time, to travel in the gulleys. They were seldom over twenty feet deep, but they crisscrossed and interconnected, and it was constantly necessary to climb into and out of them. A man could jump down fifteen or twenty feet if he used care not to tear his suit, but he could not jump out; that required climbing.

Gar took a deep breath and looked to the southeast across the reddish plain. Off there some two hundred miles were the tremendous mountains of the Antimonies. On Earth, one half of their hundred thousand feet would have been above the horizon, and on a clear day they would have been visible; on Mercury, with the sharper curvature of the smaller diameter, less than one fourth was above the horizon, but even that was almost equivalent to the tops of the Himalayas, and on Mercury the air was thin, so the Antimonies even at two hundred miles seemed to hang almost over his head. There was nothing in any other direction but the red, dusty surface, broken by gulleys which at a short distance resembled black cracks and check-marks, as in a sea of red mud slowly drying under the sun.

His eyes became adjusted. He walked to the nearest edge and looked down. He frowned when he saw the dark gleam of solidified zinc at the bottom. It was the “Galvanizing Season,” and he had almost forgotten. At aphelion the temperature was not always high enough to melt zinc on the plateau; the clouds, originating in the unexplored volcanic interior and charged with zinc vapor, made cyclonic curves to the northwest, over Vanadium, and back to the southeast, and those that had not discharged their vapor by that time invariably did so as they approached the great cul-de-sac formed by the Antimonies.

Gar Daniel looked quickly behind him, to the northwest. The sky was clear, but that was little assurance; it would take at least forty-eight hours to travel across the Parboil on foot. The humidity control in his pressure-suit would enable him to go a long time without water. The atompac power unit would operate the suit indefinitely. But he was without food; the patched-up private ship he had taken had offered no emergency rations.

He realized then he had not checked the oxygen supply in his suit. He turned his head back to look at the top of his fishbowl and for a moment turned on the oxygen full force. The pressure-disc showed yellow; the oxygen-tank was less than half-full.

He snapped off the pressure and swallowed hard. A man could get along on Mercury without extra oxygen, but he couldn’t count on making great exertion. He looked at the sun again—so close, after seven years on Pluto, that it seemed to be just above his head.

He knew the answer before he looked. He’d have to travel without oxygen.
That must be saved for emergency. It would take thirty hours longer that way, and seventy-eight hours was a long time without food, but—he set his face to the southeast. He found a place where the drop was only a few feet. He jumped down lightly, stirring a cloud of red dust. and followed the rivulet of solidified zinc at the bottom. He walked slowly but steadily, taking advantage of the gravity and making his strides long and ground-covering. He reached the top of the gully, climbed out, re-oriented himself, and set off again.

EIGHTEEN hours later he was beginning to tire, not rapidly but undeniably. The thin air of the Parboil wasn’t sufficient to sustain the metabolism of an active man even one accustomed to four times the gravity. The suit’s filter was cleverly designed to cool the air with the energy from its own heat, but it couldn’t put more oxygen into it. He climbed up a gully, got out on top, breathing deeply, and threw himself at full length to rest. He turned on a short trickle of oxygen, and it revived him quickly.

He sat up. Due south was the first cloud he had seen—a high, scattered mist of glossy orange-red—arsenic iodide, beyond a doubt. Well, it was high and probably would stay high. He wouldn’t worry about it. Then he made his usual scrutiny of the northwest. What he saw there was not reassuring. A great roily cloud was appearing; it had the dull gleam of zinc.

He watched grimly. Yes, it was zinc. It was a long way off, but it was moving toward him. He got to his feet. He turned off the oxygen and headed southeast.

He didn’t spare himself. For eleven hours he worked doggedly southeast, up and down, in and out of gulleys, thankful for the flat-tops that gave him breathing-space. For eleven hours he drove ahead. For eleven hours he did not look back. Then he stopped to rest.

He was astonished at the relative nearness of the cloud. It was still a long way off; it had come up fast and now covered the whole northwestern sky.

His lungs were beginning to burn but he got at once to his feet. He looked again southeast. If his oxygen would last he might outrun the storm. At top speed from now on, he’d reach the cave in perhaps sixty hours total time. He had been on the way for twenty-nine; that left thirty-one to go. He looked back at the dully-gleaming sky, watched the mile-wide lightning discharge, heard the rumble of Mercurian thunder, and felt the ground tremble through his feet. He turned on the oxygen and set his face to the southeast.

For sixteen hours he kept the distance between himself and the cloud. He had been hungry but had forced himself to ignore it. He had grown tired but had given himself an extra spurt of oxygen and had gone at a half-trot through the gulleys, up and down, in and out, over the flats, down into the gulleys again. But at forty-six hours the oxygen gave out.

He drove himself on. Men had lived through a zincstorm, but not without oxygen. There was no possible way out but to reach the Antimonies first. He heard the sibilant whisper of a jet-craft, and froze in a deep shadow. It was headed southeast and not traveling too fast. It might have been hunting him, but he didn’t want to be found. He had a job to do.

When the jet was out of sight, he got up and started southeast again. The great crags of the Antimonies were almost overhead. Their hundred-thousand-foot peaks showed the gleam of pure metal glaciers. He got his bearings and corrected his course a little to the north.

The thin air burned his lungs and his legs got heavy. But he kept going.

AT SIXTY-TWO hours he was still an hour from the cave but barely ahead of the zincstorm and beginning to stumble. He had been without oxygen for
sixteen hours, and in spite of his iron determination and the driving power of his muscles, his legs felt heavy and clumsy, as if they were fighting the gravity of a planet like Uranus. The storm-front was less than a mile behind him, sweeping toward the Antimonies, and the wind was a screaming roar at the great velocity required to push billions of tons of metal across the plateau. The electrical discharges, even from behind, almost blinded him. The ground trembled constantly. The odor of ozone was strong in his nostrils, and the extra oxygen helped him to speed up a little.

He pushed himself without mercy; he had come three and a half billion miles to even a score, and he didn't propose to be beaten by a storm.

He slogged down through a region of recently-ejected iron pyrites. He zigzagged among them at a tired dog-trot. He went over a transverse ridge, and, as he was on top and almost level with the surface of the Parboil, above the titanic crash and rumble of the storm, he heard the first sound of falling zinc. The tingling thud of quadrillions of drops made a giant-size metallic clatter, borne on the wind that now began to be strong enough to help him along.

He went to the bottom of the gorge and started up heavily. Then, not watching the ground, he stepped into a pool and splashed a silvery sheet of molten metal in all directions. He was thankful for the almost perfect insulating qualities of the kryptad suit, for molten zinc was well over four hundred degrees. He also noted there had been local zinc showers in this area, and he could only hope that the pressure of the bigger storm would clear the way ahead of him. Also, he'd better keep out of those pools or he'd accumulate so much weight on his legs that he wouldn't be able to lift them at all.

This really was the beginning of the storm-season. For the next twenty or twenty-five days the Parboil would be scourged with hot zinc, which would gather in the bottoms of the gorges, to be vaporized again when the planet reached perihelion, fifteen million miles closer to the sun.

A wave of native life caught up with him, fleeing from the storm. A ponderous Lead-eater, caught away from its habitat, went rolling by, grunting as it laboriously climbed the next grade. A school of Tinfish sailed by overhead, and a single-wing tin-feathered Mercurian road-runner darted down from the ridge and passed Gar on his right.

Gar stumbled a little. He steadied himself and went on, but his legs were getting numb. He couldn't feel his footing any more. He stumbled again, and then, hearing the roar of the storm behind him, straightened up and went on. He saw the road-runner swerve from something that looked like a zinc-plated rock at the top of the next ridge, and he wondered why the zinc had solidified up there. He reached it and started to sit down for a second's rest, breathing stertorously. The storm was less than half a mile away.

The rock was not as solid as he expected. He felt it give, then he looked. He got up. His eyes widened. The rock was a man in a pressure-suit plastered with a thick coating of hardened zinc, like sleet but far more deadly. The fellow had been in a shower and had fallen and not gotten up. When the storm had passed, he had been coated so thickly that he could not break the shell.

Gar bent over, frowning. The man was probably still alive, breathing oxygen, but he'd never be able to get up without help.

The sky was dull black from the storm, but the lightning was blinding even through the fishbowl. The pounding of the zinc-drops was deafening in Gar's audiophones, and the ground shivered. He turned quickly, without straightening. The downpour was only a few hundred yards from him. He looked at the metal-plated figure. There wasn't even assurance that he was alive, and no time to find out. Gar straight-
ened. What man would be out there alone but a man running from the law—or a Space Patrolman himself?

Gar's face hardened. He hadn't gotten this far by being foolish, and now, within striking distance of the cave, was no time to go soft. The man was nothing to him—and besides, the fellow was probably dead. He might have been there for weeks. Gar wheeled and started on.

V

The brownish-yellow peaks seemed to tower many miles over him, and the gray-green deposit of ore that pointed like an arrow to the cave was plainly seen from here. He sensed the faint odor of sulphur dioxide that seeped even through the filter. Then it came to him with a shock that the zinc-coated man was almost surely alive, for the sulphur issuing from the iron and antimony ores would have attacked the zinc and dulled it in a few hours.

Still, he reminded himself fiercely, the man was no responsibility of his. Every man took his own chances on Mercury. The man must know that, lying there. Gar wondered if the man could hear the pounding of the storm as he lay there unable to move.

Gar's steps slowed. He muttered an angry "Damn!" and looked back. He ran twenty long, Mercury-size steps. He broke the man loose, picked him up and threw him over one shoulder. The fellows wasn't too heavy, but the metal casing was like a casting and it wasn't easy to throw seventy-five or eighty rigid pounds over his shoulder. Gar straightened. He didn't look at the storm again. He turned to the southeast and began to walk, fast but carefully, watching every foot of the ground, for his legs moved without feeling and he knew that if he went down he would not get up.

Another jet went over high above the storm; its shrieking whistle came only faintly through the mind-dulling thunder-crashes Gar did not stop or look up.

His breathing became labored; his lungs seemed to be on fire; his legs were dead weights that he lifted with his will alone. He labored up an incline and caught up with the Lead-eater. Its huge bulk was quivering from exhaustion. It watched him with pleading, pink eyes, but there was nothing he could do. He turned his head away and passed it, trying not to hear its pitiful whimpering. He topped another ridge, and the roar of the storm seemed but little louder in his ears. Perhaps its forward movement was slowing, or perhaps his ears were getting numb. He started down the last long slope, refusing to be rushed, and then, with eyes beginning to glaze over, staggered up the ravine to the mouth of the cave.

It wasn't visible from the open end. He rounded a great crag. The first drops of zinc fell on his suit, sending up tiny spirals of smoke and dust as they solidified, but he was only ten feet from the opening. He took two big steps and was inside. The sudden roar of falling zinc closed in behind him. He took two more steps and slid his burden to the floor and himself sprawled at full length, gasping for oxygen. The drumming thunder of the storm closed over him. His tortured lungs heaved as he sucked in the thin air, and a few scattered drops splashed over his legs. Then he lost consciousness.

He AWOKE five hours later, by the chronoscope in his suit. There was no sound of the storm in his phones. He got to his feet, feeling wonderfully refreshed but ravenously hungry. The smell of garlic was strong from the antimony and arsenic ores. He took a step toward the mouth of the cave, but he sailed high and the top of his fishbowl grated against the roof. Then he remembered he was not on Pluto, and controlled his movements.

The storm had passed, and again the great sun was blazing down. The zinc,
falling on a surface heated just above the melting point of the metal, had run off rapidly, and down at the bottoms of the ravine was a pool of molten metal. Northwest across the Parboil, where the lower Antimonies robbed the West Belt winds of their scant water-content, Fuming River, covered with belching clouds of brown gas, would be running bankful of nitric acid formed by the lightning and the water.

Gar went back to look at the man he had brought in. Now that he had brought him this far, Gar supposed it was only common sense to get him out of that metal straightjacket and have a look at him. He stood above him and considered. The fellow might turn out to be an SP man, and if he did Gar would be in a spot. Having uncovered the man that far, it would be murder to leave him helpless; but if he released him, the fellow would arrest Gar immediately.

The man had no weapon such as SP men wore in space or on Pluto, but no projection weapons of any sort were admitted on Mercury. The Nine planets Council, taking notice of the vicious conditions on Venus a hundred years before, had banned weapons when Mercury was opened to exploitation; not even an SP man could wear a weapon on the planet except in the IP customs and immigration area.

Gar considered those things, and the fact that it might be a lot better to leave the fellow as he was. At any rate, there was no great hurry. Either by accident or design the man had fallen on his side and protected one of the air intakes. Gar turned the metal-cased figure a little and studied the narrow streak along the torso where the man had lain, which was free of metal. He turned up his phones, got on his knees, and listened. The man was breathing; he could hear the faint sighing of the filter, which apparently had been set on automatic and had come on as soon as Gar broke the fellow loose from the rocks.

Gar stood up and studied him again. A man who would know enough to set his air-filter on automatic and then fall so as to protect the intake was no novice. Gar's eyes began to narrow.

He could decide later. First he had to find food. He followed the cave. It went down into the mountain and grew rapidly cooler, for Mercury had no inner heat. When the temperature got down to a hundred and thirty degrees Gar threw back the fishbowl, feeling like a man stepping out of a concrete imbedment. Shortly afterward he found supplies—food in insulated containers, liquid oxygen in porous-paks, still with the Nine Planets seal on them. He noted the dates; all were in February, 2614. That brought a sobering thought: somebody had been using this cave. or perhaps was using it now—maybe the man he had brought in out of the storm.

He looked farther back for evidence of activity. If Phillips had been right, the tungsten would still be here. That didn't sound reasonable. Myron must have moved it out—and yet a man like Phillips would not be offering a hideout for an escaped convict unless he was sure of his ground. Could it be that Myron had been scared out—that he hadn't had the nerve to move the tungsten?

THOUGHTFULLY, Gar went deeper into the cave. His breastlamp threw a wide shaft of white light. He rounded a bend and turned left. This had been their storageroom. At the time of the murder of the Silver Blue of which Myron's testimony had convicted him, the room, which was really a small cell opening off the main tunnel, had been a quarter-full of tungsten.

Gar turned his light on the opening and stared. Then he moved up, incredulous. The room now was almost completely filled with metal-mesh bags. He picked one up. It was loaded with small nuggets that looked exactly like the tungsten "radishes" they had formed with the parabolic sun-mirror. The bags
were neatly stacked from wall to wall. There was no doubt about it. The tungsten that had been there when he had gone to Pluto had not been removed, but had been added to until now the storeroom was almost full; he was looking at twenty-million-dollars' worth of tungsten!

Gar whistled. He felt the blood rise in his head. Yes, all there—and every nugget dipped in zinc; they had worked that out just before the murder, because the Lead-eaters, crazy for tungsten, had finally tunneled through to the storeroom from one side. At first Gar and Myron had had to sleep in shifts, guarding the metal with sonic whistles, but the Lead-eaters had gotten bolder. Then Myron had discovered that zinc was poison to them.

Now the big problem was: why hadn't Myron taken the tungsten out—and who had been adding to it?

Gar heard the distant scrape of a Lead-eater's chisel, and extinguished the light. The sound came nearer, accompanied by the odd, water-gurgling voice of a Mercurian. Gar swung toward the sound and turned on his light with its full force of a million candlepower. Fifty feet down the tunnel a Lead-eater stopped abruptly. Its pink, shimmering eyes, as large as saucers, closed, then opened a fraction.

Gar had no doubt it was blinded by the sudden light. He watched the small Mercurian on its neck. The little fellow seemed rigid with surprise. His chartreuse eyes were big. The Lead-eater's head began to twist uneasily. Gar shouted in a hoarse voice. The Mercurian shouted something in his odd voice, and the Lead-eater turned clumsily in the tunnel and rolled downward out of sight.

Gar grunted. He wondered what they were doing up there anyway? They had seemed surprised at Gar's reception of them; were they accustomed to different treatment?

Gar was glad they had gone. He didn't want any more trouble. He found a fresh tank of oxygen and installed it on his back. He broke open a sealed box of prepared sirloin and ate every pound of it. He drank sparingly of water from the condensed supply. Then he looked for a geologist's hammer and found it. He got a pick and an air-chisel. He searched for a cylinder of carbon dioxide to charge the chisel, and finally found it on a shelf in the tunnel near where he had surprised the Lead-eater. There were a couple of dozen cylinders there, and also a dozen large plastic litre-capacity bottles labeled "10% Iodine." He wondered idly what part iodine played in the mining of tungsten. He charged the chisel, took the tools up past the storeroom and laid them in a recess in the wall. Then he went back up the tunnel to get the man in the zinc sheath.

He was as Gar had left him, still breathing. Gar studied him. Why of all the rocks in nine worlds had he had to sit on that particular one at that particular time? There probably weren't half a dozen persons in the entire million square miles of the Parboil, and if Gar had gone fifty feet to either side he would have missed him and would not now feel responsible for him. He felt indignant over it, but he picked the fellow up, threw him over his shoulder, and carried him down the tunnel.

He laid him down and studied him under his light. The zinc had covered the fishbowl. Who was the fellow anyway?

Could it be somebody hunting the tungsten cache? A startling thought struck him: the man at his feet could even be Purple Phillips. In that case Gar would be justified in leaving him as he was, wouldn't he?

Why get soft now and get into trouble for it? The Parboil was the toughest place in the System. A man like Phillips knew that if he went out there and played tag with Mercury's weather, and got caught, he couldn't expect anybody else to come along and pull him out. Gar hadn't expected help; he knew he
was taking his own chances.

This, then, was the time for Gar Daniel to be hard. The man inside the zinc sheathing didn’t even know who had rescued him; if Gar didn’t chip off the zinc, he could never even be accused.

He stood looking down at the metal-encased figure; his mouth worked for a moment as if he were ejecting something distasteful; then he threw back his fishbowl; he went to his knees and began to work on the metal over the fishbowl with the air-chisel. It was a deadly little instrument wth a sharp chisel-edged blade darting in and out some sixty times a second, and it would make a hole in almost anything. He told himself he was a fool, but he began to peel off the zinc.

VI

THE first clear space opened in the top. The man’s hair was light-colored. Gar worked steadily. He went around the neck; he split the zinc down the front of the head. He turned his light to one side so as not to blind the fellow; then he pried the two halves apart. He braced his foot on the back of the fishbowl and pulled the two halves back over the man’s head. There were still scattered bits of zinc stuck to the plastic. He began to dig them up with his fingernails and brush them off.

Finally he got to his feet and brought the man inside.

Then he gasped. “Crawford!” he said. The man smiled. “Hello, Gar.”

Gar’s voice was bitter. “I might have known.”

Myron’s smile flattened out. He said slowly, “It looks like you made it.”

“This is what I get for being soft,” Gar’s voice was unnecessarily harsh. “I should have dumped you in a pool of acid.”

Myron Crawford looked stunned for a moment. His face was lean, and blackened from Mercury’s radiation. “Why?” he asked.

“For testifying against me,” Gar sputtered. “Except for you they wouldn’t have convicted me of killing that Merk and sentenced me to three hundred years on Pluto.”

Myron’s lips parted, then closed. The incredulity in his eyes enraged Gar, and for a moment he thought of killing Myron. He could get by with it too. Just leave him in the pressure-suit and temporarily plug the air-valves, let the oxygen exhaust itself; maybe, even, release some of the oxygen on the outside. Killing another Earthman on Mercury wasn’t like killing one of another species. By the time SP got there nobody could remember anything, and pretty soon it was forgotten.

Yes, he should kill Crawford now. On Pluto they wouldn’t think once. The only trouble was that he wanted to beat Myron with his fists.

Gar Daniel could barely refrain from kicking the man now. He stood up and looked down at him, swelling with the justice and the might of his wrath, barely able to speak coherently, so great was his hatred. He flicked on the light at his chin so Myron could see his terrible contempt.

But Myron said softly, “Your letters—” his voice died to a whisper in the audiophones. His eyes were looking around Gar. “You sounded so cheerful—”

“You didn’t think I’d give it away, did you?” Gar demanded.

Myron studied him for a moment. “You remember the day we found the Merk in the tunnel, strangled with a loop of gold-mesh wire?”

Gar did not trouble to answer. “I had just brought down a couple of bags of tungsten after dipping. I met you halfway. You were going up to the mirror for another load. Remember?”

Gar still didn’t answer. “The Lead-eaters had been giving us plenty of trouble just before that, and even the Merks seemed to be trying to get at the tungsten for their beasts. You and I had talked about it. We
never caught them red-handed but they were always nosing around, and we had tried to find something else we could give them or trade them and get on friendly terms, but we hadn’t had any luck. They didn’t seem to be interested in anything but tungsten—remember?”

He stared at Gar, but Gar stared back without any sign.

Myron looked past his shoulder again. “You found the Merk near the entrance to the storeroom. His face was green from strangulation.”

“And you came back,” Gar said stonily, “and found me with the body.”

Myron nodded slightly within the fishbowl. “I insisted we take the body to Vanadium, for those bodies are practically indestructible, and I figured it would be found and traced to us sooner or later anyway.”

“So we carried that stinking body clear across the Parboil.”

Myron nodded. “On the basis of what we told him, the Commissioner of Conservation wrote out a warrant against you, and held me as a witness. We went to court at Ferrous City before the IP judge.”

“I remember every word,” Gar said venomously. “You were supposed to be testifying in my favor, but every word you said was against me. You were smart—too smart for me.”

“I answered honestly,” said Myron, his deep eyes meeting Gar’s. “I would have lied for you, but I thought it was better to tell the truth. I never believed for a minute that you killed him.”

“If you wanted to tell the truth,” Gar shouted, “why didn’t you tell them you had been down in the tunnel just before I was?”

Myron’s head twisted so he could look straight up at Gar. “I wasn’t asked, and I never thought—” he stared at Gar for a moment and then the radiation-baked corners wrinkled around his eyes, almost in pain. “You thought I did it!”

“Who else could have?” Gar roared. “You and I were the only ones in the tunnel.”

Myron was still for a moment. Finally he said quietly, “You lived seven years in the prison-pits with all that hate, and there was a pity in his voice.

“While you were spending my money raising hell on Earth,” Gar said.

“I never used more than enough to get there and back. I’ve been here mining tungsten, storing it, trying to find out who did kill the Merk, hoping that when I did I would have enough tungsten for you to make it worthwhile.”

“There’s not enough money in the System,” Gar bellowed, “to pay for seven years on Pluto.”

Myron took a deep breath. “You might have gone nuts, keeping that stuff all bottled up. Why didn’t you spill it?”

“I didn’t need your sympathy,” Gar said harshly. “There was only one thing kept me going: I wanted to come back and take it out of your hide.”

The light of comprehension went over Myron’s lean brown face in the fishbowl. He looked up at Gar, but strangely enough, in spite of his awareness of Gar’s hatred and his utter defenselessness, there was no fear and no pleading in his voice. “I heard those things about you,” he said slowly, “but I guess I didn’t believe them. I figured things could get twisted in three and a half billion miles.”

“Everything you heard about me on Pluto was the truth.”

“They said you spent most of your time in solitary—in the open pits.”

“Every day I was on Pluto,” Gar snarled, “the warmest it ever got was two hundred and fifteen Kelvin. I told them they couldn’t break me, and I proved it. They never even bent me.”

Myron looked at him curiously. “I heard that you told them you would prove that you were the hardest man on Pluto.”

“I’m the first one ever lived seven years in an open pit.”

“So it wasn’t long,” Myron went on,
watching him, “before they called you not only hard but glass-hard and case-hardened—and then somebody stuck a name on you that never left. They called you The Cyanided Man.”

Gar didn’t answer.

“The man with the glass-hard surface,” Myron said softly. “I heard all those things, and yet I didn’t quite believe them, for I’ve known you all my life, Gar. Remember when the older kids took my first play heat-gun and you went after the whole bunch? You licked them and you got my gun back too. And then you were embarrassed when I thanked you You’re sentimental, Gar—but you’re afraid of it.”

“I’m through being soft,” Gar said through clenched teeth.

“Sentiment isn’t softness. It’s humanity. And it isn’t incompatible with hardness. The most sentimental man in the System can still be hard.”

Gar snorted. “All that’s a bunch of talk. The only thing is—what am I going to do with you?”

Myron watched him. “You could leave me in here.”

“I want to feel my fist in your face.” Gar went down on his knees again and picked up the chisel.

A cold voice from the darkness said, “You guys oughta be on the tri-di’s.”

Gar wheeled and straightened. His light fell on the bruised face of Purple Phillips, standing at the first turn in the tunnel. The man walked forward, watching Gar’s face. “Mercury’s a small world, isn’t it?” He said, “It’s time for you and me to talk some business.”

“I don’t talk business with you,” said Gar.

Purple Phillips threw back his fishbowl. “I heard you the first time up in Vanadium.”

“How’d you find the cave?”

Phillipps grinned wolfishly. “Your clothes are irradiated the same as your money. I borrowed a superdetector and located you on the Parboil. I saw you trying to hide when I went over.”

“I whipped you in Vanadium,” Gar said coldly. “Get out or I’ll do it again.”

Phillips’ voice grew hoarse. “So you’re The Cyanided Man, hey? I’ll tell you something, buddy: I was tough before they discovered case-hardening. Did you think you whipped me back there in Vanadium? I had to let you get away then. The SP man was coming—and how could I find the tungsten if he took you back to Pluto?” Phillips’ light shot into the open door of the storeroom. He muttered an oath of amazement. Then he swung on Gar. “There’s twice as much as I figured. Now let’s get down to business. We’ve got just about two hours to reach an agreement and do something about it before the Batman shows up—and he’s got a Conservation officer with him.”

“Talk fast,” Gar said, “before I kick your teeth in.”

Purple Phillips looked at him with a sardonic grin. Phillips’ discolored face was ugly in the light. “You better save your feet to walk on.” He looked at Myron Crawford’s thin, tanned face in the fishbowl. He sounded complacent when he addressed Myron. “The way it looks to me, you’re no problem.”

Crawford’s brown eyes watched Phillips intently, a little apprehensively, but he said nothing.

Phillips looked back at Gar Daniel. “I know all about your act on Pluto—an amateur trying to be tough.” His gashed red lips suddenly parted over yellow teeth. “That’s kid stuff,” he said contemptuously. “You sass the warden. He throws you in an open pit—and you’re a hero!” He sneered. “The only way you’ll look like more than a punk to me is with your two fists and your feet and your teeth and whatever else you got to fight with. On Mercury you don’t get anything by pouting. On the Parboil there’s no solitary. If you want to pout, you got the whole Hot Side to do it in and nobody gives a damn and nobody brings you bread or water.” He moved so close that Gar could feel the
heat of his unpleasant breath; Gar felt repelled but he held himself from backing away. "I get what I want on Mercury," Phillips said, "because I take it." He stared into Gar's eyes for a long time. Then he sat down on a steel keg, his eyes on Crawford. "Sit down and I'll start talking."

For a moment Gar almost exploded. His scalp tightened and there was a strange tingling at the base of his skull. Then he got control of himself and said, "I'll hear your story—but if you've got any more deals where you want three fourths, you might as well start walking."

"You've got three hundred years to serve," Phillips reminded him, and with a couple of Osterhuses, you might live to do it. On the other hand, with only a part of what's in that room you could lose yourself. The System's a big place."

Gar sat on a bale of mesh bags. "I didn't come back for money," he said stubbornly. "I came back because my partner double-crossed me."

"Drown it!" Phillips stared at Gar. Maybe you're crazier than I thought. Maybe I ought to make a deal with Crawford. I could turn you in to the SP and then Crawford and I could split the metal." He turned to the man in the fishbowl.

Myron's eyes were stony. He said without vehemence, "The tungsten is half Gar's. I make no deals."

PHILLIPS' eyebrows raised in mockery. "You had your chance." He turned to Gar. "You and me, then. When the Neptunian gets down here, I swear that I heard Crawford admit he killed the Merk and let you take the conviction." He glanced down at Crawford. "He'll swear he heard us plan it, but it'll be two against one." He snorted. "Crawford goes to Pluto. You and I split the metal."

"It isn't mine to split."

"Don't be crazy," Phillips growled. "He said it was half yours—and he sure won't need his half on Pluto."

Gar got to his feet. "The way I figure it, you don't care who you deal with."

Phillips' eyes narrowed a little. "If you want to put it that way—all I'm interested in is getting my share of that tungsten."

Gar's temper was rising. "You haven't got any share in the tungsten," he said. "Get out!"

Phillips launched himself at Gar from a sitting position. It couldn't have been done anywhere but on Mercury. Gar jerked back, but the top of Phillips' head grazed the side of his jaw. Gar fell off the bale. Phillips jumped on his stomach with the heavy boots, but the light gravity saved Gar. He rolled and Phillips fell. Gar vaulted to his feet. He caught Phillips getting up; he ran at him and sank both booteels in Phillips' chest. Phillips' face went black. He fell. His fishbowl thudded against the rocky wall of the cavern. But he came back swinging his fists.

Gar took four hard ones on the chin and his knees buckled. Phillips pounded his face but Gar closed in. Phillips hammered at the small of his back, heavily, brutally. Gar retreated slowly to clear his head. Phillips pressed in hard, his eyes overbright, to make the kill.

Gar used a trick he had learned on Pluto. He hit Phillips on the chin with his right fist and followed it with a smash in the face with his right elbow, and a like pair with his left. Phillips staggered. His face was turning to a ghastly violet. Gar pressed in to beat him to the floor, but the high neck ring of the suit got in his way, and Phillips had sense enough to hold his head back.

Phillips fell. Gar started to lean over, but Phillips met him with both heavy feet in the face, a blow that crunched on Gar's cheekbones and shook him all the way down. He floundered. Phillips was up. For an instant there was only the rasp of stertorous breathing, the rustle of pressure-suits, and down in the cav-
ern somewhere the odd rumble of a Lead-eater's twelve hooves and the gurgly voice of a Silver Blue Mercurian. Phillips picked up something and ran at him. From his hands came the staccato clatter of an air-chisel. Gar stiffened. The chisel, pressed against him anywhere, would cut through his body in a fraction of a second.

Gar sidestepped grimly and swung a haymaker at the corner of Phillips' jaw. Phillips was shaken; his arms dropped a little. Gar hit him again and again, fist and elbow, fist and elbow. The chisel clattered on the floor. Finally Phillips went down with a dull thud. Gar stood over him for an instant, breathing harshly. Then he picked Phillips up in both big hands, raised him over his head, and threw him down the cavern with all his power. The man hit with a crash, skidded a few feet, and lay still.

But Gar growled, "What were you doing out there on the Parboil?"

"The Mercurians at Ferrous City had you spotted. Don't ask me how they passed it on to those here in the Antimonies—but I was looking for you in the glasses. When you came in sight, you looked just about finished, and I went to meet you. But while you were in one of those gulleys a zinc quickie swept up behind me. I had just time to fall on my side. I guess the storm swerved north after that. They usually circle around ahead of the big front when they get caught against the mountains. Anyway, you saved my life. Thanks, Gar."

But Gar looked at him with cold, hard eyes. "I came back to Mercury to get even with you," Gar said. "Throw back your fishbowl."

Myron looked at him, his deep eyes piercing. Finally he said, "If that's the way you want it."

He threw back the fishbowl. Gar hit him hard. Myron winced but he bore back. His fists were jarring. Gar grunted; maybe he was a little tired. He swung back and kept swinging, but Myron absorbed it and kept coming in. Gar shook his head to clear his eyes; he'd always known Myron was tough, but not this tough. Myron hit him on the chin. Gar's head jerked and Myron hit him on the chin again. It sounded in Gar's brain like somebody pounding with a hammer on the bottom of a cast-iron skillet. And all he could remember was Myron hitting him on the chin with blows that exploded against his jawbone like percussion powder. Gar saw yellow lights and heard the whistling of his own breath as he slumped.

W HEN he came to on the floor of the cave, with the garlic smell of antimony strong in his nostrils, there was the tall Neptunian Batman with the SP on his shoulders, and a husky, bronze-faced man in the dark blue of Conservation, and Myron Crawford, looking no different, and there was Purple Phillips
propped up against a wall, and in the light from the big Neptunian's chest-lamp was a ponderous Lead-eater, standing uneasily on its twelve stubby legs; and by the Lead-eater's brownish-purple head with huge, pink, shimmering eyes, was a silver-blue Mercurian. He was dressed in a garment of silver mesh, and his oddly shimmering chartreuse eyes were darting from one to another and back to Crawford.

The Batman said to Gar in his curiously whistling voice, "You better come with me. You've got a long trip ahead."

Gar glared at Crawford, but he didn't feel as much hatred as he had before. He didn't know why. He looked at the Batman, but oddly enough he did not feel like offering resistance, even though the officers were unarmed. "Okay," Gar said finally. He got up and looked at Myron. "I came out here to do a job," he said harshly. "I'll be back to finish it."

Myron looked at him. "Sixty hours on the Parboil and two fights," he said, his voice strangely gentle. "I think you've worked it off by now. Anyway, you're not going back to Pluto."

The Conservation Commissioner looked sharply at Myron. "Why do you say that?"

Myron said one word that sounded like "Ptui" through a gurgling throat. The Mercurian left the Lead-eater and went closer to Myron. Myron began to talk in a bubbly voice, motioning toward Gar. The Mercurian nodded. Then he nodded again violently.

Gar stared. The Conservation man watched intently. The Batman's beady eyes darted from one to another.

Myron said, "This fellow is a friend of mine. His name, as near as I can make out, is Tooey. He knows enough to get Gar acquitted."


"How did you learn that?" the Commissioner asked. He was watching Myron with keen blue eyes.

"After Gar was taken to Pluto," Myron said, "I had a lot of time. I tried to figure things out. I never thought Gar killed the Merk. And finally it dawned on me how simple it was—another Merk did it." He looked at Gar. "You wouldn't have strangled anybody. You were always the blustering type."

Gar watched him suspiciously.

"I set out a little tungsten for bait," Myron said. "The Merks brought their Lead-eaters to lap up the tungsten but I couldn't get to them for a long time. I had to figure some way to make friends of the Merks directly without using all the tungsten and without violating any laws." He paused. "Then one day I caught one of them drinking iodine."

"Iodine?" the Batman whistled.

"Remember they have a halogen metabolism—and it turned out they love iodine. So I began to leave it where they could get it, and pretty soon they got friendly and learned to talk. I wasn't trading for anything and so I violated no laws. I put it where they could get it if they wanted it—and they did. It's like ice cream to them. They got friendly and taught me their language. They even took me to visit their home. They have quite a culture down in the mountains, and they told me about the fellow who was killed. He'd stolen another Merk's wife." Myron chuckled. "The killer admitted it and they banished him to the Corrosion Belt. If we hadn't taken the body to Vanadium and thus removed the evidence, they would have tossed him in a pit of boiling cadmium. Anyway, just a few days ago I presented the judge of the Mercurians with a gallon of iodine and he promised to go to Ferrous City to testify for Gar Daniel."

"Iodine," the Conservation man pointed out, "is dissolved in alcohol to make the standard preparation. That's prohibited."

"It's medicine—and medicine is exempt if not sold or traded," Myron answered. "Also, I might point out the Conservation Department is required to observe the customs of extra-terrestrial
cultures and to take cognizance of their institutions. That includes their laws and their courts. And obviously, if a Mercurian has already been sentenced for another Mercurian's death, an Earthman can hardly be sentenced for the same death unless there's mighty good evidence. In this case there was nothing but circumstantial evidence."

The Conservation man drew a deep breath. "You're a good lawyer out here—but I'm not the judge. He'll have to go back to Ferrous City with us."

"Nobody but you can speak Mercurian," the Batman pointed out.

"There's no hurry," Myron said. "Tooeey has agreed to stay long enough to learn English. Time isn't important anyway—right now. Just put the SP seal on this tungsten and give me a receipt. We'll make a contract with Inner Planet to come after the metal. The seal will protect it from hijackers like Phillips here."

The Commissioner said thoughtfully, "There are plenty of things to indict Phillips for if we get the Merks to talking. I've had my eye on Phillips for years—but he's a slippery customer."

Phillips glared.

Gar looked at the floor and drew a deep breath. "It begins to look like maybe I got my cylinders crossed up," he said slowly.


Myron looked at Phillips and then at Gar. "I know what was eating on you," he said. "It wasn't as much the fact that you thought I was after the tungsten as it was that you were hurt because I had betrayed our friendship." Myron looked at the Commissioner. "Cyanided steel," he said as if talking to himself, "is glass-hard on the outside but it has a soft core. That's what keeps it from being brittle."

Gar bristled. "Listen, I licked Phillips twice and I can lick you from here to Fuming River."

"I don't doubt it," Myron said cheerfully.

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"I'll make a deal with you," Lorrance said, laying down his ultimatum.

The Enemy, Time

By ROGER DEE

The Terrans always get
their man—even if it
takes a century or two!

IHASSA, Astrophysicist Foranil
said. "I salute The Name!"
He rocked his ponderous, pear-shaped
body forward on its six stubby legs and
craned his flexible eye-stalks toward the
satisfying little planetary crescent
growing on the Spican ship's visiscreen.
"Home again, after seventy korads of
spatial surveying.... Strange, that the most widely-traveled people in the galaxy should not have outgrown homesickness!"

"A vestigial trait that will vanish in due time," Engineer Tsammo replied comfortably. A passage from the historic Philosophidae Ilhassi came to mind, and its aptness stirred a moderate ripple of appreciation through the sensory cilia that fringed the base of his conical skull. "As each of us must suffer some small clandestine emotion, so must The Race fall heir to the common whimsey of us all. But time is our mentor and our ally; the millenia to come shall conquer all failings."

They stood together for a short while—to the pair of Terran specimens who had just launched their desperate last-ditch gamble in their cages below and were waiting tensely for its outcome, it was a static eternity of three hours—without speaking further. They might have stood wrapped for twice as long in their respective reveries if the face of Ecologist Khii, third member of the Spican expedition, had not appeared on an intercom viewplate beside the main visiscreen.

"The squat specimen is ill again," Ecologist Khii reported. His truncated face was calm, as befitted a fully-integrated member of The Race, but his voice bordered on waspishness. "More ill than during either of its previous seizures. I am beginning to fear that not even the superior science of Ilhassa—I salute The Name—can preserve these incomprehensible creatures for long."

Astrophysicist Foranil and Engineer Tsammo considered the information briefly—for some forty minutes, as Lorraine and Ponder reckoned time in their lower-level prison—and arrived at the same solution that had served them twice before during Ponder's earlier, and equally spurious, collapses.

"Consult the thin specimen," Foranil advised. "Its ministrations roused its fellow before. Therefore they should do so again."

Khii made a negative gesture with an intermediate tentacle. "I have admitted it already to the squat one's cell, but this time its rites brought no result."

THE information was signally disquieting. Both specimens were vitally important to the expedition's report, not alone for presentation as unique zoological specimens but as indisputable proof to Colonial Policies of the ridiculous vulnerability of the dominant Terran species.

"Then we find ourselves again without precedent," Tsammo said. His voice took on a trace of Khii's near-waspishness. "There is nowhere in the chronicles of Ilhassa—I salute The Name—an example offering resolution to such a problem."

"It is possible, however," said Foranil, exercising the surprising talent for spontaneous logic that had led in the beginning to his selection for survey work, "that a conference with the unaffected specimen might suggest one."

The Astrophysicist and the Engineer, considering each other's ponderous bulks, concluded through a combination of pure logic and precedent that it would be more expedient for the Ecologist, being one, to come to them than for the two of them to go to him. Fortunately, transportation of the Terran specimen did not complicate the process; though frail and unbelievably delicate of constitution, it was marvellously agile and nimble of foot.

Ecologist Khii, following precisely the same reasoning, arrived reluctantly at an identical conclusion.

"I shall bring up the healthy specimen at once," he said.

He did not waste time and energy in relocking Ponder's cage, since the fact that neither of the Terran's previous seizures had run its course within less than two mirads—twelve hours, by Ter-
ran reckoning—made it a demonstrable certainty that the ailing creature would not rouse and escape before the Ecologist returned from conference.

Hence the second step of the gamble worked out exactly according to schedule. Ecologist Khii, with Lorrance in tow, shuffled his pear-shaped bulk into an interlevel lift and disappeared upward. Ponder darted out of his cage, crept on hands and knees under the viewplate from which Khii had called, and ran through a vast specimen chamber racked with a weird miscellany of caged fauna representing Ilhassan samples of other planets.

The deductions he and Lorrance had drawn concerning the appointments of the Spican ship proved to be encouragingly accurate. The engine room lay just beyond.

The conference, like all previous contacts between the Ilhassans and their erratic captives, began most unsatisfactorily. From the first moment of his appearance under the watchful eyestalks of Ecologist Khii, Lorrance not only refused to supply information concerning Ponder’s condition, but demanded a clarification of their status. He spoke Ilhassan astonishingly well considering the few mirads elapsed since his arousal from suspension of animation, but sprinkled it with Terran terms which had no equivalents in the language of The Race.

“Certainly I can make my friend well again,” Lorrance said. “But there’s no point in my reviving him until I know what we’re in for. You seem to have good reasons for bringing the two of us home alive—I want to know what they are.”

HE COULD have added that he was already reasonably sure of those reasons, since it happened that he and Ponder were better fitted to assess such a situation than most Terrans would have been. Both, prior to the Ilhassan raid upon their vacation fishing-camp in the Smokies, had been atomic physicists at Oak Ridge; it was that background which had enabled them to form some accurate idea as to the operation of the ship, and which had made Ponder confident that he could find the main generator in the engine room and track down the particular relay that activated it.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” Lorrance said, laying down his ultimatum. “I’ll bring Ponder out of his fit if you’ll tell me what your intentions toward us are.”

The little silvery crescent of Ilhassa grew slightly larger on the visiscreen while the Spicans considered the demand. To be bargained with by a captive specimen was not only unheard of, but ridiculous; Astrophysicist Foranil, exercising his most ponderous logic, made that clear.

The specimen wrinkled its improbably rectangular face and made a jarring Terran sound that bore some incomprehensible relation to mirth.

“So I’m not logical,” it said, showing formidable white teeth evolved for the purpose of devouring less intelligent inhabitants of its own world. “Not many Terrans are, and those few generally starve to death. But we have our points, and we learn fast... are you going to bring me up to date, or shall I let Ponder die?”

They considered the threat, distressed by the necessity of facing a dilemma not to be resolved by the vast and venerable wisdom of Ilhassa. The planetary crescent grew; Lorrance waited impatiently, sweating a little and throwing guarded glances at the bank of interlevel viewplates alongside the main visiscreen. If Ponder failed to find that relay...

“The information you ask can be of no value to you,” Astrophysicist Foranil pronounced, “since you will never be in a position to make use of it. We shall agree to your bargain, however, since the advantage to ourselves outweighs the risk.”
Lorrance bit back his impatience, resolutely forcing his eyes away from the interlevel viewplates.

"The part cannot be evaluated intelligently without considering its relation to the whole," Engineer Tsammo said weightily. "To outline our intentions toward you it will be necessary to refer to the original pressures behind the launching of our expedition. Ecologist Khii is our specialist in that field, since it is his function to assess the colonial possibilities of the various inferior worlds we touch."

Lorrance stiffened. "Colonization. Invasion. I thought so!"

Ecologist Khii took over in due turn.

"For some eighty millions of korads Ihassasp—I salute The Name—has sufficed The Race, but in our present state of advancement a program of expansion has become imperative. Moderate as our increase in numbers has been, the fact remains that dwindling planetary resources leave us only two alternatives: to import vital materials from other planets, or to colonize those worlds outright. The latter course is the more acceptable, since it is more expedient to transport colonists than raw materials. It also serves to spread the benign culture of Ihassa—I salute The Name—across the galaxy."

"And my world was the first to suit your discriminating taste," Lorrance said. He glanced at the blank intercom viewplates and put both hands in his pockets to hide their shaking. "Go on. What happens to Terrans when you start colonizing?"

Elimination, said Ecologist Khii, patently surprised by the illogic of the question. "That the inferior species should make room for the superior is a natural law too obvious to need discussion. It was to demonstrate to our Colonial Policies Administration the precise degree of Terran inferiority that we included you two in our samplings. As to your personal disposition, you are to be placed on public exhibit along with other exotic specimens. Our anxiety to keep your companion alive stems from the fact that you will probably be the last available members of your species, since the rest of your race will be exterminated when we return to colonize your planet."

"Like a boot on an anthill," Lorrance said. "And to the zoo for Dick and me—a hell of a prospect!"

He was sweating in earnest now, balancing the enormity of that prospect against Ponder's chances of finding exactly the right relay in the engine room below. "But what happens when you outgrow Earth, too? There's a point of diminishing returns that applies to colonization as well as to any other business undertaking. Or have you considered that?"

They had.

"During our seventy korads of exploration," Astrophysicist Foranil said, "we investigated a large portion of the galaxy, discovering several other planets nearly as well suited to The Race as your own. But our individual life span is so long, and our rate of reproduction so low, that it must be some further thousands of korads before we are forced again to consider expansion."

Lorrance nodded, scowling. "It's obvious enough that you're a long-lived race. It's also obvious that you've had unlimited time to build up to your present strength because you were never balked along the way. It might have been different if Ihassa—"

"We salute The Name," the three intoned.

"—had run afoul of the sort of power Earth would be some day if you'd been late enough in stumbling across her."

Ecologist Khii ruffled his sensory cilia preparatory to answering, but was interrupted by the sudden lighting of an interlevel viewplate to the right of the main visiscreen. Ponder looked out at Lorrance and made a decisive "O" with thumb and forefinger.
"I've found it," he said tersely. "You can state our terms now."

He vanished from the viewplate, to reappear a moment later in dwindling perspective as he moved across the engine room to stand before a compact switching-panel set into the bottom of a towering oval generator. He put a hand to a heavy bar switch held open by a spring relay, looked over his shoulder toward the viewplate and nodded.

"Ready here," his voice came faintly. "Say when, Lorry."

The Ihassans protested in horrified chorus, prancing with the ponderous frenzy of goaded elephants. "Stop him! Our auxiliary drive is already meshed with the planetary field of Ihassa—we salute The Name—and if the main warping engine should be activated—"

"We'll all be blown to some superior hell together," Lorrance finished cheerfully. "Unless you're willing to turn the ship about and head for Earth, that is. In that case we may be able to do business after all."

They stared at him with eye-stalks frozen in disbelief.

"I told you that we Terrans had our points," Lorrance said grimly. "We're young and impulsive and illogical, but we learn fast. Do you turn the ship, or do we all go up together?"

Ecologist Khii found words first.

"But you cannot possibly carry out such a threat—your lives would be lost as well as our own!"

The Terran made his jarring mirth-sound again. "Why not? Thousands of my people die every day, from one cause or another . . . and there's more at stake here than a couple of lives, remember? There's your colonial program to consider."

When they stood silent, sensory cilia wriggling in mounting agitation while they assessed the situation, he went on.

"If we let you land the ship on Ihassa—obscenity on The Name—you'll lead your pack to Earth. If we touch off the ship now your information goes up with you. Your only alternative is to turn the ship and take us home."

"But that is out of the question," Engineer Tsammo pointed out. "You could not possibly live through the two and one-half korads of return flight unless we placed you under suspension of animation again, in which case control of the ship would at once revert to us."

"Your only possible course," Astrophysicist Foranil seconded, "is to surrender now and to continue peacefully on to Ihassa—I salute The Name—with us."

The Terran seemed not to hear. He was staring at the viewplate, where Ponder's startled face stared palely back.

"Suspended animation," Lorrance breathed. "Dick, I'm beginning to believe we're as stupid as they think us. We thought we'd been awake during the whole of a faster-than-light flight, when they had us in deep-freeze all the time!"

"It doesn't matter," Ponder's voice answered thinly. "His face, even in its diminution of perspective, glistened with perspiration. "I'm going to throw the switch, Lorry."

"But it does matter!" Lorrance shouted back. "Wait, Dick. It matters more than—"

He turned back to the Ihassans, calming himself with an obvious effort. "Apparently you're a hell of a lot longer-lived than we suspected. You've been scouring the galaxy for seventy korads, you said, and the trip here from Earth took two and one-half . . . how long is a korad?"

"By your reckoning," Ecologist Khii said, "a korad is a period of time roughly equivalent to one hundred revolutions of your planet about its primary."

The Terran shook his head, stunned.

"Then you've been on survey for seven thousand years," he said finally. "And we've jumped to another wrong conclusion—you can't have developed
anything like a faster-than-light drive, or it wouldn't have taken you two and a half centuries to make a one-hundred-twenty-light-year flight..."

He looked at Ponder, round-eyed, in the viewplate. "Good heavens, Dick—we're close to three hundred years old!"

Ponder was not impressed. "We won't get much older," he said, and tightened his grip on the critical

"These Spicans didn't stop long enough on Earth to learn much about us, really," Lorrance said. Excitement flushed his face and sharpened his voice. "They're far ahead of us in scientific technique, but they're slow, don't you see? Their long life span makes them slower than we ever dreamed any intelligent species could be. And they've never faced the sort of fight for survival

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Lorrance stopped him with an urgent gesture. "Wait, Dick—there's plenty of time for that! I've got to think. There's a chance for the people at home, after all."

Ponder took his hand off the relay, but did not relax. "Make it quick. We can't run any risks with these superior brutes."

that gave us our incentive in the beginning..."

"Dick, they've no conception at all of the pace of technical progress on Earth. It took us a couple of hundred thousand years to graduate from chipped to polished flints, yes, but from there on our climb up the ladder wasn't linear—it was geometric. Practically all Terran knowledge was acquired within the last thousand years, and all of our technical know-how within the past two hundred—in less time than it took you and me
to make this trip! And the last fifty years of that two hundred brought nearly every modern technique and theory...the old geometric progression, building up and up and up...new fields creating new tools and the new tools creating new fields. By the time these animated pineapples get back to Earth—"

"The ship is getting close," Ponder interrupted. "It'll be alongside any minute, Lorry. We'd better play this safe."

Lorrance, his voice awed, ignored him.

"Think how far Terran culture may have progressed while we slept in the freezer down there! Dick, the folks at home may already be as far advanced as these Ilhassans. By the time the showdown comes, Earth should be able to give an account of herself that will show the galaxy which side of a specimen cage we belong on!"

"Unless the fools have blown themselves to hell in the meantime," Ponder said sourly. "But you're probably right. In five hundred years men could fight a dozen atomic wars, and still have time to climb out of the snake-pit again!"

Lorrance turned on the Ilhassans, and found them looking with extended eyestalks at the main visiscreen. The approaching ship hung so close now that he could make out every sleekly functional line. Her lighted viewports showed up clearly, ringed with curious, staring faces.

Ponder saw her, too, and shot a hand back to his relay.

Too late. There was no stabbing ray or shimmering force-field, but the universe seemed abruptly to cave in. Lorrance, caught in a sudden unbreakable muscular stasis, stumbled and fell head-long.

The impact of his head against solid metal decking left him unconscious with a fractured skull, but he carried with him into his blackout an incredulous conviction that the faces at the ports of the other ship were not Ilhassan, but human.

AND he was right.

Two days later he awoke groggily to find Ponder at his bedside, arrayed in strange and wonderful latter-day garments and bursting with news.

"The boys at home got ahead faster than we expected," Ponder said. "They discovered the Ilhassan half-light-speed drive before we were fifty years off Earth, and they went on from there to develop an instantaneous warping effect that spread them all over the galaxy in nothing flat. They found Ilhassa and colonized it over a hundred years ago."

And a week later, when he was well launched into the bewildering business of catching up on a quarter-millenium of human progress, Lorrance walked with Ponder and a genial latter-day guide through the alien wonders of the Ilhassan zoo.

"It was a near thing," Lorrance said once, with more than a touch of sympathy for the weird other-world creatures that skipped and chittered from their rows upon rows of cages. "It could have been you and I jabbering away in there, Dick."

Their guide chuckled appreciatively and led them down a broader way to a cage surrounded by a crowd of staring, interested spectators.

"You two did us quite a service," he said, trying to match his terse elliptical speech to their own archaic tongue. "Our ancestors were a little hasty when they first touched here. They'd never met with anything like the Ilhassans, so they took no chances—they exterminated every one of them down to the last Pearshape."

He halted to look complacently through the bars at Astrophysicist Foranil, Engineer Tsammo and Ecologist Khii. "A very great service. We'd never have got hold of any real live specimens if you hadn't brought in these three beauties..."
RED ALERT

By Charles Foster

It was a universal
game of chess—
but who were the pawns?

COLONEL FRANK PEASE was on
the swing shift this week. At
exactly 1700 hours, he stood waiting in
the bright light outside the console
room. Inside, Captain Joe Garcia
grinned and held up his hand, thumb
and forefinger barely separated in the
Latin gesture—"just a minute." Frank
watched as Joe turned back to the
desk and punched a code into a panel of
buttons. He waited as the identifier
guard at the door whirred and clicked.
The door opened. Frank stepped
through and walked over to the seat at
the console as Joe got up.
"Anything new, Joe?"
“Just more of the same.” He tossed the Times far across the console to the colonel. “Truce conference in its hundred thirty-seventh day. Same arguments as the first. Russia won’t talk a general settlement till the satellite program is junked. We won’t abandon the satellite work before the general settlement. Nothing new in Iran—patrol activity by UN forces. Our weekly armored convoy to Berlin got through without casualties, this time. And the postponement of the national elections here is up before the Supreme Court tomorrow.”

Joe was about to leave when the official teletype began to print. He stepped over and read it off as it came out of the machine:

JOMICO TO ALL MISSILE ACTIVATOR STATIONS. SECRET. MANNED MOON ROCKET DEPARTED WHITE SANDS. ETA 2200 HOURS PST. IF SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT WILL BE MADE. YELLOW ALERT ALL ACTIVATORS. . . .

The teletype continued to print, but Joe ignored the remainder of the order. He turned back to Frank. “A public announcement? Just what the hell is the idea? Beria himself announced from the Kremlin that a moon landing by us meant immediate all-out.”

Frank shrugged. “I don’t know. Another calculated risk, I suppose. We’ve been shoving through the moon project ever since we ran into all the unforeseen no-gravity problems in the artificial satellite plan. Maybe they figure Beria didn’t really mean it, and now our bargaining position’ll be better at the truce conference.”

Joe Garcia ran a swarthy hand through his black hair. “How many calculated risks can you take,” he asked, “before one of them blows up in your face?”

“Why don’t you run it through the computer, in your spare time?”

Joe paused at the door of the console room as Frank punched the buttons that would let him out. “That would just blow the computer up in my face, I’m afraid.” The door clicked open but Joe turned back, his hand on the knob. “Oh Frank, would you send Alec around with coffee, when you get to it?”

“Sure, Joe. Hasta luego.”

“Hasta luego.”

FRANK PEASE turned back to the console and pushed the series of buttons in the robobank which would bring Alec. Alec had started out in life, along with hundreds of others of his kind, as Robot, Electronic, Android, Radiation-Shielded, M3B3. His conception was a contractual relationship, on a cost-plus basis, between a procurement major of the Joint Missile Command and an executive vice-president of the General Electronic Corporation. A normal period of gestation had followed and presently he was christened with a serial number, his birth attested to and the maternity costs ($17,532.53, 1/2 of 1% discount for payment in ten days) recorded on an invoice form in sextuplicate, interleaved with carbon.

Alec was, from the day of his birth, FOB Schenectady, a military man. He had no civilian counterpart. If the initial cost and the upkeep weren’t enough to keep Alec off the civilian market, the priorities certainly were. So Alec had started out as a military, non-specialized machine, incorporating a severely limited intelligence, a receptor system, the ability to communicate, and a good deal of brute strength. Just a caricature of a human, because there happened to be jobs that no human being could do. But they needed to be done, by someone with two arms and legs. So Alec had been designed to read dials in “hot” rooms, to install “hot” materials in missiles, to make delicate adjustments that could have been made by a human being only by remote control, clumsily and slowly.

That had been the plan. But Alec was different. Alec was surplus, an unemployed robot in Missile Station Baker, as yet undiscovered by Higher Com-
mand. More to be pitied than censured, a clerical oversight rather than a bastard child. And several colonels and majors and captains, in their twenties and early thirties, not long out of MIT and Cal Tech, had spent their lonely off-duty hours at Station Baker and a considerable amount of government property, remodeling Alec closer to the heart’s desire.

So Alec made coffee, made beds, made conversation. His cooking, while adequate, was hardly inspired, since it had been taped into him from an army cooks-and-bakers manual. His martinis had been excellent, up to the time that the Missiles Stations had been put on the prohibition list. He played pretty fair chess. His voice, if a trifle deep, was almost human in timbre, intonation and speech rhythm.

Frank Pease, watching Alec approach the door, thought of the voice with a certain pride. He had just finished reconstructing the vocal system last week and had built in a “directed-random” system of response that made Alec’s conversational gambits a little less inane than before. Frank jabbed the hourly door code into the buttons before him.

Alec strode in, wearing the same type of green coveralls worn by the four station officers. “Good evening, Colonel Pease. Everything going all right?”

“Sure, Alec. Though we may be doing business before the night’s over. Another calculated risk, yellow alert so far.”

“Let’s hope it will work out all right, sir.” Alec paused for a moment, indicating a change of subject. “Would you care for coffee now, sir?”

“I guess so, Alec. And afterwards, Captain Garcia wants to see you.”

“Yes, sir.” Alec’s head turned as he started back to the door and Frank heard a faint creak.

“Alec! Have you missed your thousand-hour check again?”

“Yes, sir. Captain Steiner says that the roboservicer will have to be retaped before it will handle me now, sir. Otherwise I would be dismantled by it, because of all the changes that have been made in me. He said he’d do it in the morning, as soon as the radiation in the service room can be neutralized.”

Frank smiled. Their little plaything took up a lot more of their time than he saved. But probably a good thing, on this lonely eight-months stint, underground, out of contact with family or friends—nothing except the shifts, the fac-sheet, the teletype, the monthly inspections. Just the four of them—and Alec. Monotony inside, the almost-automatic station always doing its job with precision, the dials always reading correctly. Growing tension and disorder outside, reflected on fac and teletype. And the eighteen red switches, with their red latch, controlling the eighteen launchers, the hydrogen warheads mounted, the fuses set, the courses plotted and fed into automatic monitors. The “where” had been all decided. Now they were just waiting for the “when” over the teletype. The smile faded as Frank considered whether he or Alec was more of an automaton. The answer right now seemed obvious, and it wasn’t flattering to Colonel Frank Pease.

With a wave of his hand he dismissed the robot and his own thoughts. “Okay, Alec. If you’re free later on, drop up for some chess.”

“I’ll try my best to make it, Colonel Pease. Good evening, sir.”

As soon as he had punched out that code that let Alec out, Frank Pease began his routine shift of the station. He flicked on the intercom and the tape recorder. “Central to Delivery. Report.” “Received: three thousand gallons liquid oxygen,” the metallic voice droned, “thirty B-7 proximity components with White Sands modifications. Ten dozen cases Spam....”

Frank winced as the voice continued on in the same monotone. Fresh meat would be nice. But maybe they could
tape some new recipes into Alec.

"... three M3B5 Robots, Electronic. End of supplies received. All routed. No malfunctions."

He switched out Delivery and went on down the list—Modification, Assembly, Testing, Storage, Launching, Maintenance, Computing, Roboservice. He barely paused to punch the door code when Alec returned with his coffee. He sipped the coffee, then hurried on through the routine he’d repeated twice a day, now almost five hundred times. Launching requested and was denied permission to defuse Missile Seven for installation of the B-7 modification. Yellow Alert. Roboservice reported a complete electronic overhaul was needed in an M3A7 from Storage. Frank made a note for Jake Steiner. The Roboservice would be “hot” till 1300 tomorrow and he’d have to hold up Alec’s servicing till then. There was a new tape to feed into Monitoring, newly received refinements in meteorological technique. Frank fed it into the stand-by monitors, switched them over to active, then retaped the active bank and switched them on again.

It was 2032 hours before the routine checks were finished, before Frank was able to sit down in front of the keyboard at the teletype and bang out his report. He had barely begun when the receiver began to print. He stood up, lit a cigarette and watched the tape:

JOMICO TO ALL MISSILE ACTIVATOR STATIONS. SECRET. NEW ULTIMATUM RECEIVED RE MOON ROCKET. UNKNOWN IF ENEMY HAS SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE CURRENT FLIGHT. ORANGE ALERT. . . .

Frank Pease stepped back to the console and opened the latch protecting the eighteen red switches. Then he flicked open the general intercom button. “C e n t r a l to all departments. Orange Alert. No further modification, repair or maintenance except emergency repair of breakdowns, then only with permission. Acknowledge.” The answers droned back in sequence as Frank puffed the cigarette.

HE HAD finished putting his report on the teletype when Alec reappeared at the door. As usual, Frank thought as he activated the door, Alec showed up for chess just at the right moment, when the work on the early part of the shift was done. The perfect butler.

Frank set up the board while Alec was getting the other chair. Alec of course, didn’t need the chair, but it made all of them more comfortable to have him sitting on something when he was sitting. Frank held out his two fists. “Which’ll it be, Alec?”

“Left.”

Frank opened up his left hand to show a black pawn. “Okay, Alec, guess I’ll make the mistakes this game.”

Alec came as near as he could manage to a chuckle as he set up his pieces. Frank used the standard king’s pawn opening because Alec was better at that than any of the other openings. Frank relaxed as pawns, knights and bishops flowed out in a smooth development. He tried to play the game from the surface with Alec, never looking more than three moves or so ahead. Alec, once past the opening and into the middle game, used his full three minutes before making any move, but his best was not good enough to beat even the slap-dash sort of chess that Frank Pease was indulging in. It was not much more than half an hour when Frank was able to threaten a rook fork with his remaining knight. Alec did not see the deeper trap as he worked out his defense and five moves later Frank’s queen’s bishop moved in to sew up the checkmate.

Frank wondered whether another game was worthwhile. He ran a hand through his close-cropped brown hair and stood up. His glance around the room covered the banks of dials, the currently silent teletype, the facsimile printer. He stepped over to the fac and pulled out the latest head: NEGOTIATIONS DEADLOCKED. Good for this week or any week. He crumpled it up and tossed it in the waste. Well, what
the hell. He'd read all the books in this week's shipment and everything else at the Station. "Ready for another, Alec?"

"Certainly, sir. I'm always ready."

Alec opened with the king's pawn. As always, Frank Pease blocked with his own king's pawn and the game developed its pattern of force and counterforce. Frank's mind wandered as the game went on. He thought of his wife, Edith, in Albuquerque, who had come there to be near him at White Sands. She'd been proud of the garden last summer, until the shortage cut off all watering. Then the garden died, it seemed, between one blistering July day and the next. Now she received nothing but letters, with an APO number, postmarked San Francisco, read by two censors, saying nothing. Secret, Most Secret, Top Secret. Even he didn't know the exact location of this underground Station, though it was somewhere in Northern California.

He made a move with his queen's bishop, almost automatically, and thought of how his son had learned to play chess so rapidly, in the few weeks he'd been with him in New Mexico. He was only nine—no, ten now—and had developed real subtlety and power in a surprisingly short time.

He noticed that Alec had moved and he tried to concentrate on the game. He saw at once that he'd left himself open to an attack on his own king row by Alec's bishop, which would leave his rook unprotected. He started to advance a pawn to protect the position. But then he laughed, short and angrily, and tossed the pawn across the board, knocking over a tight little group of his own pieces and Alec's, interlocked.

"Is there something wrong, sir?" A slight touch of surprise in Alec's voice.

"Yes, there's something wrong! A robot trying to be a man and a man trying to be a robot—pretending to play a child's game together, waiting for the all-out. What could be wronger?"

"I don't know, sir. You do not wish to continue?"

FRANK stared at the impasive steel cylinder that was the robot's head. Then he carefully picked up the pieces he'd knocked over and set them back in the squares they'd occupied, placing each piece with precision in the exact center of its square. "Sure, let's go on. There's nothing else to do."

As the game continued, Frank found that he had to concentrate. His absent-minded playing worked him into a potentially bad position. He went about repairing the damage in his usual style, with bold, slashing attacks, designed to keep his opponent on the defensive and to throw his game off balance. But Alec was not defending his position passively. In the midst of his attack, Frank Pease saw that he was over-extending himself and that when his remaining offensive power was spent, Alec would be in a strong offensive position. But then, that was simple enough. A bishop trade would knock the guts out of Alec's attack before it could get started, and reinforce his own position.

Now Frank moved in and took the black bishop with his own. Almost at once, Alec moved. But he did not trade. Instead, his queen moved diagonally across the board. "Check," Alec said in his deep voice.

Frank studied the move, puzzled. It did not make sense, not even Alec's limited kind of sense. It would be easy to defend himself against the move and it left him in a better position than before. He wondered, vaguely, if there were defects in Alec's chess tapping or perhaps some sort of malfunction. He looked up at Alec and then back to the board. And suddenly he saw it. A six-move sequence, inevitably ending in checkmate. That is, it was inevitable if Alec saw it too. But Alec couldn't see it, not with the level of chess perception that had been built into him.

Frank made his move and instantly, unerringly, Alec's hand reached for the rook, shoving it forward five spaces. Frank looked up, startled. Alec knew. Alec, with the ability to see three moves.
ahead, had conceived an audacious, imaginative attack, probably planned at least eight moves ahead, and had not left a single loophole. "Alec! Has Captain Steiner or Gracia been fooling with your chess taping again?" But even as he said it he realized how absurd it was. The difficulties would increase geometrically in any attempt to improve Alec's game. Frank felt a cold shiver as he considered the mere physical bulk of the electronic equipment which would be needed to equip a robot to play chess at the level Alec had just demonstrated. Even if it could be done at all.

The lenses in Alec's three "eyes" were blank. "No, Colonel. I have not been retaped."

Frank Pease stared at the robot for a moment, then smiled with relief. "Then there's only one answer. You've been controlled," he said. It must be Steiner who had done it. Simply a matter of installing a remote control in the robot, observing the chess game through Alec and cutting in the control when he was ready to take over the game.

Frank turned to the console and flicked the intercom switch to the living quarters. "Steiner? Okay, you had me wondering for a minute. But you can come off it now. As Abe Lincoln said, there's a man inside. There still has to be a man inside, even with what we know of cybernetics now."

The answer came, but it was not Steiner. Captain Garcia's voice came over the intercom. "What are you talking about, Frank?" He sounded honestly puzzled. "Steiner isn't here. He's in his room, dead to the world. Saw him take two secinal tablets before he hit the sack. He hasn't been sleeping too well lately."

Frank felt the cold shiver again. Steiner was the only other man who played chess at the Station—and it couldn't be Steiner. He turned back to Alec. The blank lenses were staring at him. The teletype began to click and he spun back on his chair:

**JOMICO TO ALL MISSILE ACTIVATOR STATIONS. SECRET. ROCKET ARRIVED MOON 21 HOURS SAFELY. PRESIDENT BROADCAST NEWS AT 2215. RED ALERT. REPEAT. RED ALERT.**

Frank's hand reached out automatically for the intercom button. With a red alert, all station personnel were to be in the console room. His hand reached out, but didn't make it. A steel fist closed on his wrist. He looked up into the three blank optics of the robot. Through reflex action he tried to pull away. Useless, of course. The robot's strength was at least ten times his own.

"Who are you?"

The robot did not answer. Frank felt the steel arm slip around his chest and tighten. Then he was lifted and dropped into the other chair. Ten feet from the console.

The robot stood over him for a moment. Then he answered. "You may still call me Alec, if you wish. It will do as well as any name."

"Who—who is controlling you?"

"You would not fully understand the answer to your question."

Had the enemy somehow gained remote control over Alec? It was certainly technically feasible, but with the fantastic security precautions there seemed to be absolutely no way it could have been done. But someone had control. Keeping his eyes on Alec, Frank thought of the distance to the robobank on the console, the exact location of the switch which would deactivate Alec. He knew the robot's reflexes were fast, faster than his own—but the time it took them to act might be just enough to reach the switch. He'd leap to the side, out of the chair and toward the bank of switches. There just might be time to snap off the power switch with his right hand before Alec could stop him.

The robot's steel hand closed again on his wrist. "You should not attempt it, Colonel. While it is true that I am
partially occupied with controlling this metal tool you call Alec, I am also quite capable of following your conscious thoughts.” The robot’s voice paused for a moment, then continued. “I am not, as you are now thinking, a Russian or a communist. You are quite right in considering me an enemy, however.”

“Where are you from?”

“The way you ask the question shows you would not understand the answer. Your ideas of space and time are not very close to reality. However, let us say that I am of another star.”

Frank Pease began to say, “What is your purpose here?” but Alec’s voice answered before he could vocalize the question.

“I am interested in your possible survival.”

“My survival? Why?”

“Your concepts of entity and ego, plus the imprecision of your means of communication make understanding difficult for you. Let us say, instead, the survival of sentient life.”

“Sentient life? Human beings?”

“Whether the changes in the form of sentiency will be major or minor I cannot say. However, men as now constituted are self-limiting.” The robot gestured towards the eighteen red switches, as if to illustrate his point.

BUT for the first time in years, Colonel Pease felt real hope. If the controller of Alec actually was alien to Earth—and that seemed the most probable explanation—then there might still be a chance that war between the East and West could be averted. If there were still time. If both sides could know that a superior, possibly hostile, alien force threatened each of them impartially, there would be no choice but to unite.

The robot’s voice broke into his thoughts. “You are mistaken, Colonel. I am quite indifferent to your wars. Our policy towards such forms of self-expression is, by the nature of things, laissez-faire. And it is really no paradox when I say that my interference now maintains that policy of laissez-faire.”

“I do not understand.”

“No entity or race exists forever, Colonel Pease. We no more than you. Ours will go as many have gone before. But many, many forms of sentiency exist. Many evolve. Presently from the many there will come one—perhaps yours—to replace us. But the development must be organic; it cannot be warped by outside forces.”

“Then why are you here?”

“To prevent you from doing to others what we ourselves would not do. In a word, to make you incapable of space travel. But now I see that it was really unnecessary for me to have come.”

“Unnecessary?”

The robot gestured again at the row of switches. “You men are quite capable of dismantling your own civilization until it is far beneath the level of space travel.”

The teletype began to print again. The robot released the colonel’s arm.

“Perhaps you’d better read it.”

Frank stepped over to the teletype, rubbing the numbness from his wrist.

**NO RESPONSE FROM ENEMY TO PRESIDENT’S ANNOUNCEMENT. UNIDENTIFIED BLIPS REPORTED POLAR RADAR. RED ALERT CONTINUES.**

Then this was probably it. The called bluff, the last calculated risk. He spun on the robot, his long simmering frustration suddenly boiling into rage. “I’ll refuse. I won’t pull the switches!”

“Your refusal will make little difference. Other Stations will launch their missiles—yours and the enemy’s. Your refusal would merely shift the balance of force to your enemy.”

Frank Pease knew with sickening conviction that what the robot said was true. He could not stop the war. The alien would not. And the other missile stations would fire whether he did or not. He could only reduce the advantage of his own country. What had he thought earlier? That he was an automaton, a robot, just as Alec was—or had
been. An automatic man in an automatic factory, ready to do his part to make sure that man’s first step to the stars would be the first step back to savagery and primitiveness.

He stepped toward the metal figure, his fists clenched. Frustration overwhelmed him till the robot seemed lost in a red blur. He threw himself upon it and pounded with both fists, pounded with all his strength, harder and harder. The skin of his knuckles cracked; blood ran down his hands. But he struck out even harder. He felt a sharp pain as a finger snapped and then a steel hand grasped his shoulder and effortlessly pushed him away.

“Your teletype has information for you,” the robot voice intoned expressionlessly.

Trembling, bleeding, Frank Pease walked over to the teletype. He shook his head to clear the red haze before his eyes and picked up the tape.

... POLAR RADAR REPORTS ENEMY MISSILES. STATE OF ALL-OUT WAR EXISTS. BEGIN PLAN GABRIEL IMMEDIATELY. . . .

Automatically, mechanically, his broken finger throbbing, Colonel Frank Pease reached out for the row of red switches. There really wasn’t anything else he could do.

DO YOU KNOW YOUR PLANETS?

LISTED below in jumbled fashion are the names of our 9 major planets, together with a brief description of each. Can you match up at least 6 of them correctly for a passing score? 7 to 8 is good, 9 excellent.

1. MARS (a) mean distance from the sun—1,781 millions of miles; sidereal period—84 years; diameter—34,800 miles; satellites—four.

2. VENUS (b) the smallest of the major planets, and the one which is nearest to the sun.

3. NEPTUNE (c) was an object of search for many years; finally located in 1930, by C. W. Tombaugh.

4. JUPITER (d) it emits a light of a pronounced red color.

5. MERCURY (e) diameter—7,917.5 miles; area—196,940,00 square miles; mean distance from the sun—93,000,000 miles.

6. SATURN (f) discovered—September 23, 1846 (by Galle, of Berlin); period of revolution—164 years.

7. URANUS (g) the second planet from the sun, and the most brilliant object in the heavens except the sun and moon.

8. EARTH (h) is remarkable for its nine satellites and its flat luminous encircling rings.

9. PLUTO (i) has twelve moons, is about 86,500 miles in diameter, and is some 483,000,000 miles from the sun.

(Answers on page 129)
goes, that one takes the cake. I have seen benign bems, bad bems, and occasional beautiful bems. But this bem defies description. Maybe beastly would do. Or ghastly. I wish ghastly began with a "b," to suit my selection better. Or ghodawful. Just the same, I liked the cover. Bem covers have something to them, I guess, that makes you stop for a second look, even if only for the reason that you're shocked to a semi-cockeyed state. Wonder what story that was for.

The reader's column is going great guns now. I approve; we're liable to have a space-opera SS or TWS here on our hands. And, of course, your novels keep up with the usual tradition; always the tops. Dickson's novelet was good, but the title almost scared me away. The shorts went like this: good, fair, and lousy. Hasse's was good, Marshall's COMING HOME was lousy—just managed to make that one step removed from crud—and that leaves Barefoot's EVEN THE BRIGHT GODS (why spelled without an "h"?) MUST DIE. I still dunno whether or not I liked that one. You ought to get in a few shorts like the memorable MAJOR VENTURE. Yes, I would encourage that. I don't think I have ever read a funnier take-off on any character! Sam, that was truly terrific.

Let's have SPACE with trimmed edges. Sam, I said... oh, you heard me? But Sam... we can't have SS all alone, and looking so nice and all. Something has just gotta be done. Here I am, pleading to you on bended knees with tears in my eyes, (or something like that) and you won't heed a poor fan's plea. Let's have all your mags trimmed. Looks so much better, easier to handle, neater... what? So it costs more? Who cares? Hey, Sam, leave us not get violent!

By the way, who ARE those guys you had as authors for your shorts? Never heard of them before, so I guess they must be pen-names numbers nineteen, twenty, and twenty-one for Kuttner. Or Vance. (No, I believe you... I always did think Vance wasn't Kuttner. You know damned well he's Leinster.)

Seriously, for a while, SPACE will never take the place of SS, TWS, or FSM, simply for the reason that it accompanies them too well. Good space opera, you said, and I echo it, is s-f at its best. Well, so long as you keep up with those great long stories you have in SPACE, there'll never be any trouble at all. Matter of fact, I'd venture to say right now that you already have, after only three issues, the best space-opera mag on the market.

I still claim that you should have had TROUBLE STAR in SPACE. —410 Kensington Rd., Baltimore 29, Md.

You've got it mixed up. Vance isn't Leinster. He's Judy Merril and Leinster is Ray Bradbury. Bradbury, of course, is Bryce Walton and Walton is Leigh Brackett. On the other hand Brackett is really Poul Anderson, who is none other than Walter Miller. And in case you didn't know this, Miller's real name is Robert Heinlein, who is better known as George O. Smith. Fascinating, isn't it?

NIGHTMARE ALLEY
by James Fenimore Cooper, Jr.

Dear Sarge: No, there's nothing wrong with your eyes. It really does say Sarge. The other night as I was reading the February SPS, a strange feeling crept over me. An electric thrill shot through my head. Then, suddenly, I knew that I was thinking! And guess what I was thinking about, Sam. Aw, go ahead, guess. NO, NOT MARILYN MONROE! I was thinking that (steady, Fenimore, get up your courage) what SPS needs is good old Sarge Saturn. Now wait, Sam, gimme a chance to explain, anyway. I'd be one of the last persons in the world to suggest that you put Ye Olde Sarge back in SS or TWS. They've come a long way since he left on his interstellar voyage, and no one expects to meet Snaggletooth or Wartears in them anymore. But the way I understood it, SPS was supposed to be a different type of magazine. A little looser, wilder, more juvenile perhaps, but definitely different. A little Xeno dripped slowly over the letter column certainly wouldn't hurt anything, and might even improve circulation. (There, that should soothe your mercenary little heart.) Of course, I realize that the Sarge was Merwin's private property, and you might have a little trouble breaking into the routine, but you'd be content in the realization that you'd be pleasing me! How about it, fans, what do you think of the idea?

There was something else I wanted to mention, but I guess it wasn't too important, 'cause it seems to have slipped my... Oh yes, now I remember—your magazine. Not too deadly, Sam. (Sarge?) The interior illus were OK—no one can complain about Finlay or Schomburg — but the cover! Ummu. Well I suppose Emsh has to come up the hard way, but seriously, Sam. A purple monster! As for the stories, they ranged from THREE LINES OF OLD MARTIAN which was very good down to COMING HOME which was putrid. All in all, though, you did pretty well, considering it was just the third ish.

I suppose I'd better go now, before I get thrown out. So long, Sarge—443 West Beaver, State College, Pa.

For the most repulsive idea of the era, James Fenimore Cooper, Jr., is hereby nominated to join his illustrious ancestor in baseball's Hall of Fame and become a marblehead. And if we get any more suggestions from you we are apt to become violent.

SHOCK DEPARTMENT
by James Lewis, the Monster of Fandom

Dear Sam—It has come at last! What? Why
the new Space of course! You didn’t think that I meant Startling, did you? (After TROUBLED STAR I can’t tell much different in them.) Though I almost fainted while looking at the BEM. Honest, leave things like that to Anderson, Emsh has too much talent to waste on such stuff. Besides the bright gaudy colors didn’t appeal too much to the eye.

I heard this as I was preparing to buy it: Coming from two women age, name etc. unknown: First: “My what is the world coming to now days?” “Why I wouldn’t think that the police let such things stay on the market.” Second: “Look here is another one with a similar cover.” She bent over picked up a copy of Planet and almost blushed. Hastily putting it down, “Did you read in the paper where two women went to Washington to see what could be done about such things as comics and other ‘Trash?’” First: “Yes, I do believe that I did read something to that effect.” Second: “Well I must be going.” And then surprise—“Oh look the latest Love Stories (Published by Standard I believe) and my new Crime Stories!” She then picked up both of them and bought ’em. After that she walked out. I looked at the covers on said Love and Crime—They make your cover queen blush in envy.

I think that I was rather shocked. I bought Space under the baleful glance of the first woman who was still standing there. I think she was shocked also.

Now that six months have elapsed since I first bought Space, I think that I shall comment on them. My semiannual ratings so to speak.

The October issue wasn’t really much to rave over.... it had some good reading in it but that was only in the two novelettes. The lead is what I expected from Walton, nothing much. The cover wasn’t very well done either.

The December issue wasn’t too bad. I rate it fair. The novel was all I had hoped for and more, but the novelette and shorts wasn’t worth a dime. The cover was really worth a gander or two though. What I had expected from Earle Bergey. GOOD. I might ask a question; how could the heroine in “Planet Of The Damned” have a baby when certain things have been admitted from the story? This I ask you. HOW? Of course I understand that the mail has something to do with this.

At last I am at the best yet, February 1953. ... Honest how do you do it? How did you manage to choke that story out of Brackett? This needs to be done more often I am sure that all fans will agree.

Look Sam—I’ll see you fed to a memo before I’ll pay you to publish one of my letters. As a matter of fact I’ll send you in a story. Then you’ll have to read it ’cause you’ll be afraid that it might be good. But it won’t. I’ll know that before I send it.

Ha -----. I haven’t got my new Wonder Annual yet but it should be good. Hope it is. Don’t you?:/ I make a nomination for a novel by Hamilton in this soon.

Note—Startling Stories is now displayed with the slicks. It is no longer stuck down in the pulp section. When is Space, Thrilling Wonder, Fantastic Mag gonna go on display in this new section?—R.K. #4, Trenton, Tenn.

Tennessee can have our vote as a progressive state any time. Now, would you mind telling us what mustn’t be admitted in a story so that the heroine can have a baby?

**MARTIAN**

by Ken Leslie

The air force is ratted and science is baffled. Because of elusive elliptical things—

That in spite of denials fill Washington files
By skipping around without motors or wings—

The case in discussion is Yankee or Russian?

Or can they be extra-terrestrial ships?

Forget all the stories
I know what the score is
I piloted one of those Washington blips!

—WCTC, New Brunswick, N. J.

Good thing that New Brunswick is the place they make all those Band-aids, thassall we got to say.

**HEDGE-HOPPER**

by Joe Keogh

Salutations, Sam: I have a message for you... a very sad message... for my subject will be: THE BIG JUMP.

Looky here, Samuel, all the other yarns in Febish of Sp5 were great, good, or passable, and then I read Brackett’s novel. (s’matter o’ fact, I read it first) What crud! That plot’s been so overworked it ain’t funny. Let’s analyse it. Man loses friend. Man comes up against big outfit. Falls in love with the boss’ daughter. (Half the story was about “finding” his friend Paul Rogers. What happens when he does find him? Paul utters these historic words: “There is no time... go on Arch, run.” All that suspense for nothing—but nothin’.) The other part in the plot, Transuranic Ores, what was it? It was analogous to cattle in a western story, gold mines in adventure books, or jewels in the latest whodunit. I didn’t find one original idea in the whole thing!

Well... that’s that. What’s that scream I hear? No, Sam! You DIDN’T give him eight cents a word! 1 !

The lead novel was very disappointing. All the other ones were O.K. Best choice? Dickson’s BLEAK And BARREN Land, and EVEN THE BRIGHT GODS MUST DIE. They made the book worth buying. Incidentally, searching my electronic memory files, I find I was mistaken in the letter I sent you commenting on the second Ish of Sp5. I have read the grande premier du Ish of Space Stories I remember from H. Moskowitz’ letter remarking on Benny in the Jovian Circus. Tell me one thing, and I’ll be sure. Did Benny have the gift of turning huge dinosaurs out of
lizard eggs.—63 Glenridge Ave. St. Catharines, Ont., Canada.

P. S. Enclose the sum of eight quadrillion credits for printing this letter. Don't ask me what you're going to do with 8,000,000,000,000,000 credits! . . . wait till 2009 A. D., I guess.

J.K.

After wringing the tears out of your letter and hanging it up to dry, we finally managed to iron it out and give the public the benefit of your remarks. Incidentally, Leigh Brackett is a her, not a him, in fact her is the wife of Edmond Hamilton, a pretty good pair of scriveners. Sorry you didn't like THE BIG JUMP. We're not complaining or anything, but you will find some other letters roundabouts which seem to think that T.B.J. is science-fiction's gift to space opera. No accounting for tastes, as the vet said when the horse blew first.

THE DIM REACHES
by Tom condit

Sam: Staggering away from my super dehydrated energy filled space Pogo-stick (equipped with the new Boot drive), I suddenly saw couple in steel-reinforced red flannel long-johns gasping as their drive failed to activate. A huge BeM was bursting thru the ground in front of their ship, the ship's mighty turret swung toward the monster as the man punched buttons in the control room.

Whipping out my hydrogenized peashooter, I quickly atomized the monstrosity, then I and the other BeM, with my Pogo-stick in tow, took off into the dim reaches of the Feb. SPACE STORIES.

The Big Jump: No swords? C'est magnifique!! Three Lines of Old Martian: Unless you knew the spoken language, deciphering the written in so short a time would be impossible even if you knew the meaning, and if you knew the meaning and the language, it shouldn't take three days; besides which—Under each Martian character, Mathilda had clearly defined its equivalent (I would have spelled that with the last e and a transposed, but I don't want to look it up, so I'll have to pass) IN ENGLISH. After which it scanned in English, huh? That would call for a separate letter for each word, and the impression given was that this was written in a phonetic alphabet. Impossible . . . unless . . . of course—Fitzlorn deciphered the Pnakotian manuscripts, eh? That explains it, just one of Randolph Carter's nightmares (nightmahr to you).

The Bleak and Barren Land: I'm for Maker, and all my sympathies lie with the Modernists. As for that "Like calls to like with the strongest call in the Universe" it takes more than the same physical characteristics to make two people alike.

Coming Home: Lousy. Impossible. Or, if possible, no explanation. Reads like a fragment from a larger story. Fairly good style but too many adjectives.

Even The Bright Gods Must Die: Good, very good. That's a pseudonym, isn't it?

Flashes From Our Readers (Couldn't you think of anything better than that? I could)

Leake: Glad to see someone besides me forgets the shift once in a while, or gets mixed up or sumpin.

Ammonia-silicon, eh? Lemme see . . . ammonio-silicon, void hands, three pedal membranes, one purple goatie . . . that'd be Kruger VIII, or Lrupsirkon, I guess you'd call it. Never been there myself.

SPS would be pronounced "spez," or would it be "speece"?

In conclusion I would like to refute the rumors that I am Henry Kuttner before they start—1864 South St., Redding, Calif.

Don't worry, nobody will ever confuse you with Henry Kuttner. As Professor Lucius P. Nudnick (whose conversion into fricasee by a Martian Grulzak has now been exposed as a pious fraud) has so brilliantly stated:

"No responsible scholar of early twentieth hieroglyphics or that peculiar writing form known as fik-shun (sometimes confused with fis-sion, but now known to have no connection with nuclear phenomena) could possibly have confused the chiseling of Tom Condit with the hammer strokes of Henry Kuttner. It has been established that Condit wrote with his elbows, while Kuttner wrote with both hands at once on two tipe-riter's (an early stone cutting machine)."

This quotation appears in Nudnick's monumental volume of the early twentieth century "Myths and Mythtakes of Primitive Man." He refers on pp. 266, 827, 1117 and 3492 to Condit, whom he mentions as an early tribal leader of a rather ferocious tribe in the little known province of California.

And all we want to add to that is you better check your sources before you read Nudnick's obit thataway. The Man's indestructible.

TRUAX AND CONSEQUENCES
by John Truax

Dear Mr. Mines:

THE BIG JUMP is the best story you have published since VULCAN'S DOLLS and HELLFLOWER. THE BIG JUMP has the same smash and punch that the other stories had. Your novelet THE BLEAK AND BARREN LAND was almost as good as the novel. I didn't like any of the short stories. I seldom do. Your editorials are the best of an editor in SF, (I'm not kidding either ! ! ! ).

Hope you'll get some more stories by Leigh Brackett and Edmond Hamilton. As to your cover I thought that you were going to stay away from BEEM's.

If the impossible event that this (its supposed to be a letter, but I bet you wouldn't have known it) gets published will any people in this area interested in SF please write me. Do you know
of any SF clubs in this area—1102 9th Street, Rapid City, S. Dak.

All we hope is that you and Joe Keogh meet at the next science-fiction convention.

RIGHT AND LEFT
by J. Martin Graetz

Dear Sam: And with that meek and mild intro, I proceed to say,

SPACE STORIES IS NOT NOW AND NEVER WILL BE (A member of the human race? No, that’s Howland Owl) SHORT-ENED TO SPS! At least, not in my letters. The first comment that I made in referring to SPACE contained my own personal contration. Unlike the other fan, I am creative (modesty? never!) and as soon as I saw the problem, I in-vented SPS. There may be no difference in spelling, but there is a world of semantic difference in that lower-case p. And don’t you dare render that SPS in any of my letters. There!

Stuff. The new SpS cover is umpteen times better than the old one. (How could it have been old? It was hardly new.) The line-up of stories looks good. Nothing makes me happier than to see that Henry Hasse is writing again. I’ve always wanted to see more since I read HE WHO SHRANK in Healy’s anthol.

I’ve read so far are the letters.
1. Oh foo on you, Leake. There are plenty of non-bipedal e-t’s. How about Morrison’s THE SACK, Bradbury’s THE FIRE BALLOONS, and Heinlein’s THE PUPPET MASTERS? Then there’s those THINGS OF DISTINCTION. Fred Brown creates utterly alien forms right and left. Any more?
2. Admit it, Sam. Rich Geis has a point. MAN OF TWO WORLDS was rather adjectivy.
3. Here is the biggest gripe of all. First you cut the meat out of Lee Huddleston’s letter, with that foolish apology, then you allibed the shortness of the FfRoR column. Okay, Sam, than just why does SpS have to be only 128 pages? I’m listening.
—307 So. 52 St. Omaha 3, Nebraska.

Sure, you’d like a hundred-and-ninety-page magazine with another hundred pages of letters. And we would like to give them to you. So why is a magazine only 128, or 146 pages of what have you? Forty accountants armed with slide rules and adding machines spend all their time figuring out that one, and the an-swer never stays put—it changes every day. It’s all mixed up with costs and circulation and things which if an editor could understand, he’d be an accountant. That clear?

LOW BRIDGE
by Dave Hammond

Dear Sam: I see that issue number 3 of SPACE STORIES has hit the stands. I’ve read most of the stories in the issue, for a change. They aren’t bad. They are sort of reminiscent of what STARTLING and THRILLING WONDER were about four years back. And that isn’t bad. THREE LINES OF OLD MARTIAN would have been good if I hadn’t accidently seen the ending. I still laughed. Or at least I tried my hardest. It was uphill work.

I was disappointed in not seeing any mention of the 11th World Science Fiction Convention in this issue. I am trying to convince one of our Philadelphia science fiction authors to write a story in which some mention is made of the forthcoming convention in 1953 which anyone can join by sending one dollar to Box 2019, Philadelphia 3, Pennsylvania. Not only do you get Progress Reports, but you also get complete information on transportation, hotels, eating places, etc. Yeah.

I liked Brackett’s story, but then I always like Brackett’s stories. I am a Brackett fan. I wish she’d drop a little of this galactic stuff though for a good, solid novelet about Eric John Stark. Heck, he’s the Northwest Smith of modern science fiction. And when is some publisher going to bring out the adventures of Northwest Smith in book form? You see, the only female author I rate above Brackett is C. L. Moore.

Do you notice that all my previous paragraphs begin with an “I”? This is one of the signs of an egotist. But I’m not. Come to think of it — if I was I wouldn’t admit it. I’m clutching at straws now. I’ve nothing to say and it’s much too late to put my super-brilliant brain to work on the problem. Most of what I say is usually criticism anyway. When I’m speechless over an issue of your magazine it is a time for rejoicing.

I’ll get you on the next time around! — -Box 89, Runnemede, New Jersey.

P. S.—After what I said about Crossen’s guest editorial in the latest STARTLING, I had better lay low for a while.

Speechless? You? That we’d like to see. A very sage comment, that SpS reminds you of TWS or SS about four years ago. Wonder if it means anything? Anyways, pure undiluted space opera is an older type, but it has kind of grown up and learned its way around, so that even when very spacy and very opery, it is still somewhat more sophisticated. Witness Brackett and the work Ed Hamilton is doing today.

We promise to send a dollar to Philadelphia—stop nagging!

HILL AND DALE
by Ron Ellik

Mine friend,—You got some heavy explaining to do, Mines. I quote: ‘The coldly mental story, the complex parable, the tale of social sig-nificance is not for us.’ If this is so, how do you explain THE BIG JUMP in Space? This story could have been enjoyed if presented in the pages of STARTLING or THRILLING WONDER, but in SPS it was one lousy story. I stopped liking it almost at the beginning. This was not space-opera! That much is certain. This story, in my estimation, ranks with The Long View,
The Virgin of Zesh, and the other crummy stories you've been passing off to us in the last few months. If you're gonna pass that junk off as space-opera in Space's existence, you've just lost one, no, two, faithful readers. I speak for a friend of mine who has also bought all three issues. Please Sam, give us space-opera!

To drastically change the subject, I just got the latest ish of WSA, and, although I haven't read any of the stories in it yet, I'd like to comment on it now so I won't have to write another letter.

First of all, the art. The cover is not science-fictionish in the real sense of the word. It might as well have been a scene here on earth with an airplane crashing into the ocean, except for the space-suits, the reddish water and the too-dark sky. Then the interiors. As usual, Orban was excellent, Emsh was good, Poulton was lousy, (see my letter to FSM) and Finlay—Well, Finlay just doesn't belong in the year's anthology of best st. Especially on the same page with Bradbury. They clash, Sam! The best author and the worst artist. Its no good. Neither is the illo. 'Nuff said.

Then the authors. All big names, like you said, so there's not much I can say, is there?—232 Santa Ana Long Beach 3, California.

Brackett can't write space opera and Finlay can't draw? Well, this is a free country and all that sort of thing and presumably you are entitled to an opinion and we will even print it—but there is such a thing as going too far. Furthermore, who will protect you from the wrath of the other fan? The State rests.

INFINITE KINDNESS
by Paul Mittelbuscher

Dear Sam:—I'd like to say that the third issue of SpS was up to the standards of its sister mags TWS & SS but at the risk of causing ye ed great concern I must state that "it just didn't have it." 'Tis a shame, I like good space "opry" as much as the next fan but this issue . . . gaaaaa.

Naturally Leigh Brackett's yarn was expected. As far as I know Leif's never written a bad story. Gordon Dickson's effort was enjoyable in spots but had to many weak moments which counterbalanced the effect. Then too it was essentially the old worn-out formula of "cattle men against sheep herders." I hate transplanted westerns. I like my space opera in the Burroughs style. Two gentlemen who can do this kind of fiction are Poul Anderson and Basil Wells (both friends of mine by the way) I would suggest that you make some attempt to secure the services of said writers. I hate to do this to an old timer like Henry Harte but . . . . well, "Three Lines of Old Martain" wasn't original, OR well written, it "hopped". John Marshall and D. W. Barefoot (now that's an unlikely name if ever I saw one . . . .) can be forgiven as both gentlemen presumably made their debut with this issue and I dislike criticizing "first" efforts. I hate to discourage anyone at the beginning of his writing career for who knows what they may be capable of.

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The artwork was good this issue. There is no use my commenting on the superluminous of Virgil Finlay’s illustrations for “The Big Jimp,” when has Finlay EVER failed to delight the orbs with his “masterpieces”? I also think you know by now my feelings toward Schomburg. I have one suggestion, please DON’T use Orban in Space Stories. His work is unsuited to a “thrid and blunter” mag.

I believe you requested that we keep our letters short. I feel an infinite kindness toward all of mankind today (Especially editors) so will heed your plea and end this thing as of NOW. —Sweet Springs, Missouri.

Oliver Wendell Holmes as a young M.D. waiting in his office for patients is said to have remarked “Small fevers gratefully received.” So, we presume, we should be grateful that you were in a kindly mood when penning the above missive, else who knows—maybe atomic fission in the post office. Does “persuasely” spell presumably?

THOSE SMALL THINGS

by Jim Broschart

Dear Sam:—Just finished reading the Feb. issue of SPACE. With every issue I am becoming more convinced that SPS is soon going to rank with the top stf. magazines in the field; SS and TWS. I can find no fault with the mag except for a few minor things. They are:

COVER—Would be better if there was a line between the heading and the illo. Also no printing on the illo—sometimes I like to remove the picture and frame it, etc. Can’t you shift the location of the words ‘A Thrilling Publication’ to somewhere at the top of the cover?

BANNER—I kind’a liked it the way it was on the first two issues. The way it is now, it’s too much like the lettering on all the other Thrilling publications. (That’s another complaint I have, of which I will say more in a letter to SS)

ADDRESS— I think a lot of fans will agree with me when I say—’Print your address at the beginning of the letter column.’ I had a tough time deciding where to send this letter. Two addresses are given in the fine print at the bottom of the contents page. Hope you get this.

Well, I guess that’s everything. I won’t rate the stories—I’ll just say that they’re all good. Personally, I liked ‘COMING HOME’ by John R. Marshall the best.—Rural Route No. 1, Tovanda, Penna.

At the bottom of the contents page in all our magazines, it says very plainly that the editorial and executive offices are at 10 East 40th Street, New York. It’s the printer who is out in Indiana. Okay now?

We’ve experimented with putting the cover illustration in a panel on many of our magazines and the experimentation is far from over. There are good reasons, however, for not mak-
ing all magazines look alike.

There is also the consideration that you get a larger and better looking picture by utilizing the full width of the cover, even though you have to run some type across the top of it. Simple, clear-cut answers are rarely found; however, we are still experimenting. There’s almost nothing we won’t do for our readers. Almost nothing.

THE SPIRIT OF XMAS
by Charles Baird

Dear Sam: Today I received a gift. The donor was Leigh Brackett and the gift a few hours of enjoyment. Because I had some free time today I began reading THE BIG JUMP. I expected a good novel. My anticipation was immeasurably surpassed. I had to finish the novel without putting it down. It was tremendous! Let me extend my congratulations to Leigh Brackett and to you and your staff for publishing this novel. Curiously enough, Mrs. Hamilton’s “flame people” are reminiscent of her husband’s radioactive men in THE THREE PLANETEERS.

The remainder of the issue was fair; however the Finlay illustration on pages 10 and 100 is terrific. This mist-like drawing is the type in which Finlay excels.

One other thing—on the cover the colors are too close—they fade into one another. Emsh is adequate, but not near the old master. I can’t help but think of the cover Earle Bergey would have painted for this theme—161 Albenarl Street, Springfield, Mass.

There are too few good science-fiction artists. Earle had practically grown up with us and he knew the field. We expected to miss him. Emsh is hard to surpass and has a wonderful variety of styles and techniques. We sure could use them both.

CLOSE HARMONY
by Tex Regan

Dear Sam: I’ve been an SF fan for nigh unto 20 years (I’m 34) but in all that time I have written very few letters to any readers comment department.

However, in your February issue of SPACE STORIES I find a story by Leigh Brackett and I don’t know when I’ve enjoyed a story more. The gal is terrific! In the first place I like novel-length stories. In the second place (but no less important) she has an easy-reading, very excellent style that made it a pleasure to read THE BIG JUMP. The plot was also very good, this gal has ideas.

Anyway, you get the idea—I’m 100% for Leigh Brackett. Let’s have more of her in novel-length stories.

Do you think there is any certain category of person, male or female, which becomes staunch...
science fiction readers. For instance—I’m a professional musician (drums and piano also do vocals, all of the Dixieland variety) and I cannot get interested in any other type of fiction but SF. Now, I have noticed that a lot of my fellow musicians are also addicted to SF in the same way. This has caused me to wonder whether love of SF comes more easily to persons of a free-living, artistic type of personality. I am also a pretty good amateur photographer and have noticed that a lot of musicians are interested in photography, while a lot of professional photographers are interested in music, tying these two professions together quite strongly. And a lot of photographers, pro or otherwise, are also SF fans.

Another thing that amazes me is the number of female fans there seem to be. I didn’t think the feminine mind would be interested in SF. Anyway, I’ve never been lucky enough to meet a gal who leaned in that direction. Maybe they’re all tomboys, huh?—326 S. Minnesota, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Now that you mention it, we have a couple of friends who are engineers and their hobbies are photography and high-fidelity sound systems, which they build like crazy, always trying to get more perfect reproduction of music. Runs into money. One of these boys gave up photography for sound systems, disposing of over four thousand dollars worth of cameras and equipment. He had a record player in his apartment which took up a whole wall—looked like one of the electronic brains, complete with colored lights, switches and what have you. Don’t know how the neighbors took it, because when he played a record the walls shook.

Danny Stiles, disk jockey on station WCTC of New Brunswick, New Jersey, is another musically inclined science-fiction fan. His program STILES IN THE SAUCER features imaginary flights into space with hot platters between. It’s an interesting theory about personality traits and science-fiction. Anybody else want to get into the act?

SMALL KICKS

by Robert Kvanbeck

Dear Sam: SPS is good! The December and February issues are, anyway. I thought the lead in the December issue was especially good (PLANET OF THE DAMNED) but THE BIG JUMP in February wasn’t far behind. The only kick I have on the stories (and a small kick too) is on COMING HOME. It didn’t have enough info. I like something I can get my teeth into. It’s kind of hard to get much into a short story, though. I agree completely (almost) with Lee Huddleston on the fanzine column. I like the Science Fiction Book Corner, but I would like a fanzine column better. Enough of his post mortification, let’s end it all.—Box 233, Nevis, Minn.
P.S. I know you don't stock back issues, but can you find out where I can get the first issue of SPS? I missed it. (Of course I missed it. I wouldn't ask for it if I had it.)

Keep an eye on the letter columns of all the mags—we make a point of posting the names and addresses of fans with back issues to sell. Also look up the fanzines, such as Science Fiction Advertiser at 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, California.

Our old friend Fredrick B. Christoff, 39 Cameron St. S., Kitchener, Ontario writes to say he enjoyed every story in the last issue of SPS, but since we never print complimentary letters we won't even mention it. Allen Glasser, 71 Tehama Street, Brooklyn 18, N. Y. wants copies of THE TIME TRAVELLER, the first science fiction fan magazine, which he edited years ago. Anyone having copies is requested to write him. And there's a letter from somebody whose last name is Moore—can't figure out the first name at all, nor the sex—from Wisconsin, who also seems to like us—and we seem to have run out of space.

So keep an eye peeled for THE MECHANISTS by Dwight V. Swain—a fast-moving tale of intrigue on two planets and some very sprightly shorts, all in the next issue. Till then—

THE EDITOR

Answers to Quiz on page 120
1-d, 2-g, 3-f, 4-i, 5-b, 6-h, 7-a, 8-e, 9-c.

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