

Worlds of Fantasy



No 3

In this issue
"STRATOSHIP X9"
by
W.B. CLARKE

SCIENCE FICTION

16

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £232-10s. Please send two more." B.C., Tredegar, S. Wales.—Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book," 1931.

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AS HEALER

One lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a 'Joan the Wad' to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the Water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER

Another writes: "Since the War my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck, and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a 'Joan the Wad.' We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job, and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back, and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan.'"

AS MATCHMAKER

A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has 'Joan the Wad.'

AS PRIZEWINNER

A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting 'Joan the Wad' I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize, but I know that —, who won £2,000 in a competition, has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan.'"

AS SPECULATOR

A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1s. shares, and of a sudden they went up in the market to 7s. 9d. I happened to be staring at 'Joan the Wad.' Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

JOAN THE WAD'S achievements are unique. Never before was such a record placed before the public. Ask yourself if you have ever heard before of anything so stupendous. You have not. Results are what count, and these few Extracts from actual letters are typical of the many hundreds that are received, and from which we shall publish selections from time to time. We unreservedly, GUARANTEE that these letters were absolutely spontaneous, and the originals are open to inspection at JOAN'S COTTAGE. Send at once for full information about this PROVED Luck Bringer. You, too, may benefit in Health, Wealth and Happiness to an amazing extent.

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WORLDS OF FANTASY

No. 3

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WORLD
OF
FANTASY

*All characters in these stories are entirely
imaginary, and have no connection with, or
reference to, any living person.*

THE ELDER RACE

by JOHN SLOAN

It was just ten minutes to three on a bright and sunny day in June in the year 1960. Where before there had been all the activity and apparently meaningless haste of the anthep, now for the moment was a halt in the hitherto ceaseless commotion.

Dick Forrester, B.Sc., looked around him, gazing at the nearby metal walls which seemingly pressed upon him like a prison. There were still ten minutes to go.

He turned and faced the window, constructed of thick unbreakable quartz; and the vision it gave him through its weird lens-like clarity caused his heart momentarily to beat a trifle faster.

The bright green fields of England had never looked so beautiful, he thought, as to-day; and who knew, he may be viewing them for the last time. Many people, some of his best friends among them, had already told him as much; but all the arguments which they had used could not avail in turning him from his purpose.

In less than ten minutes now he and his three chosen colleagues were due to make yet another attempt to cast off the shackles which bound man so firmly to mother earth.

Dick, twenty-five years of age, looked nothing like the scholar which his learning and degrees proved him to be. Six feet in his socks, his appearance was more consistent with the activity of the Rugby field, and such indeed was the case. His was that rarity, a first class mind in a first class body, and he was in charge of this expedition.

In those few remaining minutes, with all the careful

preparations completed, he thought back over all that the last fifteen years had brought.

He was ten when the first atom bomb burst upon an astounded Japan, and he had grown to manhood during the days when all scientific talk had been of atomic power.

It was inevitable that, given the fact of the faster than sound rocket which the Germans had so largely perfected and used against this country in the second world war, the idea of the combination of rocket and atomic power had filled venturesome minds with the conviction that those wild dreams of such writers as Jules Verne and Wells that man could roam the spaces would now be realised.

In those fifteen years there had been many attempts to break away from the powerful attraction of the earth.

The first, three years after the devastation of the premier atom bomb, was still vivid in the memories of the people of America. A rocket which towered high above the surrounding treetops, yet which, because most of its great bulk was the atomic engine, could house only two people, had blown apart a few seconds after it had left the ground and in full view of a gigantic crowd which included the relatives of the luckless ones whose lives had been forfeited by man's thirst for knowledge and more experience.

So with each succeeding effort. The Germans being what they were, it was too much to expect that an attempt would not be made by their rocket experts; but that had met with no more good fortune than any other, and in those fifteen years none had lived to break beyond the airy belt of earth.

Yet what are a score or even a hundred failures when a group of men is determined that mankind shall triumph eventually over the seemingly impossible task which nature has inflicted upon it?

A door opened and the noise broke through the train of Dick's thoughts. Doctor Hemings, who now entered the small artificially lighted room, was more in accordance with the usual view of academic learning. About five

feet four in height, he was almost bald and had thick pebbled glasses perched at a precarious angle on his thin nose. He was twice Dick's age and he looked like the current caricature of the forgetful professor. He was certainly the latter, but forgetful, no; for it seemed that once any fact was brought to the notice of that brilliant mind, it was stored away neatly and carefully in the appropriate pigeon-hole, from whence it would be brought when needed, but never lost.

"Three more minutes," said Hemings, looking at his wristwatch. "I shall be glad to be off."

"So shall I, Doc," replied Dick. "I have been trying to keep the tension from playing havoc with my nerves."

"Take it calmly, my boy," said the doctor; "a few more minutes, and if our calculations are correct man will break the chains which now bind him to earth."

Again the door opened and the two other members of the expedition came in; Alec Macgregor, a burly Scot with the great mechanical genius of his race, and Harry Stenway, a youthful but promising astronomer. These two were the same age as Dick; in fact the trio had been in college together and there had built up a friendship which was fashioned on the many interests which they held in common.

"Is everything O.K.?" asked Dick, and they both nodded. He held out his hands to them and silently the four shook hands, and with mutual wishes of good luck the four men left the small room and went to their various posts of duty. It was now almost zero hour.

In the long room which held the mighty engine and an assortment of instruments; pressure gauges, speedometer and kindred devices which occupied almost an entire wall, Dick and Doctor Hemings glanced through the small observation window and waved to the crowd outside. The arms of those near at hand could be seen raised in wild waving. The mouths of all were open but no sound could be heard through the walls, sound-proof as well as insulated against the awful cold of space.

Dick looked at Hemings.

"Well, here we go, Doc," he said.

It was exactly three o'clock by Dick's wrist watch. He pulled at a large switch and in a moment a pronounced hum was manifest throughout the room. It sounded like the purring of some giant cat, and to the two it brought the sensation of much comfort.

Dick glanced again out of the window, then pressed a second switch. This controlled the artificial gravity process which would keep the machine at the normal gravitational pressure to which they were used on Earth.

Once more his hand moved, and this time it was quite a small lever which he pulled. Outside the crowd disappeared, and the earth was falling rapidly away from them; yet there was no feeling of discomfort and no sensation of acceleration. All this was eliminated by the artificial gravity.

Hemings glanced at an altimeter.

"Thirty thousand feet up," he said.

Dick nodded: "Not bad going," he remarked, and pulled over the lever another notch. The hum of the engine became more highly pitched, then moved up until it was beyond the range of human ears.

"Seventy thousand," said Hemings's voice in a triumphant tone.

They were higher into the stratosphere than any previous ventures had reached. They had jumped forward when Dick moved the lever over; at least that was the indication from the discs which measured the speed, yet still they had no sensation of any movement.

They had left Earth at a speed of one thousand miles an hour and were now moving out towards the moon at a pace five times greater. It was faster than man had previously travelled and roughly two days of space flight should bring them to the vicinity of Earth's satellite, for this was to be the first port of call, now that man had thrust himself off his native globe.

In the older days of the theory of space travel, before the atomic rocket was a reality, it had been calculated that an initial speed of some seven miles a second would have to be achieved in order to counter the pull of Earth's

mass ; but the tremendous and lengthened power of the atomic engine had altered that, and the present speed would enable man to conquer where previously he had failed.

From their altitude Earth was already visible as a huge sphere, and the curves were clearly marked ; the various lands standing out in relief as on some gigantic globe in a schoolroom.

Even as they watched it lessened in size, for each minute took them some forty miles or more further away and into the infinite.

Doctor Hemings switched on a small button beside a white screen upon the wall. Immediately the tiny room at the front extremity of the spaceship was brought into view on the televisior. Alec Macgregor and Harry Stenway could be seen attending to the various tasks in the nose of the vessel.

"O.K. Chief," said Alec. "I think we've done it."

His voice came through as his lips moved. He might have been standing beside them in the same room.

"We are further out than anyone has reached," said Hemings. "Everything is quite well this end. Switch on the repellor rays to deal with any possible meteorites. Can you see the moon yet?"

"Dead ahead," replied Harry ; "and clearer than I have ever seen it. I feel a bit more settled than I did ten minutes ago."

Dick grinned.

"Same here," he said. "I felt my hair stand on end as I started her going ; but we're still in one piece. Harry, you and Doc should go to rest now. Alec and I will hold the fort for the next six hours, then we will awake you for you to take over your turn. Cheerio."

"Good-night all," said Harry and Doc together.

Doctor Hemings smiled. "That sounds alright," he said ; "it is just 3-15 p.m. Greenwich time." He switched off the televisior and went to lie on the couch against the furthest wall.

The spaceship travelled onward and into the unknown. The synthetic air plant was functioning perfectly. There

was little to do except to watch the various instruments, for all danger of a blow-up seemed past.

Seven watches of six hours apiece went by and meals, duty and rest were the principal occupations of the quartet. One more watch should bring them approximately into the vicinity of the moon, but from this point things seemed to go astray.

The glow of the front apartment became visible on the televisior, and as Dick turned towards it he could see both Alec and Harry, and noted that each had an air of worry about him.

"Any trouble?" he asked.

"We can't see the moon, Dick," said Alec.

"What do you mean?" asked Dick.

"Except for the stars there is nothing but emptiness right ahead where the moon should be," said Harry.

"We must have moved off our course somehow."

Dick turned to arouse Hemings and as he did so his eyes glanced out of the window at the side of the room. He stared in amazement. Hemings, waking to his call, looked at him in a startled manner, then followed the direction of his gaze, only to see Earth's old moon, multiplied to a gigantic size, hovering appallingly near at hand.

"We have swung well off our course," said he.

"Why, can you see her from your side window?" asked Harry.

"Yes," replied Hemings. "It should be still well ahead, but it is dangerously close; although at the speed we are moving it looks as if we will shoot right past."

"Look at the speed indicator, Doc," said Dick. "Do you see what I do, or am I dreaming?"

"Ye Gods," gasped Hemings; "twenty-five thousand miles an hour. What does that mean?"

"It means," replied Dick, "that some large body has attracted us towards it."

"Watch the indicator, Dick," said Alec. "If we have been caught in the grip of some large planetary body, powerful enough to draw us off our path and step up our speed like that it should continue to increase."

There was dead silence in the cabin for about five minutes which seemed like an eternity, then Dick said:—

"The speed remains static at 25,000; what now?"

"There is one alternative that strikes me," said Hemings, "we are being held to a fixed speed which has swung us away from the moon. As you can see, Dick; it is no longer visible, other than as a glow behind us. We are heading out into space, and probably on a beam of some kind."

"A beam, Doc," said Alec, "do you suggest intelligent direction?"

"That and nothing else," answered Hemings. "If it were one of the blind forces of nature, the pull of some large planet, for example, we would have already more than doubled our speed."

"Have you any idea, Harry, where we could be heading?" asked Dick.

"Well, most of the planets are at the other side of the Earth, or off at a tangent at the moment. Mars seems to me the one possibility."

"Mars, gee whizz," said Dick. "Perhaps we shall be able to answer the old enigma of the canals."

"What are you thinking about, Doc?" asked Alec.

"I was just working out what seems our new schedule," answered Hemings. "At our present speed, and with Mars say roughly forty million miles away, that's about 1,600 hours of travel, say a little over sixty-six days. Luckily we have a three months supply of food, so if Mars is our destination we are alright for eats."

"Righto, then," said Dick, "all set for Mars."

There seemed nothing further that the space travellers could do but to keep the engine running in case they got off the beam. The days passed slowly and monotonously. The routine of one day was repeated the next.

Fifty days went by, and from the look-out window at the fore end of the craft one member of the starry cluster had become sorted out from the rest and was more clearly defined. If it were Mars they should then be a little less than ten million miles away, but whichever

wanderer of the spaces it was, there they were obviously going.

Ten more days of travelling the apparently interminable wilderness, and by that time the star ahead had grown. It now ceased to be a large star and registered as a slightly larger moon. There was now no doubt in the minds of Dick and his fellow travellers concerning the identity of the globe ahead, for it coincided in Harry's view with the photos all had seen. It was Mars.

A thrill of excitement and expectancy ran through each of the four. Looking back afterwards, neither of them could recall that he had ever thought of death as the end of the long journey. They had done what no others had previously managed; Earth could be left behind and the spaceways were there for the adventurous to roam.

Each day brought the strange planet nearer. From the fore window it seemed to occupy most of the space ahead. All the markings with which they were familiar in their books stood out boldly and clearly. By the time that they had calculated that there was one more day of travel the new world showed as a pattern of greens, browns and grays that made them think of Earth; but they were all too excited to feel homesick.

When it seemed that they were perilously close to the sphere and that much longer at that speed must bring them to disaster, Dick glanced with some anxiety at the speed indicator. It was registering 20,000, and was going steadily downward. In a matter of minutes it was at 5,000 and then he knew that whatever power had held them, it was now removed. The speed and destiny of the ship was once more in their own hands.

It took nearly two days at their reduced speed before they encountered the atmosphere of Mars. They estimated that they were then twenty miles from the surface. There were now signs of cities and evidence of life.

All stood by now in readiness. Dick reversed the proceedings of the departure from Earth and gradually the speed of the vessel slowed down: 1,000, 500, 100 miles an hour, and now Mars no longer hung before them but

could be seen below as they journeyed through her air and parallel with her ground.

Some distance ahead a huge spot was marked out in a gigantic white circle. It could be nothing but an indication that there was the place to land. It was about half a mile from a huge white building.

Steadily as a bird the craft swept onward, and at last crossed the nearer line of the circle. Gently Dick took it down and the ground drew gradually nearer. There was a just perceptible bump, not enough to disturb them, and then they were at rest. The journey from Earth to Mars was an accomplished fact.

Dick left the engine running so that in the event of a hostile reception from the natives there would be at least some chance to attempt an escape; but at the back of his mind was the thought of that directional beam.

"Stand by while I test for air," called Hemings.

He pressed a lever against the window and it opened slightly to admit a little of the air of Mars. He took a sniff. It seemed to do no harm and he breathed again; this time more deeply.

"Quite all right," he said. "Come through boys."

Alec and Harry came from the far end of the vessel and for the first time for more than two Earth months the four friends were once again together in the same room.

"Shall I open up, Dick?" asked Alec.

"May as well, Alec," replied Dick. "We don't know what kind of greeting we are going to get, but we have to get out of here sometime or other."

Alec pulled the lever which operated the thick door settled so neatly into the side of the vessel. The door swung open and a natural light penetrated the room and was good to see.

All four walked to the door and poked out their heads. There was not a soul in sight. At the far end of a huge lawn of what looked to be red moss stood the magnificent white building.

Alec unfastened a flight of light metal steps from a

niche in the wall and lowered it gently into position from the open doorway to the ground.

"We don't seem to be having any trouble with the gravity of this planet, anyhow," he remarked.

"Of course not," replied Hemings. "Earth's normal gravity is still switched on in the machine, so be careful; you will probably notice the difference as soon as you go outside."

One by one they ventured forth from the vehicle which had been their world for two months. With no trouble they each negotiated the short steps and soon stood upon the soil of Mars. Noticeably there was less pull, but it was not enough to cause inconvenience, and after a few attempts they were able to move in comparative comfort. The temperature appeared little different from an Autumn afternoon in England.

They stood in a group before the open door of their spaceship and waited for a few minutes with their eyes fixed on the white building ahead of them. From where they were, could be seen an imposing flight of stairs leading upward from the red lawn, and at the top of the stairs a large arch seemed to fashion the entrance to the building; but of a door there was no sign.

Dick was about to make some comment when a lone figure appeared coming towards them through the archway. It was dwarfed by the immensity of the building on which it moved, but it walked upright on two legs and was appreciably human in structure, and scantily clothed.

With no hesitation it moved across the terrace to the staircase and with impressive dignity descended to the lawn. It continued to approach the group of Earthmen, each of whom could feel his heart beating wildly at the thought of meeting with a member of an alien race across the skies.

As the figure approached nearer, two things became manifest. The human resemblance was clear, although the eyes were of a strange colour. Nose and mouth were in approximately the same position as those of Earthmen, as also were the ears, but these latter protruded

further from the skull. The being was of some considerable height above the human form, being at least seven feet tall; and covered only in a pair of short trunks of some woven red material it became apparent that it was also feminine.

She finally came to a halt about ten yards from the little group, and then extended her arms wide apart and showing that the hands were empty. Hands and feet resembled closely those of the human form.

Dick stepped forward and extended his arms likewise, bowing gracefully to the imposing creature. I wonder how we shall make ourselves understood, he thought. Then he and the others received their first shock on Mars.

"Welcome, men of Earth; Mars greets her visitors from the beyond." The voice was low and possessed a contralto quality which was superb; and it spoke in English.

"You know our language!" said Dick in amazement. "How can that be?"

"There will be much else to surprise you, for we know much of your lives and habits. We can see and hear much of the happenings on that strange planet which is our nearest neighbour. But come," she said with a pleasant smile, "I will take you to the rest of the rulers."

There was a momentary hesitation on the part of the Earthmen to leave their spaceship. The Martian woman smiled again in an engaging manner. Then she said:

"There is no need to fear. No harm shall come to you or your craft."

"Excuse me then for a moment, I will switch off the engine which I left running," said Dick.

He moved as rapidly as was possible up the ladder, entered the vessel and did the requisite actions which brought the engine to a stop. Then he returned to the ground where he found his colleagues in conversation with the native of Mars.

"Come Earthmen; Thura will take you to her people."

They walked across the soft and restful Martian lawn. It was good to be in the open once more after the cramped

size of the spaceship, and it was a relief to breathe natural air instead of the artificial supply which had only been possible on their long journey.

They came at length to the staircase. Each step was a trifle higher than would be its counterpart on Earth; but the increased height of the Martian race, if Thura was a typical specimen, would account for that.

Thura, with Dick just a trifle behind her, led the way up the massive stairway. It seemed to be formed of some rubber like material which just perceptibly gave to the feet and made it a pleasure to walk.

The little company reached the top, crossed the terrace and entered under the huge arch which now they could see swung in one unbroken curve from the floor on one side upward till it seemed to soar on high, then continued downward to the ground perhaps one hundred feet away.

On through the archway and along a magnificent corridor with a similar arch at its far end. This opened into a gigantic hall of theatre-like proportions containing seating accommodation for several thousands. From the first view of it there were no seats vacant. Thousands upon thousands of tall, dignified beings, each as scantily clad as was Thura, but of both sexes, smilingly welcomed the visitors from space and spread their arms in greeting as they rose to their feet.

Down the centre of the huge room Thura took them towards a slightly raised portion at the end. There stood nine to receive them, and now Dick noticed that whereas the trunks of those others he could see were of varying shades, all the nine on the platform wore the same red coloured trunks as did Thura. There were four women and five men. Already the Earthmen found that they had become inured to the almost nudity of their hosts.

The Earthmen glanced around them. There was nothing which had the appearance of being a weapon to be seen anywhere. All round them were smiling faces and empty hands.

Thura turned to Dick and his companions.

"Our method here is for visitors to step forward in

turn and announce themselves by name. The members of the Ten will then do likewise."

As she finished speaking she moved forward and took her place beside the nine on the rostrum.

Each of the Earthmen then moved a short distance in that direction, announcing his name clearly. The Ten on the platform followed suit, and it transpired that the other four women were named Merka, Dorla, Ruta and Tinta. The five men were Torvo, Jonan, Kydon, Sildor and Larsok.

It was explained that these Ten had been chosen by a public acclamation to be the advice givers and general deciders in any possible disputes which might arise. Their term of office was for three years and then a fresh Ten would be selected. There were always five men and five women in the Ten.

When this had been told the Earthmen appreciated that it had been one of the leading citizens who had come to welcome them. Dick expressed his thanks to them for their courtesy and friendliness.

"First we must take you to refresh yourselves," said Thura. "After your long journey you must first wish to bath, and then we will take you to dine. Our people will now be dismissed."

She turned to the thousands still standing and spoke a few words in a tongue which was meaningless to the Earthmen and in a few minutes the vast hall was clear. The visitors were then taken along several corridors until a series of rooms was reached, all opening out of a small square inlet in one of the passages.

Here they were left with the information that these rooms leading off the alcove were all bathrooms, and that if they required it a change of attire of the Martian kind had been provided for them in the room indicated.

None of them had seen anything so palatial as the fine bathroom which they now entered. It was obvious that the Martian race had developed to a state of high civilisation.

They bathed and when this operation was ended, found the requisite clothing laid out in readiness for

them and it was so designed that each garment could easily be adjusted to fit their slighter figures.

With a feeling of remarkable well-being and an intense desire to eat, they left the bathroom and proceeded back to the alcove. Here they were joined within a few moments by the Ten, then conducted along further corridors to a small hall where a table was already set for fourteen diners.

The four comfortable chairs for the guests on one side of the table, all the furniture being of the rubberised material, had been built up a trifle so as to raise them to the height desirable for their dining. Dick and his friends were motioned to be seated and then the Ten sat in their chairs on the other side of the table.

Thura, who sat at one end of the festive board facing Dick pressed a button on the corner of the table and within a few seconds fourteen women entered the room, each bearing a plate in her hands which she set before the diner apportioned to her care.

The first course was obviously a soup of some kind, but it was certainly delicious. They were told not to worry about the Martian customs in dining, but to make use of the varied assortment of utensils in accordance with the manners on Earth.

Dick and his colleagues thoroughly enjoyed the repast, and not a word was spoken on either side of the table until the meal had ended. Then they were taken to another alcove and shown a set of rooms wherein they could retire for the night.

It was still early by Martian standards, but none of the four found any difficulty in getting to sleep on the luxurious couches which were provided for them.

During the next few days they were taken around the city; all of which was fashioned of the same pliable rubberised stone. Four members of the Ten were with them wherever they went. A constant change of three members was arranged, but Thura was a permanent member of the group.

She, Dorla and Merka took them several times in an aircraft of strange design to visit other cities, but it

seemed that these were few in number on the planet. They were warmly received wherever they went. Violence seemed unknown in this almost perfect world.

Scientifically the Martians were superb. Thura was able to show them powerful telescopes, which, trained upon the Earth, brought within their vision much of the life of their own planet. They were able to hear wireless programmes from their homeland and readily understood how it was the Martians knew so much about them.

For a month, during which they developed a strong and firm friendship for the members of the Ten, and more particularly Thura, Merka and Dorla; they travelled around and studied the now ancient civilisation of Mars. The early impression that the spots upon Mars capable of sustaining humanity were very limited in number was confirmed. It was brought home finally to the notice of the Earthmen that the days of this magnificent race were numbered. Mars was a dying planet.

One evening they were invited to attend a meeting in the huge hall wherein they had first met the Ten. They had a very fine meal with their three particular friends. The rest of the Ten were busy with some of their problems.

After the meal they bathed and changed and were then escorted to the splendid hall. There was again a mass of the Martian public to greet them with the usual smile and wide-armed welcome which by now they were quite used to receiving.

The Ten were all on the platform and four additional chairs had been set beside them, obviously for the Earthmen to take their places with the rulers of Mars. It was a great and noble gesture, a signal honour.

All present, including the Ten, stood as Dick and his fellow Earthmen entered and took their seats. There was a momentary pause, then Thura rose to her feet.

"Friends from Earth," she commenced. "It is time now for us to tell you our story, and to ask you for your aid. First you must know that it was in accordance

with our desires that you originally planned your trip in space."

"How can that be?" asked Harry.

Thura smiled. "We are able to study much of the life of your planet, as you know from a use of our telescopes. We were able to guess, before your people knew about it, that rare metal which is the source of atomic power; but, though we could realise the power of this ore we could not work upon it ourselves for it is unknown upon Mars."

"How then do you come into the picture?" asked Dick.

"It was we who put into certain people on Earth whose minds were receptive to our suggestions, the idea of seeking for this ore. We guided your scientists in their experiments in atomic energy, and subsequently you four in your practical attempts at space travel."

Dick did not feel happy at this revelation.

"What was your purpose in working in this way?" he asked.

Thura paused for a moment before she replied. She turned and faced Dick squarely. This time there was no smile upon her face.

"Since you have been here and have travelled around our planet it must have become manifest to you that Mars is a dying world. We want some of that strange ore in order to build space ships capable of flying from Mars to some other world so that our ancient race shall not perish when Mars can no longer support our life."

The same thought sprang immediately into the minds of all four Earthmen, and with it came a great fear. They had been beguiled to Mars by this race of super-scientists and here were at their mercy. It was possible for the Martians to take possession of their supply of atomic power and to make further machines with which to attack and attempt the conquest of earth. The horror of the situation must have shown plainly on their faces.

"My friends," said Thura; "how you misjudge us. Do not fear that we shall attempt to take Earth from

your people. That we could never do. We could not justify the saving of our own race by inflicting suffering upon another."

"Then you mean no harm to Earth and its peoples?" asked Dick.

"None whatever," replied Thura. "The world we have in view is the one you know as Venus. It is a young world, and shows no signs of a race of people; but it contains all that we would need for our sustenance. There we could settle and as the various life forms evolved we could help them to a full growth."

There was one point which still puzzled Dick.

"Why do you need such a thing as atomic power when you already have so powerful a means of travel as the ray with which you brought us here?" he asked.

"There is a simple explanation of that problem," came Thura's answer. "We could use that ray to take some of our race to Venus, but some would have to stay to ensure that the ray is properly directed. There have been volunteers to stay and do this thing, but the rest cannot accept this sacrifice of lives, not even to save our race. If Earth will not let us have sufficient of the atomic ore for our purpose then there is no alternative for us but to stay on our native Mars and to die with her when she can no longer support us. Friends of Earth, the fate of our race, our civilisation and our knowledge is in your hands."

Thura resumed her seat and for a long while there was a silence. Hemings, Alec and Harry looked at Dick and wondered what he would do. Finally he rose to his feet.

"I will do what I can for you, people of Mars," he said. "Since I have lived among you I have been impressed by the sheer beauty of your lives and the complete absence of any violence in your behaviour. It must not be that such a people shall die, for there is much that you can teach us. With your scientific knowledge is it possible that you can build a machine with which I can talk across space to my people?"

"It can be done," Thura said.

"You must understand that I have no power, Thura, such as you hold here. I can only suggest to my race, but cannot command them."

"Neither do I command here," added Thura; "but it is understood what you mean."

Soon after this the meeting broke up.

Within a few days the machine was ready. It was a large thing in size and comprised a televisior in addition to a wireless.

Dick was soon speaking into the machine, and in a few minutes he was being heard and seen by various people on Earth. He explained to his friends at home where he was and many were glad to know that the expedition had been successful and was not lost in the wastes of space.

He convinced his friends on Earth by his evident sincerity of the sort of people the Martians were and he soon had Thura talking to his people and showing the Ten to Earth.

The world government on Earth soon decided that the necessary ore should be supplied and arrangements were made for pilotless spaceships to be transferred from Earth to Mars by the powerful Martian ray.

Within a year all was ready for the flight from Mars. Dick stayed and gave all the help he could to his new friends, for so he felt them to be by that time, and finally the day came when all the Martian race was collected together and entered into the various machines allotted to them.

The flight from Mars, past Earth, and on to Venus was accomplished successfully, and soon the great race was settled in its new abode. Venus had all the promise of a perfect world for the old Martian people.

Dick now wished to see his native planet once more, and with his Martian friends quite safe he said the time had now come for him to leave for home.

"It is hard for me to part from you like this, Dick," said Thura; and she blushed furiously.

"Thura," asked Dick; "is it possible for a member

of the Ten to resign before the term of office is completed?"

Thura smiled. "It is possible," she answered.

"Then come with me to Earth as my bride," he asked her. "We can cement together the new found friendship between our two races, and with you there much of the ugliness of human traits would quickly tend to die."

Thura took his hand. "It shall be done," she said.

A week later, mated in the fashion of Mars, and with the good wishes of all the people of the new planet, Dick and his lovely bride left for the journey to Earth. There would be many other journeys between the two planets Dick new, and when the men and women of Earth knew the people of Venus, other bridal couples would brave space in their search for romance.

THE END

TREACHERY FROM VENUS

by **EVERET RIGBY**

CHAPTER ONE

SLOWLY, with infinite dignity, a brilliant cortege mounted the gilded staircase which led to the Assembly Chamber of the Council of Earth. As they approached the double doors of the Chamber, the two guards, dressed in the familiar blue and gold uniform of the Terran Guard, sprang to attention, heels clicking with the precision of automata. The right-hand, and therefore senior, officer took one step forward, saluted, and demanded in the traditional form: "Here sits the Council of Earth. Who seeks to be admitted, and in whose name?"

The answer came at once, again in the traditional words, for no others would serve. "The Prince of Tahrahn seeks to be admitted! In his own name he seeks it, as Venusian Ambassador and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Council of Earth, and in the name of Skohn, Emperor of Venus, Overlord of Mercury."

The doors swung ponderously open, and the Prince of Tahrahn and his followers strode forward into the great Chamber to the waiting Council. With slow, arrogant tread they approached the great table, and the Councillors rose to their feet, bowing courteously to the newcomers, who, in turn, returned the bow, but with such a frigid, disdainful air as robbed the gesture of any courteous intent. With a certain sinuous grace, they took the seats prepared for them, and there was a general clearing of throats and rustling of papers as the Earth Councillors resumed their seats.

The Prince of Tahrahn, who had already introduced himself to the guards outside, leaned back in his chair and

surveyed the assembled Council, not rudely, certainly, but with a lofty condescension which was obvious to all. True, his features were so different from those of the human race that it was utterly impossible to read any expression there, and much of his arrogant bearing might be put down to his consciousness of noble birth—an important matter on the feudal world of Venus, but meaningless on Earth for many centuries.

Although humanoid in form, that is to say with a head, a torso, two upper and two lower limbs, he differed in almost every other particular from the human race. And this is scarcely surprising, since the dominant race of Venus is reptilian in origin. The Prince, then, under his scarlet robes, had a body of dark brownish-green, covered with fine scales, and would have been as much at home in water as on land had his dignity allowed him to sink so low. His face, although of the same colour and texture as the rest of his princely person, resembled quite closely that of an earthman. The eyes were wide-set and large by Earth standards, and the ears were long and somewhat pointed, but the nose and chin followed the Earth pattern in their essentials; the most glaring incongruity was the mouth, for the Prince, in common with his companions, had a mere slit of a mouth with no lips at all.

The President of the Council rapped the table and rose to his feet. "In the name of the Council of Earth," he began, "I extend to your Highness . . ."

"One moment," interrupted the prince with a languid wave of one webbed hand. "Before we begin, would you be good enough, Mr. President, to increase the temperature? I find this room uncomfortably cool."

The President flushed angrily and glanced at the thermometer on the desk before him. Swallowing his annoyance, he pressed the bell by his side and spoke hurriedly to the attendant who answered the summons. Turning again to the prince, he made a noble effort to smile pleasantly. "Your Highness must be aware," he said, "that the temperature here is already considerably

higher than normal ; however, I have instructed it to be increased still further."

The prince nodded distantly. " No matter. I would not wish you to be inconvenienced, gentlemen. But we waste time. Shall we proceed ? "

With a sigh of exasperation, the President took up his notes. Did the Venusians intend to be discourteous, he wondered, or was it merely their alien nature which always produced these clashes of temperament ? He hurried through his message of welcome, looking in vain for any gesture of appreciation, and proceeded to the main point at issue.

" Your Highness is already aware," said the President, " that the epidemic on Earth is rapidly getting out of hand. The supplies of curative which you have been good enough to send us have been miraculously successful in effect but woefully inadequate in quantity. I am not exaggerating when I say that the fate of the human race is at stake, and I implore you to help us with large quantities of this fungus which, you admit, is of no value to you."

The Prince shrugged. " It is true," he admitted, " that the plant in question is valueless to us, but it is extremely rare. As I have already informed you, the collection of this simple little fungus involves great cost in material and life. You have no knowledge, gentlemen, of the dangers which beset anyone who enters the jungles of Venus. I tell you, the price we have fixed is most reasonable ; I can increase your supplies, but can you pay for it ? "

The President set his jaw grimly. " No," he answered, " we cannot pay for it. You insist on payment in radium, and we have already sent to you nearly half the supply available on this planet. More we cannot spare. Surely, there must be some other material of value ? Synthetic radio-actives ? Rare isotopes ? "

The Prince dismissed the offer with a contemptuous gesture, and rose to his feet. " It is profitless to discuss the matter further," he declared. " There is but one thing which we require of you, and one thing only which

you require of us. I should have thought the question an easy one, but it is plain that your need is not as great as you claim."

The Councillors had been silent up to now, but this arrogant speech was more than they could bear. Hot and uncomfortable in the hot-house atmosphere, they were also hot with anger.

A white-haired old man on the President's left rose to his feet, mopping perspiration from his chin. "Last week," said the old man, "I stood by and watched my family die one by one. You say our need is not great? Let me make a suggestion. We will send men to search your jungles for the plant we need. All we ask is that you give them free passage and the opportunity to seek. Will you do this?"

The Prince raised his webbed hands in mock horror. "Impossible! An alien race to wander at will on Venus? Our religion forbids it! Even if we were to be so mad as to allow such a thing, your puny Earthmen could not survive more than a few days. No, gentlemen, you have my terms—I am not interested in your foolish suggestions!" And with an arrogant toss of the head, the Prince of Tahran, followed by his silent companions, swept through the great double doors, past the sentries, and down the staircase to the waiting autocar.

In the Council Chamber, the President rapped savagely on the table to quieten the angry tumult that had broken out, and, when order was restored, spoke more to himself than to the Council.

"Very well," he said. "Now we know where we stand. We shall take our measures!"

CHAPTER TWO

CAPTAIN GILBERT TODD of the Special Division, Terran Guard, was a puzzled man. To be recalled to duty on the third day of a fourteen day leave was bad enough, but why should he have to report to the Director himself instead of his own immediate chief? Well, he'd know soon enough, he reflected—must be something pretty special. He allowed his imagination to wander over the possibilities, rejecting one idea after another as too fantastic for belief. In the middle of a vague day-dream involving the capture of drug-smugglers on the frozen wastes of Jupiter, he was abruptly recalled to reality by a voice from the communicator on the opposite wall inviting him to enter.

Hurriedly smoothing down his uniform, he crossed the ante-room and pressed the button on the doorway; as it slid noiselessly open, he stepped smartly into the office beyond, saluted, and stood rigidly to attention. The door closed noiselessly behind him. The Operational Director came round from behind his desk and greeted him with a friendly grin. Waving the captain to a comfortable chair, he picked up a card from his desk and cleared his throat.

"Captain Todd," he began. "I understand my summons recalled you from a well-deserved leave?"

"I don't know about the well-deserved part of it, sir, but I was on leave. But that doesn't matter. Is it a new assignment?"

The Director nodded. "Yes, captain, it is. Rather a special one, as a matter of fact. So special that you can turn it down if you like."

Todd began to look interested. "That certainly is special, sir! But of course, I won't turn it down, whatever it is."

"I hoped you'd say that, captain. But, remember, I won't hold you to it if you do change your mind. Listen."

He seated himself comfortably behind the desk and surveyed the captain for a moment.

"I don't know whether you've guessed," he went on, "but this assignment has to do with the Epidemic. Just a moment . . ." He raised a hand to forestall the captain's interruption. "I know what you're going to say. You don't know anything about fighting epidemics, and you don't see how you can help. That's what I'm going to tell you. But first of all, let me give you a picture of things as they are at this moment. You already know that things are bad, but you don't know just how bad. Very few people do know. The plain truth is that the human race faces extinction in the very near future; believe me, that is no exaggeration, but a simple fact."

He paused for a moment, absently toying with the card in his hand, and went on: "The Epidemic is a completely new and different disease; the widely accepted belief that it is a mutant form of the ancient polyomyelitis is false. Moreover, the most intensive activity of all our experts has failed to show any method of combatting this scourge. I will go further than that: we do not even know in what circumstances it is contracted! There is no evidence that it is a true infection in the accepted sense of the word: certainly, the injection of blood from an infected to a healthy person will transmit the disease in all its virulence, but casual infection by normal contact between individuals is not sufficient."

Todd looked puzzled. "But surely, sir," he broke in, "It must be! How else can the Epidemic spread?"

The Director looked at him keenly across the desk. "That, captain, is precisely what we have been asking ourselves! The outbreaks occur at regular intervals of four weeks: every four weeks, a large number of people of all classes and descriptions spread over an area of a few hundred square miles contract the disease and ninety-five per cent of them die. Ninety-five per cent. The remaining five per cent., I may add, wish they had."

He was silent for a moment, and then suddenly leaned across the desk. "Captain Todd, you are a layman, but

an intelligent one. Can you suggest any possible explanation of these facts? Any explanation, no matter how fantastic?"

The captain shook his head, slowly. "No-o, sir, I can't . . . Unless . . . But, no, that's out of the question . . ."

"What's out of the question, captain?"

"For a moment, sir, I wondered whether . . . whether . . . some outside agency could be deliberately responsible. It would account for the facts, but it's impossible of course!"

The Director leaned back in his chair. "Is it?" he asked innocently. "We are beginning to wonder!"

The captain sucked in his breath sharply. "The Venusians!" he whispered. "But why? Why?" As the full import of this terrible idea struck him, he shook his head, and looked again at the Director sitting grim and silent before him. "But surely, they've been sending us some curative drug, haven't they? Some antibiotic fungus that works like a miracle?"

The Director nodded. "Yes," he agreed. "They have. An obscure fungus found only in the Venusian jungles, which, as you say, works like a miracle . . . The payment they demand is radium . . . in large quantities. Our whole available supply would be sufficient to buy treatment for perhaps ten million people."

"I see," said the captain slowly. "And you suspect that they . . ."

"Exactly!"

The captain sat for a moment in stunned silence. Looking up at last, he met the Director's gaze squarely. "You spoke of an assignment for me, sir?"

"Yes, captain. The most dangerous assignment you ever faced. I want you to steal a quantity of the fungus. You are a qualified space pilot, and have spent a period in the bodyguard of the Earth Ambassador on Venus. You are familiar with the Venusians, and have some knowledge of their language. Not that that is likely to be of much value. Most important of all, you are a man

of considerable resource and daring, as your past record bears witness. Will you go?"

"When do I leave, sir?"

The Director came forward and shook his hand. "Three days from now. In a two-man ship: your companion will be a technician sufficiently familiar with this fungus to identify it readily and ensure correct collection and storage. All the help and information I can give you is in this envelope; you will memorise it before leaving this room. I need hardly add that, until you return, the Government of Earth has no knowledge of your whereabouts or even your existence; if you fall into the hands of the Imperial Army, you can expect short shrift and we can do nothing to help you."

The captain took the slim envelope, and shuddered involuntarily at the vast responsibility descending on his shoulders. "Just one thing more, sir, for my own peace of mind . . . is mine the only expedition?"

"No, captain, there are five more, but the less you know of them, the better. One ship-load of this drug will give us the breathing-space we need—more than that we dare not hope for."

CHAPTER THREE

THREE days later, a swift patrol-ship blasted off from a hidden space-field somewhere on Earth and disappeared in the evening sky. It bore no name or number, and the silvery metal of its hull was concealed by skilful camouflage.

Pressed hard against the padding of his seat by the

five-gravity acceleration, Captain Todd grinned sympathetically at his companion, to whom spatial acceleration was a new and unpleasant experience. During the intensive three days of briefing which had preceded their departure, Todd had learned a good deal of respect for Ling, and the oriental, in his unemotional way, had shown his liking for the captain. The only point which bothered Todd was whether the oriental's spare physique would stand the gruelling conditions they could expect on Venus—assuming that they could make a landing in safety! True, Ling had passed the exhaustive physical tests, but the captain had all the practical man's distrust of theoretical and artificial tests of any kind.

"Feel all right, Ling?" he shouted above the roar of the motors.

Ling managed a feeble grin. "Very far from all right! How long does it go on like this?"

"About four hours altogether, but only the first hour at this rate; the other three hours we accelerate at one G, and that's scarcely noticeable. That means we shall have a velocity of about 900,000 feet per second—about 600,000 miles an hour. Our parabolic course will be about a hundred and twenty million miles long, so we'll coast for about a hundred and eighty hours and then decelerate slowly so that we can manoeuvre her easily. Think you can make it?"

The oriental nodded grimly, and the captain relaxed again. Forty minutes to go, he thought, and everything fine. Hope it's as easy as this at the other end...

With the terrible burden of acceleration lifted at last, the little ship sped on through the ether for day after monotonous day. Ling was amused at first by the absence of gravity, but the many little inconveniences involved soon stifled his amusement. To float freely and weightlessly was a pleasant sensation, but there were drawbacks; an unguarded movement might lead to an undignified swoop to the cabin ceiling, and before the flight was over, he had more than one bruise to show for it!

Now the Earth had faded to an inconspicuous speck

behind them, and Venus loomed large ahead. Decelerating steadily, and constantly alert for the ever-present danger of patrols, they approached until the orb of the planet swelled to fill the sky and its gravity began to tug insistently at the ship.

Todd turned up the power to counteract the gravitational pull, and turned to his companion.

"This is it, Ling," he announced. "From now on, it's a matter of luck. Ninety-five per cent. of the population of Venus lives in the regions corresponding to our Arctic and Antarctic zones, and the rest is sea and jungle, but they have scattered posts and experimental stations all over the surface. We have to go in fast enough to stand a chance of not being spotted, but slowly enough to choose our spot. If we land on or near a station, we've failed—if we get over that danger, our troubles are just beginning! All set?"

Still braking heavily, they plunged into the dense mist of the lower atmosphere and sat watching the instrument panel in tense excitement. Slowly, the minutes ticked by, until, miraculously the vision screen cleared abruptly to show a dense mass of tropical vegetation zooming towards them; nearer and nearer it swept as the captain savagely forced the ship in to a landing at a speed well above safety level. With a splintering, tearing crash, they sliced through the tree-tops, the ship rocking and swaying from side to side, until with a final bone-shaking crash, it shuddered to a reluctant halt and was still. Todd threw himself back in his seat and mopped his streaming face. "Expedition arrived safely," he reported to no one in particular.

* * *

An hour later, two jumpy and apprehensive Earthmen, their limbs and bodies clad in light armour against the bite of reptiles, and their hands and faces protected from

insects by repellent cream, stepped gingerly out into the unknown.

The ship had crashed its way through the heavy foliage above and now lay completely screened from observation from above; in fact, it was so well hidden that Todd felt a qualm as to whether they would ever find it again! But that had to be risked.

Their surroundings agreed fairly closely with the conditions they had been led to expect, for although the Venusians did everything in their power to prevent the leakage of any information whatever, some knowledge had filtered out from time to time.

They had been fortunate enough to land on fairly solid ground as far as they could judge, but all around lay thick steaming swamp in which flourished tropical vegetation of the weirdest kind. The dense foliage above made it a place of half-light and moving shadows, and the swampy ground tugged longingly at their feet with each step, releasing each foot with a long, reluctant sucking plop which made their limbs ache almost at once. But worst of all was the heat—not merely the actual temperature, for that they expected, but a thick blanketting humidity so great that their lungs ached with protest.

Nor was this all. Underfoot, the swampy moss was alive with darting reptiles which struck constantly and ineffectually at the Earthmen's leg armour, and the air was full of the high-pitched whine of insects. They had walked barely a hundred yards when Todd called a halt, and they cautiously sat on a fallen tree to mop their streaming faces.

"See anything, Ling?"

"I see much, and all of it extremely interesting, but the fungus, no. As far as we could judge from the structure of the fungus, these would be just the conditions in which it would flourish . . . Ugh, you filthy beast!" He kicked off a two-foot lizard which was creeping along their tree-trunk, and stood up again. "Are we going on?"

Todd joined him, and they began a systematic search of the area round the ship. It was exhausting work, and

Todd, powerful though he was, soon felt the strain. Ling, strangely enough, seemed to stand the conditions better, whether because of his lesser weight or his absorbing interest in seeking the exact conditions in which the fungus might be expected, was more than Todd could tell, but he looked admiringly at his companion more than once as they plodded through the swamp.

The hours slipped by, and a sudden deepening of the shadows warned them to seek the shelter of the ship. They had barely reached it when the light faded completely, and they were glad enough to slam the port and throw themselves in the seats of the cabin.

Ling professed himself too excited to sleep and volunteered to take first watch; Todd raised no objection, and as soon as they had sprayed the cabin with insecticide and turned on the outside microphone, he made himself comfortable and closed his eyes.

Over the microphone came the myriad noises of the awakening jungle. The whine of the insects softened to a steady hum, but the night filled with growls, barks, and roars the sources of which they could only conjecture. In the far distance, they heard from time to time a deep, shattering roar that made the whole ship vibrate, and each time they heard it the other noises froze to sudden stillness, then, after a few minutes, slowly began again.

The night passed without incident, however, and they started early, so as to cover as much ground as possible before the real heat of the day. The new day brought fresh hope, and the absence of any sign of discovery or pursuit made both men confident of the final success of their mission. Nor was their confidence misplaced, for, just before noon, they found a patch of more solid ground which Ling excitedly declared was the likeliest spot so far.

Rising from the swamp itself was a low hillock, still covered with low creepers and purplish moss, but free from the larger trees whose tough branches made travel so difficult. The creepers here were covered with thick, wiry thorns which they were obliged to hack away before they could approach, but these grew less abundant until,

as they came near the summit, the ground became more open. At the same time, they began to notice an overpowering stench which seemed to come from the summit itself—a foul animal odour which made them hurriedly fix their breathing filters.

The centre of the hillock was occupied by a roughly circular hole some twelve feet in diameter; below they could see slime-covered water, and it was from this that the stench seemed to come.

Ling shouted in excitement and pointed a shaking gauntleted hand at the rim of the hole: inside it, growing in rich profusion was the fungus they had come so far to seek!

CHAPTER FOUR

LAUGHING like children, with success in sight, they set to work at once to collect the precious material and convey it to the ship. For the first time, they separated, and, for the sake of speed, Ling collected the fungus while the captain carried it back to the ship. Within a few hours, the hole was stripped as far as they could reach, and the special storage compartment in the ship was crammed full. Ling carefully measured the conditions of temperature and humidity, and even collected some of the foul slimy water from the hole to ensure that the fungus would be kept alive as long as possible.

It was on this last expedition that disaster came.

They had already transported one can of the foul liquid, but Ling insisted that they needed another. He leaned over the rim, with the captain grasping his belt, for the soil was treacherous after their trampling. Suddenly, the water below began to bubble, and the stench, already overpowering, spewed forth in thick gusts.

Todd heard his companion gasp, and tightened his hold on the belt, coughing a little himself, even through his mask.

A moment later, Ling was scrabbling furiously at the soil, pushing back in wild haste. "Back!" he screamed. "Get back, for God's sake!"

In one swift movement, the captain, accustomed to sudden action, swung him away from the hole, threw him clear, and reached for the heat-gun at his belt. Ling scrambled to his feet and began to run as a huge, nightmare of a head appeared above the hole's edge. Eight-foot jaws, armed with triple rows of ponderous teeth, stretched out at the end of a long scaly neck that seemed to Todd's incredulous gaze to be unending.

Ling, already ashamed of his ignominious flight, circled back to the captain's side, weapon held ready in a shaking hand.

"Back away, slowly, Ling," whispered Todd. "Don't shoot unless it shows signs of attacking—it may not notice us..."

They began to back cautiously away, the great, baleful eyes of the hideous monster watching them venomously.... they reached the edge of the thorny creepers, and as the captain half-turned to cut a way through, the creature struck!

It was over in a flash. One moment they were standing together, and then Todd was alone. Ling hung screaming from the monster's jaws while the captain aimed his weapon at the hideous neck and kept his anger hard on the trigger.

The heavy heat-gun would burn a hole through three-inch armour plate in one short blast, but five, long, agonising seconds passed before it penetrated the tough scales of the Venusian monster. The ground rocked and heaved as it struggled in the death throes, and Ling, still screaming, pitched to earth, rolled over, and lay still. The vicious head, half severed from the neck, snapped ineffectually a few feet away, and then, with a last, convulsive heave, it too lay still.

Todd knelt beside the broken body of his companion,

and felt for his pulse. As he strained to detect the faint, tenuous thread of life, Ling opened his eyes. His face contorted with effort as he feebly motioned the captain to come nearer—there was no mistaking the urgency of his expression, and Todd bent his ear to the dying man's lips.

".... Got it," Ling was whispering; "Away... Tell them... fungus associated animal life... may grow that way..." The contorted face relaxed suddenly and the anxious eyes grew fixed and staring. Ling was dead.

Todd stood up. He had a duty to his dead companion—it was unthinkable to leave the broken, bleeding body as it was, but there was no time to waste. If the heat-gun blast had been detected, the hunt would be up within a few minutes. Ling would have understood... Without a backward glance, he strode off and made his way back to the ship.

Now that he was alone, the alien jungle seemed more ominous than before. He paused for a moment as he heard a faint crash ahead, and then went slowly forward, gun in hand.

Todd mopped his face as he came to the ship, and holstered his weapon with a thankful sigh. Just a few minutes, now, he told himself, a few minutes more, and the job's done... He opened the port and pulled himself up into the air-lock. Still only half-way in, he whirled as a rustling sounded close behind him, and the jungle exploded in his face with a blinding flash. Even in the split second before unconsciousness, he realised that he had failed, and the knowledge was bitter indeed.

* * *

Todd dreamed. He was lying helpless on something hard and unyielding, and somewhere, a long way off, two Venusians discussed him with dispassionate indifference.

In the dream, he strained to catch what they were saying—it was important, he knew, very important.

"... caught one alive, at any rate," one was saying. "Five more ships have been destroyed with their crews, but one will serve our purpose."

"This one should soon recover consciousness," another voice answered, also in the harsh but sibilant Venusian tongue. "He will be able to answer questions almost at once, but the general paralysis will persist for several hours."

Captain Todd opened his eyes, and tried to move. His limbs failed to respond, and as the mists began to clear he realised what had happened. The Venusian paralysers! He closed his eyes again in an effort to gain time, but the movement was too late.

A stinging blow across the face forced him to look up, and he felt the vibration of a violent kick in the side, although no pain penetrated. A major of the Imperial Army of Venus looked down on him with gloating contempt, while further back in the ship's cabin stood a civilian—a high official of some kind, to judge by his dress.

The official spoke to his companion. "He is awake? Good. Kindly go and supervise your men in righting the aircar. I will deal with the prisoner."

The major saluted and left. The official must be a high one, indeed, Todd reflected. He watched the Venusian as he settled himself comfortably in the seat facing him. Why did they want him alive? It was almost as if the other had read his unspoken thought. "You are most welcome, captain," he declared mockingly in badly accented but understandable English. "So welcome, indeed, that a reception committee is waiting at my laboratory to do you honour."

Todd shuddered in spite of himself as he remembered the many stories he had heard of the refinements of torture which the Venusians kept at their disposal for the purpose of extracting information.

"You will be interested to learn," went on his captor, "that you were detected by the blast of a weapon of

some kind. Very thoughtless of you, of course, but perhaps you had no alternative?"

Todd remained grimly silent.

"And so very unfortunate," gibed the Venusian, "when you already had what you wanted. You should have set off at once." He shook his head pityingly. "A fool-hardy race, but not lacking in courage, I will admit. It seems almost a pity to exterminate the breed... ah, that interests you, does it? I thought it would! Perhaps you would care to know more? Really, captain, you are most uncommunicative! Ah, well, you will talk soon enough..."

Todd became aware of a dull ache in his side and a faint tingling sensation in his toes, and his heart leapt with excitement. The paralysis should last for several hours, but it seemed to be fading already... his armour! That was it, the Venusians had reckoned without the fine mesh armour, and he might have a slim chance after all...

Changing his tactics, he forced himself to keep his twitching limbs still, and spoke to his captor. "You talk of exterminating the human race," he said. "Surely that is a little ambitious?" He remembered an old oriental proverb quoted by Ling, and added: "A frog has to pass a very severe examination before it becomes a dragon!"

The Venusian smiled pleasantly. "How very apt! So you are a wit? I shall look forward to a long talk with you, captain, although I very much doubt whether your observations will be in a humorous vein! However, for your own private information, the Earth race is indeed doomed. The fascinating disease we are distributing is making splendid progress, and the radium with which you purchase the antidote will enable us to complete the final weapon."

Todd looked incredulous. "You are responsible for the disease? But that is impossible!" The twitching of his awakening muscles was almost unbearable, and the cracked ribs from the Venusian's kick were a searing agony, but no hint of the pain showed on his face.

The Venusian smiled his slow pitying smile. "You are very stupid. Of course we are spreading the disease. Unfortunately the organisms are very short-lived, and only those infected within a few hours contract the disease, but it will serve. Soon the Weapon will be ready and we can make an end . . ."

Through the ship's microphone came the sound of distantly approaching men ; it was now or never ! Bracing himself for a supreme effort, Todd catapulted himself across the cabin and fastened his fingers round the Venusian's throat. It was no time for niceties, and he forced his aching thumbs to squeeze and squeeze, fumbling with his foot for the lever that would lock the outer port.

It was over in a matter of seconds. Dropping the limp and lifeless body, and supporting his injured side with one hand, he sank gasping into the control seat and started the motors.

Shouts of confusion and alarm came over the microphone as the roar of the motors rose to a crashing crescendo and the ship quivered and lurched drunkenly as the power reached the rockets. With a sudden jerk the ship moved forward and up, crashing through the trees to freedom.

Panting in his seat, Todd pressed down the power lever, notch by notch, oblivious to the agonised protests of his own body. If only he could get a few minutes start, he could beat them yet . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

AVERY, shame-faced major of the Venusian Imperial Army stood rigidly to attention and listened to the scathing comments of his superior.

"I would not have believed such inefficiency to exist

in my command," the indignant commander was saying, glaring fiercely at the offender. "You are given a childishly simple assignment—the capture of a puny earthling—and have him in your hands, paralysed and powerless. Like a fool, you leave him to a civilian, and he makes good his escape! And now, to crown your ineptitude, you tell me that you do not know whether the civilian was alive or dead!"

The major squirmed uncomfortably, but knew better than to speak in his own defence. The bitter, contemptuous voice went on:

"You realise that this civilian was in charge of certain operations of vast importance, and that he had knowledge which, if it came to the hands of the enemy, would be disastrous to our plans?"

The major nodded miserably, but remained silent.

"I have recommended that, in view of your past record, your execution will be swift. This is more than you deserve. You may go."

* * *

In the far-off Imperial Palace, his Serene Highness the Emperor of Venus drummed nervously on the table with a scaly hand as he solemnly addressed the assembled generals.

"And so, gentlemen, we must be prepared for anything. The Weapon will not be ready for many days, and must be adapted at once for defensive purposes. Within twenty days, the Fleet can be equipped to receive broadcast power, and can then beat off with ease any attack. Once it is so equipped, the original plan can be followed. This will delay matters, but there is no alternative..."

* * *

On Earth, there was a turmoil of preparation. With the suspicion of foul play now become a certainty, the Council knew that the only hope was to strike, and that quickly. Whatever the Venusian weapon was, it was not yet ready, and there was nothing to be gained by delay. All over Earth, all activities not directly connected with the preparation for war ceased abruptly, and every ship capable of conversion to a fighting vessel was the scene of frantic activity.

Already the First Fleet stood on its space-fields, manned and equipped in every detail, waiting only the completion of the Second Fleet to cover the rear and form the second line of attack. And in thousands of foundries, factories, and machine-shops, work went on day and night to provide a third battle-line should it be needed.

The Council of Earth had decided that the full facts should be made public, and mankind laboured with a single-minded purpose to avenge the past and wipe out the threat to the future. Old bickerings and party strife were forgotten, old enmities and jealousies put aside, and each man vied with his neighbour only in the amount he could do in the common cause.

So it was that, before many days had passed after the dramatic return of Captain Todd, Earth became an armed camp. To add to the universal hatred of the common enemy, a Venusian ship was detected less than ten thousand miles from Earth: it made no response to the signals of the patrol vessel, and there was a sharp running fight before the alien ship was captured—intact, but with a dead crew.

When evidence was found on the Venusian vessel of its being designed for bacterial warfare, the story was complete. All men spoke with one voice for the first time in Earth's long history—"The Venusians must be destroyed!"

And so the First Fleet rocketed skyward to do battle for the human race. Ten thousand ships there were, the pride of the Earth, and in them rode the flower of Earth's manhood. A million miles ahead of the main body, the scouts probed the vastness of the System for any sign

of the enemy, probed it with every instrument and detector that the fertile wit of man could devise and with the keen expectancy that knows not what to expect.

Following behind came the battle cruisers, each with its escort of swift interceptor vessels and its supply ships. More than a hundred in number and well-nigh impregnable in might, the cruisers represented the greatest display of power yet assembled. Each one, if unhindered, could wipe clean of life ten thousand square miles of surface in an hour, and was no less formidable an opponent to another ship in space. Greatest of them all—the Flagship—directed the operation from a control-room that would easily have housed a village and left room to spare.

And in every ship, unexpressed but almost tangible, went the hopes and prayers of the whole human race.

As this vast panoply of power went forward on its vengeful errand, the space-fields of Earth busied themselves with the final preparation of the Second Fleet.

A mere five hundred ships, this—a puny force compared with its great predecessor, but still no mean adversary. Its backbone was a mere handful of the newest ships, completed or tested too late for inclusion in the First Fleet, and there were many scarred and battered veterans, hastily reconditioned and brought up to date. Passenger ships and cargo vessels of all types made up the number, some fully armed—or as fully as their design would permit—some sketchily armed, and some with little or no armament at all. These latter, manned by ready volunteers, had the function of drawing the enemy's fire, or, if they had the opportunity, of becoming themselves projectiles if they could take an enemy with them to eternity.

Nor was this all. Every vantage-point on Earth housed defensive weapons, and there was no lack of men—and women—ready to use them. And the factories laboured on, frenziedly, unceasingly, to produce ships, weapons, instruments, supplies, and the myriad needs of war.

The days passed slowly, and the First Fleet drew nearer and nearer the objective. Not a single enemy had been

sighted, and hopes ran high that the surprise would be complete.

But as the Fleet began to decelerate—a mere two million miles from Venus—contact was made, and all hopes of surprise faded. Hurtling from the cloud-covered globe before them, the enemy fleet came to give battle—came in open order, apparently in careless disarray, as though they had taken off hastily and without any plan. All were small ships, and their numbers were few against the might of the Earth Fleet.

There were many in the Fleet who rubbed their hands in glee and spoke confidently of the slaughter to come, but the more sober and experienced men looked troubled and said little, wondering what this apparent unpreparedness meant.

Nor was there long to wait. As the gap between the forces narrowed and the men of the Fleet sat ready at their weapons, the enemy struck.

Long before the most powerful projectors on the battle-cruisers were within range of the enemy, destruction began to fall among them, and as they approached nearer, the destruction fell thicker. The smaller ships were contemptuously ignored, but one after another of the great cruisers were destroyed without striking a blow. Some exploded in a brilliant flash of energy which encompassed any other ship within a hundred miles, some glowed briefly and buckled like paper, and a few plunged on, dead and desolate across the void. Along the line of communications ships strung out behind the Fleet all the way back to Earth went the message of disaster and the hastily conceived theories of the nature of the Venusian weapon. The force that was striking down one proud ship after another was not new—energy bolts such as they themselves would use—but the range at which it was employed was impossible. The battle-cruisers were hopelessly outgunned by much smaller ships, ships which could not possibly produce more than a small fraction of the vast power available to the cruisers! Slowly the realisation dawned that there was but one explanation—broadcast power! Venus had solved the problem that had

baffled mankind for centuries, and Earth was at her mercy.

CHAPTER SIX

EVEN as the message of despair sped on its way back to Earth, the Admiral strove to bring his force into action before it was obliterated. With the distance between the two forces rapidly diminishing, the point was almost reached where the long-range weapons of the heavy cruisers could be used with some faint hope of success, but the number of cruisers still remaining was pitifully small. Weaving erratically in their paths to make the Venusians' aim more difficult, and screened as much as possible by the smaller ships, the handful of cruisers bore down on the enemy with a two-fold object: to destroy any ships they could, and, if possible, to break through to the planet itself and create as much havoc there as possible. As this manoeuvre got under way, another factor entered into the Admiral's calculations. The Venusians had largely ignored the smaller ships in order to concentrate their attack on the cruisers, and almost before they were aware of it, droves of scouts penetrated to torpedo range. A full dozen Venusian ships perished in as many minutes before they realised their danger, and the cruisers found a precious respite while the enemy turned his attention to the scouts and interceptors which were growing so dangerous. Best of all, the Venusians were compelled to fall back a little to maintain their protective screen over the home planet, so that the battle moved a little closer to enemy territory.

The gallant little ships fell in scores, but there was no lack of others to rush in, launch a space torpedo, and perish in their turn. But the unequal struggle could have but one outcome, and the struggle ended at last with the Venusians triumphant if reduced in numbers. Then came the battle of the giants. Less than a dozen cruisers had run the gauntlet of fire to come within range of the

enemy, but the little band of survivors was high with purpose. A single direct hit from a Venusian would utterly destroy a cruiser, but, once within its range, a cruiser could administer the same medicine. Twisting and turning wildly, every gun firing, the Earth ships fought back at the enemy, striving all they knew to break through the barrier of fire to the planet, and one by one, they met annihilation on the way, but this time they had company in their destruction, for many Venusian ships perished with them.

Slowly, as their numbers dwindled, the Earth ship drew nearer to their objective, until a mere thousand miles separated them from the bulk of Venus. Lucky hits from the last three ships threw three of the enemy into flaming extinction, and the Flagship and two others dived into the gap. The emptiness of space filled with the coruscating flash of unleashed energy as the enemy ships tried frantically to close the momentary gap, but in that instant, they were through. They roared into the atmosphere as the pursuing enemy fire dwindled—even the coldly calculating Venusians hesitated to launch the nightmare force of an energy bolt in the direction of their own planet—but only the Flagship survived the barrage to plunge alone through the cloud belt. Decelerating to the limit of human endurance, the Flagship sought for a worthy target to attack in the few minutes of survival which would remain to it, and in the brief time which elapsed before the automatic defences found their target, a terrible rain of destruction was launched on the inhabited plain below.

Long before its own load of destruction reached the surface, the Flagship died. And though every man of her crew perished in an instant of flaming energy, and her intricate controls were fused to worthless scrap, the Flagship plunged downward, first at a steep angle that was the resultant of her own velocity and that of the blow which had destroyed her, and then, as the attraction of the planet gripped her, vertically with swiftly gathering momentum. As the dead ship gathered acceleration, her hull glowed white-hot from the friction of the atmosphere.

Still downward, and the tortured metal grew brilliantly incandescent and began to soften. A few minutes more, and the incredibly resistant alloy would have fused to a shapeless mass of molten metal, but before that point was reached the terrible projectile struck.

In one flaming instant, the whole store of man's most powerful agents of destruction which the huge ship contained dissipated itself in an unthinkable holocaust.

Had there been any Earthmen there to see, he would have groaned to see the waste of this tremendous destruction, for the Flagship had passed a full thousand miles from the inhabited plain of Venus to come to her end in dense jungle.

There were no Earthmen to see, but there were Venusians in plenty, and these died in an instant. The whole planet shuddered, and the wave of concussion travelled to the far-off cities to take its toll of life. And behind the concussion came the even deadlier plague of radio-active gases and particles that made the very air and water potent poisons.

Far off in space, the Venusian fleet faced panic. Secure in their possession of broadcast power which made them invincible, they were leisurely mopping up the scattered remnants of the Earth Fleet when their weapons died. Nor was it long before the pursued became the pursuers as the little ships discovered the proud Venusians to be almost powerless before them, and savagely set themselves to exact vengeance. They had no way of knowing that the Flagship, plunging blindly to its own destruction, had fallen on the one spot on Venus which could turn defeat into victory. Hidden in remote jungle, the immense source of broadcast power was incomplete in its defences, and the terrific momentum of the falling Flagship had crashed squarely into it and through it. The explosion of the subatomic weapons of the ship had fallen on fertile ground, and the vast stores of fissionable material in the station had produced the holocaust of power fitting enough to be the funeral pyre of the Venusian race.

Space hummed with rumour.

The Second Fleet, approaching on what it believed to be a suicide mission, heard with amazement of Venusian ships that could neither fight nor run effectively, and pressed on to see for themselves. The Venusians, battered and crippled as they were, sent up all the self-powered ships they could raise to oppose the forces of Earth, but these were contemptuously swept aside.

Asking no quarter, the arrogant race manned their defences with courage, and many Earth ships fell in flaming ruin on Venus, but, one by one, the batteries were silenced as destruction rained down from the avenging Fleet.

The Venusian colonies on Mercury did not escape.

Warned of the wrath to come, they swallowed their pride and sued humbly for peace. Stripped of weapons, with their spawning beds destroyed, they lived out their lives on the torrid plains of Mercury, pondering perhaps on the follies of treachery and aggression. So perished the Venusian race from the Solar System. Venus itself, a barren, radio-active waste, bears witness to man's determination, and on Earth, united as never before by common danger, man works on to fulfil his ultimate destiny.

THE END

MOONS OF FEAR

by NORMAN A. LAZENBY

CAPTAIN JACK ENGLE set the old, groaning space-tramp down on the surface of Jupiter's ninth moon and, when the atomic engine stopped, he heaved a sigh of relief.

He slapped Tod Bender on the back, spoiling that old space-hound's attempt to light a cigarette.

"Well, we made it! Here we are on the Jovian moon!"

Tod was considerably older than the space ship, which had been whimsically named *Light*. The old space-hound had been among the first to visit all the planets of the Solar System.

"We made it," he growled, "but how the hell do we get this crate off with a cargo of Jovium to weigh her down?"

"We'll figure that out later," rapped Jack Engle.

Tod Bender glared through one of the ports at the weird terrian of Jupiter's ninth moon. He was a tough man and he kept his age a grim secret. He had reddish stubble and never seemed to be really clean-shaven. His blue, blue eyes had that indefinable fierceness of the old Vikings. He wore a grubby silk space-costume, and the front zipp was always half open to display a growth of reddish hairs on his chest.

"What a world!" he snarled through a cloud of cigarette smoke. "So in fifty years Man has finally got his hands on all the planets in the system, and what dose he do with 'em? Digs into 'em. Gold outa Mars—the vanished Martians never had any use for gold. Uranium outa Venus—nobody ever lived on Venus, or ever will want to. Diamonds outa Saturn, and now Jovium

from the Jupiter moons. Why can't Man stay on Earth? The loveliest world of the lot! Queer, ain't it, when you figure there isn't another planet like Earth?"

"Put a sock in it!" roared Captain Jack Engle. "I don't want to listen to your beefing! Maybe there are better worlds than Earth. Maybe Man will find 'em when he builds a ship capable of reaching out to the other universes."

"That will be some fast ship!" jeered Tod Bender. "If that ship ever hits the speed of light, it'll sure be travelling. 186,000 miles a second, huh? An' even then it'll take it four years to hit the nearest group of stars—and maybe fifty years before it reaches the worlds beyond that."

"What you worrying about?" grinned Jack "you won't be on it! All right. Let's get along to Frisk's mine. I can't stand here chewing the fat with you!"

The ship had landed fifty miles from the only civilised settlement on the ninth moon. The small slender vessel lay in a rock-bound valley. Huge mountains soared crazily on all sides. Fifty miles away the settlement comprised an Imperial Earth Navy Officer for Law Enforcement, about a hundred miners and an equal number of Jovian Brutes who worked as labourers. The settlers lived in pre-fabricated homes and cursed the whole place and waited for the day when they could return to Earth, rich, as a result of their mining of Jovium.

Jovium was an incredibly heavy mineral and a better agent than Uranium for atomic power. Jovium was rapidly ousting Uranium as the atomic fuel. On Earth, plants were changing over to the use of Jovium; space-ships were using it with the atomic engines.

There was a thin atmosphere on the moon, which was rather heady. There was no need for space-suits. Captain Jack Engle and Tod Bender let down the ramp and walked from the ship.

The space-tramp was all automatic, and they were the only crew. They owned the ship, and more crew would have meant sharing profits—when they made them!

As they approached Jason Frisk's mine, the workings

had a curiously deserted appearance. For one thing, the belts had stopped ; there was no ore coming up from the shaft where robot diggers should be working.

Jack Engle broke into a run as a sure instinct for danger jagged through him. He regretted running after only one minute because the rarified air did queer things to his heart. But, with Tod at his heels, he ran on and pushed open the bungalow door without ceremony.

The neat little house was empty. Jack stared round and jerked back, almost blundering into Tod.

"What in space !" growled the old-timer.

"Something's wrong here !" jerked Jack Engle.

"Sure looks like it," said Tod, wonderingly. "Where's Jason Frisk and his daughter ?"

Jack moved with long, swift strides to the shaft building. He rammed back a door and stared inside. The place was deserted. He walked quickly to another plant building, looked in, saw that the row of metal robots had stopped. He came out and hurried to the power unit. He found the power had been shut down.

Jack came out and stared up at the brazen face of Jupiter in the sky. It lay like a great brass plate, and seemed near enough for him to reach out and touch, but it was actually a third of a million miles away.

"Now what's been going on ?" he demanded of the planet, and received no answer, naturally.

"You'd think there'd been a plague around here and everybody had gone," said Tod Bender. "Didn't Jason Frisk have three Jovian Brutes as servants ?"

"Correct. And he treated the cunning devils better than they deserved," said Jack.

Slowly, they walked back to the bungalow. They were near it when dramatic action literally hurtled out of the sky at them.

A squad of Jovian Brutes flew from a nearby rocky pileup and made straight for Jack and Tod.

The Jovians were ape-birds. In addition to hairy, muscular bodies, they possessed big curved wings which threshed powerfully at the thin air. They had a low order of intelligence and no sense of logic. A Jovian

Brute could be made to do anything if the inducement appealed to its extraordinary mind.

Jack Engle thrust Tod into the bungalow. He slammed the door shut behind him.

"Well, let's go out and argue with them devils!" demanded the old-timer. "We can make 'em change their minds."

"Not this time, I think," snapped Jack. "You want to be torn to little bits? Remember, the Brutes have nice claws at the end of those winged arms."

"What's gotten into 'em?"

Jack did not reply. He went through a big chest of drawers. He was searching for a gun. He found one. He had known Jason Frisk kept one in the drawer. It was an old atomic flash gun.

"Okay, open that door," he said grimly to Tod.

Outside they could hear the dull flap-flap of wings as the Brutes circled around. There was a dull thud as one landed on the metal roof and a rasp of strong claws as it walked overhead.

Tod grunted and did not argue. In five years he had learnt not to argue with Jack Engle. He pulled the door open and Jack emerged slowly into the open.

One of the Jovian Brutes saw him and uttered a hoarse bellow. Although the creatures had learnt to speak English, the bellow was typical of their animalistic natures.

As the winged arms shot down with menacing claws at the ready, Jack Engle pressed the button on the flash.

The released atomic power was comparatively little, but it burnt a hole right through the Brute's head.

As the body crashed at his feet, carried onward by its own momentum, Jack leaped agilely sideways. He crept out of the doorway, moving with the bungalow wall at his back.

Another Jovian Brute hurtled round the building, half walking and half flying. The arms were outstretched. One slash from those grim claws would rip him from cheek to stomach.

But the atomic ray leaped in a split second. Only the merest flash was necessary.

A wing was almost severed from the Brute. A horrible howl screeched from the bird-like head, and it turned and limped away. Jack slammed back against the bungalow wall as a scraping sound above his head told him another Brute was coming down the metal roof.

He burnt it before the creature could really reach him. The body slumped near him on the red rock and, before the Brute died, it glared balefully at him.

Jack Engle felt grim. He did not care for this killing business. He could not understand why the Brutes were attacking. The Jovians, nesting in the mountains, had not fought the Earthians to any large extent. Usually, the Brutes had fought only when attacked. They had kept away from the miners, except those who had learned to work for them.

He moved round to the other side of the bungalow, keeping his back to the wall. He did not want to come into the open and give a Jovian the chance to bury steely claws in his back.

All at once a small craft swished across the valley with terrific speed for its tiny shape. It was just like a scintillating bead. It vanished in a fold of the mountains. Jack stared, and at that moment the air became black with the flock of Jovians flying away from the mining site. The sound of flapping wings filled the air. In a few seconds the whole swarm had gone.

Tod came up behind Jack.

"Now we're seeing things!" he growled.

"I don't understand why the Jovians are so bent on attacking," said Jack Engle. "The crazy brutes never had so much determination before—and I've been to this moon a few times in the past years. What's got into 'em?"

"Something," returned Tod, "and that little jet we saw might give us the answer. And where is Jason Frisk and Delia?"

Jack pointed a strong, clean-cut finger to the hills.

"That's where we're going. If we find anything,

we'll radio the Imperial Earth Navy Law Enforcement Officer at the settlement."

"Maybe we ought to radio him now."

"We'll wait until we find something definite."

They ran back to the spaceship and jumped in. The ramp went up with the pressing of a button. A second later the ship rose vertically like an express elevator. At a height of five hundred feet, it slipped smoothly away and headed for the distant mountains.

Compared to its speed during interplanetary flights, the *Light* moved very slowly. At a mere hundred miles an hour, Jack Engle set the ship to nose through a fantastic canyon of immense, twisted peaks. This was where the tiny jet had flown. The Jovian Brutes had gone after it.

The strange jet must obviously be piloted by Earthmen. That conclusion was certain. The Jovians would not fly by any other means than their wings. It seemed they distrusted mechanical flight.

Within a few minutes Jack Engle had the *Light* nosing between towering peaks that soared up like incredible spires. On a world which saw wind storms, the spires would not have existed. But the ninth moon never experienced storms. The placid atmosphere was never ruffled. There were no seas, but in the dim past there had been, for the moon boasted some reptilian life which must have evolved from seas.

All at once Jack Engle saw some of the shambling, hair-and-feathered ape-birds. He was looking through the control-room ports as he handled the ship manually. The Jovian Brutes were perched on a large rocky plateau. There were several hundred of the species.

And lying on the plateau was the small jet craft!

Jack Engle piloted the ship slowly past the Brutes' haunts and at sight of the ship a crowd of the creatures flew at it. There was nothing they could do. There was one atomic gun on the *Light* but Jack did not want to use it at the moment.

His intention was to find out something about the missing mine owner and his daughter. When he thought

about Delia, Jack got a grim feeling. What had happened? He remembered the girl as a laughing, very human Earthian girl. The moon had been no place for her, but her mother had died, and she had insisted on staying to look after Jason Frisk.

Near to the high plateau was a huge tableland of red rock. Under the golden light reflected from the huge Jupiter, the red rock was ruby-coloured. Between the two tablelands was a huge deep crevice.

Jack sank the ship to the red rock and stopped the engine. The slight humming sound ceased.

Immediately, Jack switched on the ship's radio. He began calling on a multi-wave.

"Hello, spaceship *Light* calling. You on the plateau—what are you doing here? Who are you? Can you hear me?"

He repeated the call four times but got no reply. Then while switching through several wave-lengths for reception, he heard a message going out.

"Jet calling Venua. Jet calling Venua. There is a ship called *Light* threatening us. This ship is armed. Hurry."

He heard the call go out twice and then silence.

"That's our pal over there," snapped Jack, "and he's afraid of us. It's our gun. We're going over to that plateau before the Venua comes up. I've a hunch the Venua is an armed ship."

"Hey! I thought this was a peaceful moon!" rapped Tod Bender. "What's going on?"

"That's what we intend to find out."

Jack Engle lifted the ship again and eased it over to the other tableland. As he navigated the ship, he sent out a message.

"Calling Jet. *Light* calling Jet. I have my gun trained on you. Make a move and we shall atomise you. We are landing on the plateau. We shall be armed."

A minute later this was an accomplished fact. Jack Engle and Tod Bender walked down the lowered ramp cautiously. They were armed with the latest atomic

hand pistols. Only a whiff of the snaky ray was needed to shrivel any living thing.

The Jovian Brutes did not descend on them from the rocky hideouts. Jack smiled grimly and knew the reason. Someone had given the Brutes orders.

The next instant the small jet shot off with terrific acceleration. Jack and Tod halted to watch the ship go. They could not stop the little craft, and they could not follow until they got back to their own ship.

Jack Engle had an idea it was useless to pursue. But he intended to look round the plateau. Why had the craft landed here in the first place?

As they went on, he was conscious that the Jovian Brutes were withdrawing through innumerable crevices and gullies. The men on the departing ship had told the Brutes not to attack. The men in the ship had known the Brutes stood no chance against guns.

Against a lone mound of rock, they found a cave. Carefully, Jack Engle stared into the mouth. He got a swift surprise.

There was a girl bound hand and foot and lying in a corner of the cave!

Jack Engle was across in swift strides. He whipped a knife from his silk suit and cut her free.

"Delia! Say, what is going on?"

"You ask me!" rejoined the girl ruefully, "and I don't know—not exactly."

Jack walked her out of the cave, putting an arm round her shoulders to steady her for her limbs were rather numbed. Tod Bender grinned coarsely, taking good care that Jack Engle did not see his smiles!

"What do you mean, Delia?" Jack watched all the time for a surprise attack by the Brutes.

"Well, I know that those two men have my father on board the little jet, and they are taking him to another ship. I heard them say this much. Oh, Mister Engle, they intend to kill my father and throw his body into the Earthian settlement!"

Jack halted in surprise. Anger flashed through his eyes.

"What's the idea of that? It's cold-blooded murder!"

She clutched his arm.

"Can't you do something? These men intend to scare the miners off the moon. They'll kill those who do not go. They are just starting the campaign, and they arrived at our mine only a few hours ago. Throwing my father down at the Earthian settlement is just the first move."

"But what is their plan?"

"Didn't I tell you? They want to stop the mining of Jovium. They're just starting. They intend to wreck the mines and blast the seams by atomic power. There are really few seams of Jovium on this moon. The mineral is plentiful on Jupiter, but beneath the ice-belt."

"That's 16,000 miles thick," said Jack, grinning a little in spite of Delia's obvious agitation. "Let's get on our ship. We've got to move it. I thought you said you did not know much about these fellers?"

"I don't know why they are starting this war against the miners," retorted the girl, "but I have overheard so much."

"You've overheard enough for us," said Jack. They reached the ramp and moved inside quickly. "I know there is a ship called the Venua somewhere on the moon. Why did these fellers bring you and your father up among the Jovian nests?"

"It was the first part of their campaign. The Brutes were to be ordered to fly us over the settlement and drop us to our deaths. These men are going to use the Jovians to do the dirty work."

"These men seem to have some power over the Brutes," commented Jack grimly. He turned a vernier and fed power to the gravity-propulsors.

"They are giving them some beastly drug!" said Delia. "The Brutes will do anything for it. I saw them hand it out—some sort of leaf. I've never heard of it before."

"Probably brought it to this moon," muttered Jack.

The ship was zooming smoothly through the atmosphere. Jupiter was now almost overhead, like a vast yellow sky. The valleys and craters were plain as if the world were near enough for one to walk there!

Jack Engle had the detector screens in operation. He was looking for a spaceship called Venua.

The name interested him. It gave him a hunch. He did not intend to play the hunch any further, but he thought he had an idea why a campaign of war had started against the Jovium miners.

It was only a matter of time before the wide sweeps across the moon brought the presence of the other ship on to the detector screens. For one thing, Jack Engle had a good notion that the ship would be near the Earthian settlement.

The Venua was not a big spaceship, but it carried an atomic gun. By Imperial Earth Navy law, non-naval ships were allowed only one gun. No ship that wanted to visit Earth dared mount two guns or it would be impounded. And most ships had to return to Earth at some time in their careers.

The two ships came in range of each other a few miles beyond the settlement. But they did not fire.

There was every reason. The atomic gun, with its deadly power, was not evadable. Both guns would fire at once because each ship was fitted with instantaneous mechanism which would fire the gun as the ship exploded. Both ships would be atomised.

The gun was useful when operating against non-atomic weaponed enemies.

Captain Jack Engle brought his ship close to the other. The platform top deck was only a hundred feet from the other ship. Jack began to call over the radio.

"Venua. Venua. You will take Jason Frisk down to ground safely. If you do not, a report will go out via interplanetary wave-length to Imperial Earth Navies Headquarters."

A snarling voice came over the *Light* loudspeaking receiver.

"We have not got Jason Frisk."

Jack leaned forward, spoke grimly into the transmitter.

"You lie! Set the mine-owner down. Do you want the report to go out?"

"Earth Navies have plenty on their hands!" snapped the unknown voice contemptuously. "They couldn't spare a ship. Go ahead with your report. And get your ship out of our way."

Jack indicated to Tod Bender to take the radio over and send out the report to the Imperial Earth Navies Headquarters. War in any way was a matter for the Navy.

The *Venua* suddenly darted off. The Captain of the ship knew he could not use the atomic gun as long as the other ship was fitted with instantaneous shooting. Had the *Light* been a non-atomic ship, the argument would have been ended by now.

Jack Engle slipped his ship after the other craft. The two ships moved away from the mining settlement area. Down below was nothing but the rocky terrain with some clumps of weird cactus.

The *Venua's* air-lock suddenly opened. As the sliding metal door opened, a number of Jovian Brutes flew out. Two of them carried the limp figure of a man between them.

Jack Engle was astonished to see the Brutes emerge from the other ship.

"Gee, but that drug those fellers hand out must be mighty attractive to the Jovians! So far there has never been anything that would get a Jovian Brute into a flying ship."

But Delia was filled with sudden terror.

"They intend to drop my father over the settlement!"

Jack Engle turned his ship immediately and moved after the Brutes.

He could have atomised them, but that meant killing the mine-owner, too.

The Brutes flew quickly and soon were over the small settlement. Jack kept the ship close by them.

Suddenly, at about five hundred feet, the Brutes released the man. He began to fall through the air.

Delia let out a shriek and turned away.

Jack Engle's hands moved swiftly. Under manual control, the ship swooped in a dive. A second later the platform deck was under the falling man. Simultaneously, Jack dropped the ship at a speed a little less than the rate of a falling body.

"Rush up to the deck!" he ordered.

Tod grasped the girl and raced away with her. They went up the spiral escalator in a second. They burst through the platform deck trap-door. They saw Jason Frisk rolling on the deck, dazed but unhurt!

It was the result of swift judgment on Jack's part that had effected the trick. It could only be done with a ship that could change forward speed to sudden downward descent.

A few moments later, as the ship moved forward again, Jason Frisk was brought down to a cabin lounge and given a stiff drink. He held the glass and breathed heavily as he looked up at Tod Bender. Delia was fussing around her father, overjoyed that he was alive.

"The leader of those men is a fellow called Simon Grink," said Jason Frisk. "There are only four of them on that ship. I suppose I was not meant to live to identify them."

"Are they Earthian Venusians?" rapped Jack Engle, as he came into the lounge. The ship was on automatic hover, on the fringe of the settlement.

"I don't know," stammered Jason Frisk. "I didn't learn that much."

Jack smiled thinly.

"I think they are. However, it will be as well if we land and warn the settlers about this gang. Already our radio report is out to Imperial Earth Navies."

"It's out," muttered Tod, "but that Simon Grink feller was right when he said they had their hands full."

The Venua was not in sight and even out of the detector screens. Jack Engle put the ship to descent. They landed at the rough spaceport fashioned near the

mining settlement. There were no other ships in at the time. Traffic was not so frequent.

Before they left the ship, he set the atomic guns to instantaneous reaction. If Grink decided to risk everything by attempting to atomise the settlement, he would annihilate himself into the bargain. But, of course, as soon as the man saw the *Light* he would know that Jack had taken this step. So there would be no bombardment. It was a game of check.

Simon Grink evidently had considered giving the Jovian Brutes the dirty work to do, with, possibly, the idea of blaming the Brutes for all the trouble. He could, no doubt, have annihilated the settlement from the start, but such an act might make Imperial Earth Navies really determined to get the man responsible. But by using the Brutes he could give the affair the appearance of just another spot of trouble with an alien race. And the Navies had enough of that on hand in other quarters and the ninth moon would get little attention.

In the centre of the settlement was a rough square. Jack Engle got to the base of a prefabricated fountain and the miners gathered round him.

In curt sentences he gave them the facts.

"There's a ship on this moon with men on it out to run you off the moon and wreck your mines. The man's name is Simon Grink. I don't know yet why he should try this game. But we can beat him and find out. Grink is using the Brutes and making them fight by means of some rotten dope he gives them. This is Jason Frisk. I'll let him speak."

The other miners, incredulous at first, listened to the mine-owner. He was one of them. And his words had the ring of truth.

"This man planned to throw me from the air to the ground here!" he declared angrily. "My daughter and I were captured and carried off by the Brutes. I don't blame them. My three Jovian servants were led off and given some drug."

The mine-owner had more to say, and then Jack Engle

spoke up again. The young space Captain impressed the miners.

"As long as my ship is here, Grink will not use his atomic guns because that will be the end of him as well. But I fancy he will be at work wrecking Jason Frisk's mine. We've got to stop him. I want a jet runabout. Anybody willing to lend one? It might not come back," said Jack, ending on a grim joke.

"I've got one," said a long lean miner at once. "and it's a special craft."

"How, friend?"

"It has an invisible skin," returned the miner, "an' that's just what you want. It hasn't any guns. You can't risk being seen by that other ship. They'll blow you outa the sky!"

Jack had known that but had been prepared to risk it.

Only minutes later Jack Engle and Tod Bender were getting ready to enter the small jet runabout. It was similar to the craft that had returned to the Venua, but it undoubtedly had a plastic skin which rendered it invisible in flight. After fifty yards, in the sky against the yellow glare of giant Jupiter, the craft was invisible. It had screened engines, too, which meant it would escape recording on the Venua's detectors.

"What made you buy a crate like this?" grunted Tod.

"Well, I guess it's mighty handy," said the miner with a grin. "You see, I do a lot o' prospecting on this moon, an' I don't always want the other fellers to know my comings an' goings. You can't blame me for that!"

"Guess that's fair enough!" laughed Jack.

With the miner, whose name was Bert Darton, went Jack and Todd, along with Jason Frisk. As it was his mine they were going to visit, he would not allow himself to be left behind. Delia, however, had to stay at the settlement. Jack and the others were armed with the atomic pistols.

The invisible jet rose in the air with its four passengers which was about its capacity. To those below, it was

gone a second or two after it left the ground. There was just the merest twinkle and then it vanished.

In reality it had a useful speed. Eventually the craft soared through the air to Jason Frisk's mine. As they approached, they saw a black swarm of Jovian Brutes rise in the air and leave the mine buildings in a great hurry.

All at once a great concussion shuddered through the air. The Jovian Brutes, although a good distance away, were tossed in the air displacement.

Jason Frisk groaned as he saw his mine buildings vanish in a cloud of dust. All around the site the ground quaked and seemed to settle down. From the craft, they could trace the underground seams as a pattern as the ground quaked. The Jovium deposits had been atomised by charges laid underground. Simon Grink had already carried out his deadly work as far as this mine was concerned.

It was a grim moment for Jason Frisk.

"All my work!" he groaned. "Curse him! I was doing so well!"

Bert Darton laid a hand impulsively on the other's shoulder.

"Don't worry too much. If we beat this man, I can show you another deposit which I just discovered a week ago. We are in this together."

It was a fine offer, and Jason Frisk was touched. He shook hands with Bert Darton.

The invisible jet was not fitted with detectors. Those elaborate machines were mainly for interplanetary ships.

"The Venua must be around somewhere," muttered Jack Engle, "though what we can do when we find her I'm not sure. But we shall find her!"

All at once, as if satisfied that the wrecking had been carried out well enough, the Venua nosed out from behind a twin-peaked mountain and proceeded leisurely to the west. With the ship flew a great cloud of ape-birds.

"They're off to another mine!" cried Jason Frisk.

" Might be Tom Welling's, judging by the direction. How are we going to stop these wreckers? "

" We'll have to follow and watch out for an opportunity," said Jack Engle.

Unknown to the crew of the Venua, a small jet flew behind the bigger ship! Jack piloted the invisible jet close enough to see the movement of men behind the large ports.

During the next few minutes there were tense moments when a hairy Jovian Brute flew close enough to the invisible jet to touch the craft. But at a twist of a control, Jack veered the jet to one side.

After some minutes it was obvious to Jason Frisk that the Venua's destination was, indeed, Tom Welling's mine. The Venua flew slowly through a maze of mountain spires and then sank to a perfectly circular crater. The Jovian Brutes sank with the ship, muscular wings threshing the air.

The metal mining buildings were not deserted. A man came out and stared across the flat rock at the ship and the crowd of Brutes. At the same time, four men descended from the ship and walked over to the mine. They moved arrogantly and were accompanied by the Jovian Brutes. Once or twice the men handed something to the Brutes, and the creatures immediately transferred the gifts to their mouths with antics that betrayed their delight.

On the invisible jet four men watched grimly.

" That's the drug those fellers are giving the Brutes! " rapped Jason Frisk. " I don't know what it is, but they'll do anything to get it. It's a sort o' leaf, and they eat it."

" Right. This is where we act," snapped Jack Engle decisively.

He sent the jet down so quickly that even Tod Bender's stomach seemed to be left high in the sky. Silently the little craft fell and landed like a feather five yards from the Venua.

" Okay. I'm going to make a dive and get inside that ship," rapped Jack Engle. " The ramp is down. This

is my chance. Once we get that ship, Simon Grink has had it."

The ramp was down and the ship was unattended.

The door in the invisible jet swung open and Jack Engle leaped out.

The distance was a mere five yards, but his movement was sensed by the flock of Jovian Brutes. As they noticed his quick run, they also sensed the presence of the little jet although they could not see it.

The Brutes, with the four men, were close to Tom Welling. In a few swift seconds, just as Jack reached the ramp, the huge Brutes gripped the five Earthmen and flew into the air at immense speed.

Jack Engle had to stop to throw in the control that slammed the Venu's ramp into place. Then he had to run to the control room. He flashed a quick glance at the hundred dials and then jerked his eyes to staring out of the control room ports.

The Jovian Brutes were disappearing at terrific speed towards the jagged mountain tops. Even though they were carrying their four masters and Tom Welling, they would get to the mountains in a few more seconds.

Jack Engle cursed the Brutes. They had acted with swift instincts. They had seen him dart for the Venua, known in a flash it was too late for them to return to the ship, so they had resorted to the only course they knew—flight; and, loyal to the men who supplied them with dope, they had helped them to escape in addition to taking the mine-owner.

Jack stabbed the Venua's engines to life. He threw in a control switch and turned the vernier. The craft rose like an elevator.

He was in command of the Venua now! He could control the atomic guns! Simon Grink had not had time to lay the atom charges to wreck Tom Welling's mine, but thanks to his Brutes, he had the man as hostage.

Jack flicked on the radio, touched a pre-set button that would put him on to the wave length used by such jets as the little invisible one.

"Venua calling Tod Bender. This is Jack Engle.

I've got the ship in hand. Follow this ship. I think we should look for Tom Welling."

Tod's voice growled back immediately through the Venua's loud speaker.

"You bet. Those fellers oughta be rounded up. Good for you getting the ship."

Jack settled back in the padded control seat and flew the ship manually. Automatic control was all right for the immense void, but on the erratic terrain of this moon sudden movements might be required. He sent the ship in a swift swerve to the mountains which had engulfed the escaping Brutes and Earthmen.

He could not see the invisible jet, but he guessed it would be right behind him.

After nosing through incredible, towering spires of rock he suddenly sighted the black shapes of Jovian Brutes on a rocky ledge. He dropped the Venua like a stone to the mountainous spot. Then, a few yards from the ledge, he stopped the ship abruptly and set it to hover.

With his appearance, the Jovians had run into some caves. There was nothing in sight.

Jack Engle opened the ramp. When it was down, like a drawbridge sticking into space, he walked out and stood on it squarely. He held his atomic pistol in his hand.

"Simon Grink!" he called. "Simon Grink. Do you surrender? I have your ship. You can't leave this moon without a ship. We can hunt you down. Come out and surrender."

There was no movement from the caves. Jack waited, and then a voice, thick with fury, shouted across the gap:

"We have a mine-owner called Tom Welling. Unless you hand over our ship, he will be flung to his death over the settlement by the Jovians. I shall give the order, and it will be a lesson to those cursed miners."

Jack Engle compressed his lips. He had expected Simon Grink to use the mine-owner as a bargaining

factor. Grink had stated his case. What was to be done?

"If you throw Tom Welling to his death," shouted Jack, "I shall hunt you down and kill the lot of you."

"That would not bring Tom Welling back to life!" shouted the other.

Jack walked slowly back into the ship. He jerked at the ramp control and brought it up again.

There would be no chance of trying another trick like the one which had saved Jason Frisk's life. The moon Brutes would be on the alert.

He knew he would have to hand the Venua over. But first he had work to do.

He walked to the atomic gun instant reaction mechanism and stared at it for a moment. He raised the lid of the big control casket. He began work on the maze of radionic tubes.

When he finally clamped the casket lid down again, there was a smile of grim satisfaction on his lean face.

He walked to the ramp, let it down again by the automatic machinery. He walked out and hailed Simon Grink.

"Can you hear me? I agree to your terms. If you hand Tom Welling over safe and sound, you can have the Venua back."

"What arrangements do you propose?" came the other's throaty response.

"Get your Jovians to fly Tom Welling down to yonder valley. Leave him and I'll put the Venua down a mile away."

"All right," grated Simon Grink. "But if there is any trickery, Tom Welling won't live."

A number of Jovian Brutes soared out of the caves. Two were carrying Tom Welling.

Jack radioed Tod Bender.

"As soon as those Brutes set Tom Welling down, pick him up with the jet. I'm handing over the ship. Don't worry. After you pick up Tom, come after me. Guess I'll have to play ball with these fellers."

Jack wanted Simon Grink to get his ship back. After that the time would come to get the wrecker in a position which would end him. As soon as Simon Grink took over his ship again, he was half-way to that position !

As the Brutes flew down with the mine-owner, Jack set the Venua on a slow glide to a valley a mile away as he had promised.

He was aware that Simon Grink and his three pals came out of the cave and were flown cautiously through the crevices and gullies by the Brutes.

Jack did not leave the Venua until he heard a call from Tod saying they were ready to pick Tom Welling up. Then Jack Engle stepped out and ran to the nearest rocky shelter.

Simon Grink and his pals approached the Venua with extreme cunning. They obviously distrusted Jack.

They gave him no chance to train his gun on them. The ground was extremely jagged and they took advantage of the cover. A few sudden darts, which gave Jack no sight of them, and they had reached the ship.

Jack grinned thinly. Maybe he could have tried to get one of them with his atomic gun, but there were better ways.

He wormed his way through the rocky pileups, giving the men in the ship no chance to sight him. As he worked his way into a deep crater, a head suddenly appeared from nowhere. It was Tod Bender's head and it was suspended about five feet from the ground !

"The jet's here !" rapped Tod. "Come on over and get in. We've got Tom Welling safe. What's the idea letting them gents get the ship back ?"

Jack leaped over the boulders. He gripped the door of the invisible jet and hauled himself inside. He soon found the others turning inquiring eyes on him. The door clanged behind him and the jet plumeted away into the brassy sky.

"Now they can start on wrecking some more mines !" growled Tod Bender. "I figure when you had the Venua, you had 'em napping !"

"They also had power of life or death over Tom here,"

Jack pointed out quietly. "Okay, Tod, set the jet back to the settlement. We're going aboard our own ship again."

"What's on your mind?" demanded Jason Frisk.

"I'm going to hunt the Venua," said Jack lightly.

When the invisible jet returned to the settlement, the Venua had disappeared. The ship lay somewhere behind the fantastic mountains.

Jack and Tod got out of the invisible jet. They walked over to the *Light*. A crowd of miners followed them, anxious to hear what was going on.

As Jack Engle was about to go up the ramp of his ship, a tall man in dark blue uniform approached him. This was the officer of Imperial Earth Navies.

"I've had a report from Earth," said the officer grimly.

"The Navy can't send a ship for at least a week."

"I figure to fix Simon Grink before that," retorted Captain Jack Engle.

Jack and Tod Bender got to the control seats. The ramp was up. They were about to take off when hundreds of Jovian Brutes flew over the settlement from all corners.

In the swiftness of the attack a number of men were ripped fatally. The ape-birds zoomed off with others and dropped them to death.

Then atom guns began to weave rays in the yellow sky as the miners recovered from the surprise. A number of Brutes fell with thuds to the ground. As soon as the guns began to play, the rest of the horde flew off at great speed.

Jack had the ship in the air. He aimed an atomic blast at a number of the fleeing Brutes. The creatures simply disappeared in mid-air.

"Grink sent them over," snapped Jack. "The Brutes would never attack the miners in the ordinary way. He wants to make things tough. It's time he was fixed."

"Good and proper!" growled Tod. "When are you going to tell me what's on?"

Jack grinned, and piloted the ship away from the settlement manually. In a minute they were nosing

through the fantastic rocky spires again. The Venua was not in sight so far.

"I'll tell you something, old pal," he said. "I fixed the instant reaction gear of the Venua's gun before I left that crate."

"You fixed it—how? You hadn't time to break up the atom pile. It's encased in four feet of Leadenuil."

"Exactly. But I could and did rearrange the detection and reaction valves controlling the gun. Now if we were to get in range of the Venua, we could atomise the whole lot and their gun would not react. So we would be safe."

Tod Bender ruffled his grizzled old head. He was delighted.

"Let's go get that feller and his pals. The trouble is we'll never know why they started this wrecking campaign."

"I think I can guess."

"Okay. Tell me?" demanded Tod.

Jack smiled.

"Later, eh? Right now, keep a lookout for the Venua. One thing, they won't be the first to fire. In fact, they won't fire because they know it sets off the reaction chain. But I don't think Grink will realise he is at our mercy."

After a wide sweep over the terrain the space tramp sighted the Venua. The ship was hovering little more than half a mile from Tom Welling's Jovium mine.

"Still figuring to wreck the mine," observed Tod Bender. "That feller never gives up."

Looking down at the mine, they saw a number of Jovian ape-birds emerge from the buildings.

"They've been at work already!" gritted Jack.

Sudden movement on the Venua's part attracted his attention. The ship suddenly darted off.

With sudden anger, Jack turned his ship and pointed the atomic gun. He pressed the button and kept his finger on it.

He certainly gambled that the crew of the Venua had

not checked over the reactor system. Had they corrected it, this would be the end for both ships!

The escaping ship was caught in a blast of pure radio-activity. The ship turned into a cloud of white smoke that began to boil and swell.

Jack raced his ship in a terrific swerve to the right and turned away from the atomised ship. Tod looked back. The pure white cloud was billowing high in the air.

"That's the end o' them!" grunted Tod.

The Jovians, emerging from the mine buildings, had had time to escape. When Jack Engle scanned the horizon for sight of them, they had gone.

He turned to the ship again, circling the mine from a good height. All at once the ground below was flung up in an upheaval. Like Jason Frisk's mine, there was a pattern of the seams which had been atomised to be seen from the air.

"Those Brutes were down the shaft and along the seams!" jerked Jack. "They laid charges. That's two mines they've wrecked."

"They won't wreck any more!" yapped Tod. "Never saw such a nice cloud o' smoke! That's the end o' them."

Jack Engle was silent as he threw his ship high above the spires. In a wide, swift swerve, he headed for the mining settlement.

At the spaceport, they climbed out. Plenty were there to greet them. Delia was among the first. Jack waved cheerily to her.

"The Venua is atomised. The wreckers are dead," he said.

In the settlement square they held a meeting. A question was flung at Jack Engle.

"What was the reason for this campaign against us?"

"I can only guess," returned Jack. "The Venua is named after Venus. Now—"

With terrific suddenness the air was filled with huge flying bodies. The Jovians flew in at high speed and swooped at the assembled people.

There was great confusion and sudden cries of agony as the flying ape-birds clawed at human bodies. Atom

pistols weaved a few seconds after the initial attack. Unlike the first onslaught upon the settlement, the Brutes came on despite the many who died in mid-air. There seemed to be hundreds—more than ever.

Jack wheeled, lancing at the sky with his gun. He saw a hairy body plummet down at him, taloned wings outstretched to rip him to pieces at one blow. His gun burnt the creature in half. There was the stench of burning flesh all around him. The grim screams of pain came alike from human and Brute throat. As the torn body of the Brute thudded near him, Jack thrust round, sensing attack from behind.

His gun snaked out again. The Jovian Brute, bird eyes glazed with a strange lust, tried to swoop beyond the atom ray. But the ray caught it and lanced a hole through its body. The Brute howled in agony and lurched away, dying at every yard.

And then, suddenly, the attack was over. The black bodies wheeled in the air and tore off at incredible speed. In seconds they were black dots on the moon's brassy horizon.

For some time the confusion in the settlement reigned. Then the wounded and dead were sorted out. It had been a grave fight. Although some fifty Brutes lay around the settlement, they had, by weight of numbers, killed ten Earthians and badly wounded five more.

And then Jason Frisk, wild-eyed and grim, came tearing over to Jack and Tod as they helped with the wounded.

"Delia's gone! I can't find her anywhere!"

Jack Engle straightened, felt his nerves tense.

"What d'you mean? She isn't—isn't—dead, is she?"

"She just isn't in the camp!" grated the other. "I think the Brutes took her off."

"That settles it," said Jack grimly. "I had a hunch after this attack that Simon Grink wasn't on board the Venua when we atomised it. If Delia's gone, that's proof. The swine has ordered the Brutes to carry her off. He's got to have some sort of hostage. He hasn't many weapons left."

"Can you figure out some plan?" asked Jason Frisk

desperately. "Damn him! Why does he have to get hold of Delia. I suppose it's because she's the only woman on the moon."

"Possibly," rapped Jack. "And possibly because he guesses that many of us would do a lot for Delia."

There was only one thing to do. They had to set off and look for the girl. Jack spun round to his ship and then hesitated.

"No, I've got a better idea," He jerked his head to Bert Darton and Jason Frisk. "Look, this is how we trap Simon Grink for good."

He quickly outlined a plan.

A minute later Tod Bender, Jason Frisk and Bert Darton took off in the spaceship. At the same time Jack flew the invisible jet up after the larger ship. He was alone in the jet runabout. The invisible craft was unarmed, of course, but Jack Engle had his atomic pistol.

He had known Delia on and off for some time now. Every time he had got to the moon he had liked the girl more and more. Someday, when he plucked up nerve, he had intended to start courting her. Jack, usually swift enough in most matters, was a laggard at love!

Maybe Simon Grink thought he had pulled a good trick. But it might not be so good for Grink in the end!

Tod Bender had instructions to pilot the ship to the valley near one of the Brute's hideouts. Then he had further instructions. It was all a question of wait and see.

Jack saw the *Light* sink down to the rock-strewn valley. Jack set the invisible jet down nearby and waited.

The three men in the ship descended and began to explore the valley. After some minutes they moved a long way from the ship. Jack smiled grimly. He stared through the windows of the jet. The glass was veneered with the transparent plastic skin. He could look through and not be seen.

Tod Bender and Jason Frisk began to climb a crazy track leading up the wall of the bluff. Bert Darton followed behind. Jack jerked his eyes up to the small black shapes moving about on the lofty ledges of the

bluff. The Brutes knew that the three men were climbing up from the valley.

Jack hoped that Simon Grink would be informed about the stationary ship in the valley. If the man was not up in this particular eyrie, the Brutes would soon bring him along to watch events. In fact, Jack Engle was willing to bet that Simon Grink knew about the ship already.

After a while the three men had climbed a long way. There was no possibility of them being able to get back to the ship quickly. It was then that four black shapes hurled down from the eyrie.

Simon Grink was hurtling down towards the ship supported by three Jovian Brutes. They shot down at express speed. Jack had to admit the man's nerve was good. He certainly trusted the Brutes.

Jack Engle knew that the man's strongest need was for a ship. Without a ship, he would never get off the moon. To get possession of a ship was vital.

The bait had served its purpose. The supporting Jovians swooped down and set Simon Grink gently on the ground. Tod, Jason Frisk and Bert Darton were many hundreds of yards away, among difficult ground. It would take them at least twenty minutes to return to the ship.

Simon Grink knew this. He did not know an invisible runabout was only a few yards away and that a grim-faced young man was watching his every move!

Cautiously Simon Grink approached the ship. He had the brains to know it might be a trap.

The Jovians shuffled along with him and then suddenly they sensed the invisible jet. As they turned their bird-like heads fiercely in every direction, Jack knew he had to act.

He leaped out of the invisible jet with one huge jump.

The effect was startling on the Brutes. They forgot to lift Simon Grink. Instead they hurtled upwards like the momentarily startled creatures they were.

Jack pointed his atomic flash at Simon Grink.

"Hold it! Don't try to get that gun out of your belt! I'll atomise you first."

The man froze with sudden inward fear. Jack Engle walked up quickly. He wanted to get the gun away from the man.

He reached out and whipped the pistol from the man's belt. He breathed a little easier.

"Now, Grink, maybe we'll talk: Where's Delia?"

"You won't find her!" sneered the man. He turned slowly and faced Jack. He was a heavily-built man with the pallor that life on Venus can give. The cloud-planet did queer tricks with Earthian complexions. Jack noted all this and everything strengthened his hunch about the man's reasons for his campaign of wreckage.

"We will find her, Grink!" snapped the young man.

"She is up in the Brute's eyrie. They'll take her further away into the rocky fastnesses. You won't find her—unless you help me."

"Just what do you expect?" snapped Jack.

"I'll exchange the girl for your ship!" retorted the man. "Let me navigate the ship away from here and I swear I'll deposit the girl safe and sound not far from here."

"You want to get off the moon, huh?"

"Give me the ship and I'll go."

"Back to Venus, no doubt," said Jack pleasantly. "Back to the Uranium miners. Maybe you're one of the biggest owners of Uranium mines. You must be, or you wouldn't be so dead set on wrecking the Jovium mines. Jovium is beating Uranium in the Universe's atom-fuel markets, isn't it. And you fellers on Venus don't like it! That's right, isn't it?"

"What of it!" snapped Simon Grink. "It's true, of course. Why should you worry about these miners?"

"They happen to be my friends. Now get in this invisible jet. Sure, it's invisible. That's how I happened to be here. Get in or I'll atomise you."

"You would never find the girl!" bluffed Grink desperately.

"Okay. Get in and take me to Delia. Once we get

to the girl, we can make a deal. A deal for Delia, sounds just right, eh, pal?"

Simon Grink did not see any humour. He scowled and stepped forward to the spot Jack indicated. He had to feel for the outline of the jet door. A few moments later they were both inside. So simple were the controls, that Jack could operate the craft with one finger and keep the gun on Simon Grink at the same time.

"No tricks, pally, or I drill a little burning hole through your heart with this ray."

Grink did not know if Jack Engle was bluffing. He tried to read uncertainty in the young man's words, but saw, instead, implacable will.

The jet shot up to the top of the Brutes' eyrie in seconds.

"A nice fast lift," observed Jack. He looked down below, through the windows. He saw Tod and the other two making in all haste for the ship. They knew he had Grink at a pistol point.

"Now show me the spot where Delia is kept," demanded Jack grimly.

"What happens to me after that?"

"You'll be taken back to Earth for a trial. No lynching, I promise you that. Though the miners would do it without blinking. You're not exactly popular."

Simon Grink was in an agony of doubt. On one hand he faced death if he refused. On the other, if he was handed to the miners . . . He had tried to bargain for the spaceship and failed. This young man wasn't easily bluffed.

"Promise to take me back to Earth," he panted.

"And I'll order the Brutes to bring the girl forward."

"I give you that promise," said Jack grimly.

Simon Grink was thinking that the trip to Earth was a long one and afforded him time to plan some tricks to escape. That was the only reason why he assented to show Jack the girl. That and another slight chance . . .

He directed Jack to land on the rocky eyrie. A second later they stepped out and halted beside the invisible jet. Jack did not intend to go far. He kept the gun on Grink.

Simon Grink gave a long prolonged call. Quickly, the Brutes appeared from behind all possible concealing points. Grink rapped some gibberish to them.

Jack just did not understand. He had never stayed on the moon long enough to learn the Jovian Brutes' hideous tongue.

Two Brutes flew strongly through the air carrying Delia like a toy. Although white with fear, she kept her head. In a second she was set down on the rock. She stumbled over to Jack Engle. Another second and he had his arm round her comfortingly.

He motioned to Simon Grink.

"Get in the jet."

The man jumped in. Before Jack could follow the door slammed in his face. He felt the displacement of air as the jet shot upwards.

Jack lanced at space, instinctively following the jet's invisible flight. It was sheer instinct on his part. He was aiming at nothing. There was nothing to see.

But the atomic ray followed the rising jet long enough to burn through vital controls. The jet stopped rising. It began to fall. It was invisible until it crashed on the rocks in the valley below. Then the plastic skin burst.

The spaceship *Light* rose swiftly minutes later. It crept near to the ledge on which Jack stood with the girl, keeping the Brutes at bay with the gun. The ship hovered so close that the two were able to step on to the lowered ramp.

"Let's go," said Jack quietly. "I guess that's the end of wrecking on this moon. No one can stop Jovium from becoming an important mineral."

Tod Bender grinned as he watched the other hold the girl solicitously.

"There's lots o' things you can't stop!" he muttered, and then turned away with a wise old laugh.

THE END

STRATOSHIP X9

by W. B. CLARKE

DAN MADOC thrust through the chill night of Iskar, keeping his eyes on the blue fire. The tongues danced in giant formations on the horizon. The flickering plumes of blue fire seemed a weird witchery even from this distance.

Dan wondered if the Brethren were far behind. If he had outdistanced the Iskarites, he was lucky. Those clumsy, four-legged bears could nevertheless move fast when they desired. And now that the Earthian prisoners had broken out of the machine jail, the Iskarites would be moving damned furiously.

Iskar was a cold planet. Even though he had maintained a fast pace for the last hour, Dan Madoc still felt the freezing atmosphere sting through his nylon clothes. His face was raw with cold, although there was no wind on Iskar.

He hoped the other twenty-five Earthians had escaped successfully, but he doubted it. There was nowhere to escape to. Iskar was a tiny planet in a System of four hundred other planets, it was incredibly distant from Mother Earth. And Earth was fighting wars with the winged Sirisites. At the moment Iskar hardly existed in the memories of those at home. So that the break from the machine jail was a move of desperation. The Earthians could not leave the tiny planet.

The machine jail had been a hellish place. The Iskarites had attempted to create a machine civilization similar to Earth, Mars and Venus, but they had no ability with machines. Machines were alien to the bear-like

creatures. Still they had persisted with their plans, and so built the machine jail with slave labour.

The machine jail was a grotesque factory of silent metal mechanisms imported from Earth just before the wars. The humans were strapped to the mechanism. Arms and legs were bound to metallic components so that the prisoners of the machine jail were part of the remorselessly working tools. This was the Iskarites' conception of machine minders. Men and women, captured as they landed to prospect on Iskar, provided human components for the imported machines. Con-torted flesh had to operate with the machines. From the chutes and belts the products the Iskarites desired emerged.

The break had been planned by Dan Madoc and Chet Wilson. The two men, sent by the four-legged Iskarites to repair a conveyor, had seized their guards. A fight and the guards were dead, their skulls broken by metal bars. The remainder of the Earthians were freed and the breakout started. It was an escape of desperation. Death awaited many of them, but there are worse things than death. Most of the Earthians had hoped they might evade the Iskarites in the night.

Dan Madoc had found himself separated from Chet Wilson. There had been nothing else but to plunge on desperately. He guessed he had been lucky in evading the bear-people. He had heard screams of pain in the night as claws had ripped human flesh. Others had probably been rounded up, for the Iskarites would not want to lose their mechanistic slaves.

Now the blue fire danced mockingly on the horizon ahead. That was his destination, for he had heard strange tales about the cold, blue flame of Iskar.

He ran on, lurching a trifle, his mouth sucking painfully at the knife-edged air. The terrain was rocky and moss-covered. He had crossed hills and gullies where ice crusted the ground. He had gone on and on, realising that by some amazing fluke he had avoided the Iskarites.

The leaders of the Iskarites were called the Brethren. They were the ones who made the decisions. They were the ruling class. The Brethren would be issuing orders right now in their grunting language. They would find out who had got away, and they would make plans to scour the small planet.

The blue flames danced eerily and closer now. Dan Madoc panted for air and ran on. Then he felt the queer fumes in his lungs. He was really near to the jagged holes from where the flame of Iskar spouted. There was no heat. Remembering the tales he had heard, he knew he would encounter no heat. Cold blue flames danced like mere light on a screen.

On and on he ran, staggering somewhat as he breasted the final slope to the ridge of rocky gaps where the flames issued. Then he halted, sucking at the air and staring at the flames.

It was odd, but there was not the slightest heat. As he breathed heavily, he felt the peculiar fumes rush into his lungs. It was not an unpleasant sensation. In fact, it had a narcotic effect upon him, steadying his nerves.

He advanced, his head back, staring up at the leaping blue flame as it towered thirty feet into the air. The light blue flame flickered up from a series of trenches in the rocky pileup.

At the fringe of the actual flame he hesitated. Then he dived forward. He thought he could not be hurt if there was no heat or poisonous fumes. He had to test the strange tales he had heard about the blue flames. At least, he could not be in any more danger than if he waited until dawn for the Iskarites to find him.

He walked right into the flame. He halted and sucked for air. He got mostly a lungful of the fumes. They did not irritate or choke, but he had a curious feeling of dizziness.

Dan Madoc stood right in the centre of a thirty foot pillar of Iskar flame and waited, his hands clenched by

his side. Then, after some ten minutes, while he rocked under the narcotic effect of fumes, he raised his hands and stared at them.

He could see his hands all right. They looked normal, work-stained and with rough red patches where he had been strapped to a coil-winder.

He could see his hands—and his legs—but he wondered if the tales of Iskar flame were true. Was he now invisible? Was he invisible to others? Had the flame coated him with the strange deposit?

He could see himself, but perhaps that was part of the odd effect. Could the Brethren see him?

Grimly, Dan Madoc walked out of the flame. He figured he might soon have the opportunity of testing whether he was invisible or not. How long would the effect last—if the change had taken place? He had heard tales. The reflective deposit wore off after so many hours, depending upon friction, his own exertions and climatic changes.

Dan clambered down from the rocks and paused again. He'd have to test the whole thing. If he was invisible, there was a great chance of getting to the one and only spaceship belonging to the Iskarites. The craft lay outside the town, crewless and little used by the unmechanistic bear-people.

Dan Madoc jumped down from some rocks and made to stride out through the eerie blue light thrown by the flames. He would be back at the town before dawn and test his invisibility. Life or death hung on the test.

Then, all at once, he crouched as he sighted a figure move less than ten yards ahead. The bluish light mingling with the dark made identification of the figure difficult. For a moment he thought the figure might be one of the grey, furred Iskarites. Then, with a sudden leap of his heart, he knew the creature was two-legged. One of the Earthians!

He hurried over the rocky ground. He made a few sounds with his boots, and the figure whipped around in fear.

Dan Madoc saw the girl's face and recognised her. She was Alix Denyer, one of the most courageous of the Earthian prisoners. She was nearly as tall as he. She had swung her golden head in alarm at the sounds he made.

Then he laughed and ran forward at the same time. She heard the laugh and whipped around, bewildered, staring for a sign of the man who had laughed.

Dan Madoc was within two yards of the girl when he realised the flame had been tested already. Alix Denyer could not see him !

He rapped out reassuring words.

"Alix—this is Dan Madoc ! This voice ! You can't see me ! I am invisible !" He laughed again and reached out to grasp the girl's arm. She was turning her head, searching for sign of him.

"The flame ! So you've been through the flame !" she panted. "It's true ! The stories are true !"

He held her arm. She steadied and put out her hands to grasp his invisible body.

"Can't you really see me ?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"No. There is no sign of you—and yet you're close enough."

He had always liked Alix Denyer, though the routine of the machine prison had separated them just when their friendship was ripening.

"That's a fair test," he said. "Come closer to the flames and tell me if I am completely invisible to you."

They went closer, so that the blue light danced all around. She assured him he was completely invisible.

"I hope the Iskarites have no greater range," he said grimly. "They have the sense of smell, like the animals they are. But maybe we can outwit them. You must stand in the flame for about ten minutes. You'll be unharmed. I'll wait for you to emerge. I won't go in again. Over-exposure might bring queer results."

She nodded, clung to him for a minute and then

steadied. Watching her, he thought she was a proud, good-looking woman. Even the oil on her face, brought from the machine jail, could not disguise the fine lines of her face, her generous lips and liquid eyes.

"I made this way hoping to find a hideout," she confessed. "I thought the tales of the flames were just more inter-space rumours. I don't know how I got away from the prison. Oh, it was terrible hearing the cries of those killed and captured!"

"You'll have to forget that!" He led her to the nearest pillar of flame. "Go in there and endure the dizziness for as long as ten minutes. I'll wait for you."

He had a theory he would be able to see her when she emerged from the flames. He could see his own limbs, so probably he would be able to see Alix. There was some queer chemical action in the deposit laid over a body that entered the flames. He had no time to think about analysing the mystery. With him the invisibility was an accomplished fact, and that was that.

He waited and ten minutes later saw Alix Denyer stagger out of the concealing pillar of flame. He was grimly triumphant that his theory was right. He *could* see Alix. Yet she had been unable to see him earlier. So they were now both invisible to those unaffected by the flame.

He strode up and helped her down to smooth ground away from the fumes.

"Look, Alix, we've got a chance to get off this terrible planet. We might get to the spaceship."

"What about the others, now back in the machine jail?" she asked slowly.

For a moment he looked grim, impatient.

"Okay. We'll try to rescue them. Maybe we are invisible, but the Iskarites will smell us out."

"The Brethren will have taken some of the Earthians back to the operating points in the machine jail," she said. "We must try to get them out."

For a moment, grim, hard man though he was, he

shuddered at the thought of going back to the ghastly jail.

"If we keep moving, we might baffle the Iskarites' sense of smell," he said. "So let's get back to the town."

They left the giant tongues of blue flame and travelled back towards the Iskar town. Hand in hand, they walked and climbed the rough terrain. About ninety Earth minutes later, they stood on a hillock of moss and overlooked the town. The cavernous homes of the bear people lined the streets. There were few mechanistic contrivances on the roads. All markets and shops were inside the caves. That was the way the Iskarites liked to live.

The short night was nearly over. Iskar's distant sun would soon send watery rays to warm the chill planet.

At one end of the town lay the big, black domed machine jail. It was just a huge cavern of metal, without windows. Staring at it from a distance, Dan Madoc thought of the weeks he had spent in the grotesque jail, and he shuddered.

"I suppose the Iskarites have rounded up the remaining prisbners and stuck them back as human components among those machines," he said. "Well, now for the test."

They walked slowly towards the town. He held Alix Denyer's arm protectingly.

He could see, on the outskirts of the town, the globular shape of the spaceship. It lay motionless and deserted. He remembered the rumours that had gone around the machine jail when the ship had landed on Iskar. The tales said that the Iskarites had stolen the ship from another planet and that they had nearly wrecked it on landing, such was their lack of ability with anything mechanical.

The Iskarites had not gone near the ship after the bad landing. The craft, named Stratoship X9 by some unknown people on an unknown planet, was still assumed to be in flying order, in spite of the bad landing.

Dan Madoc was sure he could reach the ship easily, without attracting the Iskarites. He and Alix had the chance to make an easy getaway. And yet there was the machine jail and its prisoners to think about. The Earthians could not be left to a mechanistic hell.

With swift, grim strides, they walked into the town. Although they were undoubtedly invisible, they tried to avoid the groups of bear-people.

Even so, more than once as they passed some of the Iskarites, one of the creatures would rise on its hind legs, paw and sniff at the air.

But Dan and Alix hurried on, leaving the creature puzzled. With swift movement, their scent trail vanished.

In a few minutes Dan and the girl arrived at the big, domed prison. They stood outside the windowless place and heard the clank of moving metal and the occasional shriek of a human, trapped as a living component of the ghastly factory.

The big main door opened. Two furred Iskarites walked out of the sliding door, talking in their "Pog" language. The syllables sounded like "Pog" in every conceivable variation of tone. Judging by the red markings on their fur, the two creatures were engineers, rare individuals on Iskar.

Seizing the chance, Dan and Alix slipped through the open door. The two bear-creatures rose on hind-legs pawing and sniffing the air, puzzled. When rearing like this, they were fully nine feet tall. They had formidable claws.

Inside the cavernous jail it was darkish, and the clank and whine of machinery was everywhere. The Iskarites did not need much light to see; they had animalish perceptions.

Dan and Alix saw the guards lurching awkwardly down the aisles, mimicking Earthian overseers. There were only three in evidence at the moment. The furry creatures walked clumsily on hind legs, pausing occasionally to stare at some wretched human strapped and bolted to a remorseless machine.

Dan Madoc looked around for something handy to use as a weapon. He hesitated. If he wielded a steel bar, the weapon would not be invisible.

But the guards had to be attacked before the prisoners could be released. Nothing could be achieved until the guards were out of the way.

Dan Madoc picked up the steel bar and ran to the nearest Iskarite guard. The creature sensed danger, saw the steel bar rushing forward without any apparent support or motive power. The Iskarite reared and pawed furiously at the steel bar.

But Dan Madoc had the advantage. The creature could not see his movements. The steel bar swung at great speed and the bear-creature tried in vain to ward off the blow.

The first swing stunned the Iskarite. The guard fell, sprawled. Dan Madoc went on grimly to finish the job. Another blow and revolting green blood flowed from the cracked skull of the creature.

Dan rushed away from the scene to overtake Alix as she circled invisibly to tackle another guard. The two Iskarites were bristling with sense of danger. They barked "Pog" sounds. One was about to reach for an alarm bell when Dan rushed forward.

The creature saw only a swinging steel bar which glinted terribly as it flashed forward. A snarly sound grated from the Iskarite's jaw. It was the last sound before death struck fast and brutally.

The last guard backed, tried to reach the alarm bell. Electronic sparks snapped from the creature's furry coat as the hairs bristled under the sense of danger.

Dan Madoc brought his green-tipped steel bar into play. He shouldered Alix to one side. This was not work for a girl, however courageous.

The rattle and whine of machinery, mingled with the unearthly groans of the tortured slaves, rose above the snarl of the Iskarite.

Then Dan struck. The bar crashed through the creature's waving paws. A horrible snapping sound ended the snarly voice of the Iskarite.

Dan stared for a second. He drew deep at the musty air of the machine jail. He dropped the steel bar. He whipped around and took Alix by the arm.

"We haven't time to waste. The other guards must have gone out to eat. We've got to work while there is time."

It would not do for them to stop the plant machinery. That would show as a warning light in the control-rooms outside the jail.

Dan went to one Earthian prisoner. Alix hurried over to another—a girl she had known.

Dan worked grimly at releasing the man. The man's arms were strapped to moving rods which dipped and swerved every few seconds to perform an operation on the moving belt below the prisoner's chest. The man had to work with the grinding regularity of inhuman metal. His fingers were free. The parts which moved before him had to be clipped and punched unless he wanted the attention of the overseer.

Dan applied grimly working fingers to the straps. The moving rods continued on their courses all the time. But the man was freed in a few seconds. He staggered up, rubbing the harsh weals on his arms. Then, with Dan and Alix, he staggered off to free the other prisoners.

The word got around that Dan Madoc and Alix Denyer were back in the machine jail—but as free, invisible agents this time and not slaves. The Earthian prisoners could not see their rescuers, but Dan and Alix spoke reassuringly as they worked to free the machines' slaves.

Within a few minutes the Earthians were free. Dan and Alix carried light metal discs so that the prisoners could identify their position. The conveyor belts, moving from the machines, carried a jumble of ruined and incomplected parts.

"Won't be long before the polecats in the control room find out something is wrong!" exclaimed a man.

"We'll be rounded up again—like the last time!"

wailed a woman. "Some will be killed! How can we get away from here?"

Dan Madoc moved the metal disc impatiently. The murmur of voices died away and heads turned to the disc expectantly.

"Alix and I will have to slip out," he said grimly. "We intend to get the stratoship. You will have to watch the door and kill any Iskarite that tries to enter. Then we shall bring the ship down into the yard beside the door to this jail. If we achieve that, we are all as good as free from Iskar."

"A good thing, too!" growled a man. "Any planet would be better than this!"

"We'll have to work fast!" urged Dan. "The Iskarites will soon discover something is wrong, but you should be able to keep them out of this machine jail. There is only one door."

And then he and Alix slipped out of the jail door and made across the yard. They heard sounds of the Earthians as they prepared to guard the door. There were no windows, and so the place should be easily defended.

Dan led the girl to the outskirts of the town. They passed groups of Iskarites as they carried on business at the mouths of their caves. The two humans took care to give the creatures a wide berth.

Then, past the caves, they came to the location of the ship. Stratoship X9 lay like some alien thing. It was a product of another civilisation. The Iskarites had no real interest in the ship. Even their best engineers were not qualified to handle it. Stealing the ship had been one of the bear-people's most extraordinary exploits. They were a fumbling sort of people, vainly trying to imitate the machine civilizations of Earth and Mars and the other worlds of the Solar System.

The ship was deserted. Not one of the Iskarites was anywhere near. Dan sought the door to the globular ship and found to his grim satisfaction that the door was not locked. The panel slid smoothly and he and Alix

climbed inside the craft and pushed the door back again.

Dan thought the interior of the ship looked mighty satisfying to a man who had had enough of Iskar. Release from the cold planet was at hand!

He went to the control room and stared at the panel. He saw that the ship had been built on Cirees IV, according to the nameplate. Cirees IV was a small world of the Cireesian group and was reputed to be an energetic colony of Earthians. Well, they had built a nice ship.

Dan Madoc had arrived at Iskar to prospect, but he was a trained engineer. A few glances at the controls and he figured he could handle the stratoship.

He tried the contactor. The atomic motor hummed into life at once. Evidently the bad landing made by the Iskarites had not damaged anything in the motive power.

Quickly, now that the motor was throbbing, he set the vernier for a slow lift. He pressed the appropriate button on the bank. The craft lurched.

X9 rose vertically but with a bad list to starboard. Dan guessed a control fin or the mechanism working it had been damaged in the bad landing. Well, he thought that could be fixed. Possibly adjustments could be made in the controls to compensate for the damage.

The ship rose high above the town and then Dan set it to "Hover." In the next minute he made checks of the controls governing lateral movement. Everything seemed all right. With a manual control, he set the ship forward to the position above the machine jail yard.

He guessed the ship's movement would have been noticed by the Iskarites. The whole town would be alert. The Brethren would galvanise to action because they did not want to lose their slaves. Without them, the plant would cease to operate because the Iskarites were hopeless at mechanical work.

Dan Madoc eased the ship down to the yard. He wanted to land the globular ship just beside the door to the jail.

It was Alix who pointed through a port to the mass of furry Iskarites already in the yard.

"They're attempting to get in the jail!"

"With only one entry, the brutes will find death awaiting them!" said Dan grimly. "And if they don't get out of the way, this ship will crush some to death."

The ship slid down and at the last moment the grey furry mass of creatures ran for safety. Dan landed the ship, but kept the motor humming.

He opened the sliding door. He waved a cushion at the door of the machine jail. He guessed the Earthians could see through cracks in the door. He waved the cushion because he was still invisible.

The machine jail door opened with a slam. The Earthians ran for the ship. At the same moment a number of grey Iskarites leaped forward.

There was a short, desperate battle. The Earthians had to fight a way to the ship. They were armed with metal bars, but two Earthians found they were hardly a match for vicious claws. The two men went down, slashed to ribbons. Two Iskarites were killed, so that the score was about even. Desperately wielding the metal bars, the Earthmen fought a battle, retreating to the ship all the time.

Dan and Alix helped them into the craft as fast as possible. The last two men were helped in as they backed, swinging savagely with great metal bars. At the last moment the bars were thrown at the Iskarites, and then the men leaped backwards. Dan slammed the door shut and set the magnetic lock.

He leaped back to the controls and shot the craft up vertically into the grey Iskar sky. At five hundred feet he set the vernier to "Hover."

He went back to the main lounge to examine the ex-prisoners. He found he was still invisible to the Earthians—like Alix—and so he had to carry a metal rule from the control diagram board.

The X9 was carrying nineteen Earthians. The others

had been killed during the earlier breakout from the jail, and two had died in the last skirmish. Some of the women were weak from fatigue and would need attention. All of the men required rest.

"I'm going to the control room," said Dan. He waved the metal ruler. All they could see was the ruler. "I'm going to chart a spacewarp to Earth. It might be a long trip with this crate, but Earth is the place for us."

He left them, with Alix tending those who needed attention. Two men, hardier than the others, were exploring the store-rooms. Dan passed them in the corridor and waved his stick cheerfully. The men were looking for food, weapons and any valuable accessory.

Dan Madoc spent the next fifteen minutes working out a warp to Earth. Looking through the data above the diagram board, he gathered the ship had a maximum speed of one light year an hour. As Iskar was four hundred light years from Earth, the trip would be lengthy.

At last the warp was planned. He fed the strip of paper into the Automatic Flight. He shunted the power to the Automatic and let it take over.

The ship vibrated as it gathered speed and tore away from Iskar. The velocity increased steadily with every passing second. Dan made an adjustment to compensate for the damaged control fin. After that there was nothing more he could do. The ship was now on Automatic Flight and would only need checking every period on the warp.

He rejoined the others in the lounge. A meal had been prepared. Everyone was laughing and overjoyed at the prospect of freedom. Dan looked for Alix and found her in a corner. She was waving her stick for the benefit of the other Earthians, but she was visible to Dan.

As the ship throbbed on through the blue-black void, there was work for all to do. Things had to be organised. The food had to be checked and rationed, because there was little enough for nineteen people.

At the end of a period Dan returned to the control

room to examine the warp. Alix came with him, her arm in his, a smile on her lips.

"One thing is certain, we'll never visit Iskar again," she joked. "The planet may contain valuable minerals, but I don't like the people!"

"If I ever go back to Iskar, it'll be with plenty of ray guns!" growled Dan.

His keen eyes stared at the warp graph, puzzled. The recording needle seemed in error. He began to make some calculations in an effort to check. The graph was recording their flight, but he suspected an error.

After ten minutes of calculation, he knew his warp was correct. The sheet was in the Automatic Flight, and should be controlling the ship, but all the same he knew the X9 was not on a warp to Earth. Already the ship had sliced nearly a billion miles away from the warp.

Something in the setup of the Automatic Flight was wrong. He inspected the outward checks, such as the dials and graphs, but got no clue as to why the X9 was slicing away from the warp he had fed to the Automatic.

An hour later Dan Madoc turned the ship manually. He stood at the controls and steered the ship back to the warp he had set for Earth. For some time he held on to this course, and then he switched over to the Automatic again.

He figured the ship should stick to the warp on the sheet.

But even as he watched, the needles swung slowly again.

The Stratoship X9 was swinging in an immense circle to the old warp!

Then Dan realised the Automatic Flight was preset and had no alternatives. It was impossible to navigate the ship back to Earth. The Automatic was set for some unknown destination, and the ship would fly to that destination. On the trip to Iskar, the Automatic had run its course and then licked over to the other alternative. Now it was immovable. Even a manual course to Earth

would have enormous deviations, and someone would have to stand by all the time—all the four hundred hours.

The more Dan Madoc thought about it, the more he realised it might be better to let the X9 run its course. The ship had a destination. Maybe it was Cirees IV, its birthplace.

There was not sufficient food on board to run risks. They could not wander all over the vast voids of space, with the Automatic pulling to one destination and the manual control set for another. With such terrible deviations, the ship could surge on for a year and still not come within sight of the Solar System. The Earth's sun was a tiny star at the best of times. Its light was lost in the void where stars a hundred times its size scintillated.

Dan let the ship swing back to its present warp. He even took the warp sheet he had prepared from the Automatic. The ship flung forward through space without a change or tremor. Dan realised his warp sheet had never really affected the ship.

His lips were tight as he swung to Alix.

"We're not going to Earth. We've got to go with the ship. There is a preset destination, and goodness knows where that is!"

Later sleep claimed them, for Dan and Alix, and in fact many of the others, had not slept for over twenty hours.

When Dan Madoc rose from his bunk and went to the control room nearly eight hours later, he realised with a start that he was visible again to the others. He met a man in the corridor, and the way the man looked at him and smiled proved the invisible deposit from the flames of Iskar had worn off.

It was the same with Alix Denyer. The effect had faded and once more they were normal Earthians.

Dan stood in the control room and stared at the warp graph. The X9 was still plunging through space, but

the graph showed that the warp would take the ship nowhere near the Solar System.

Dan held a meeting and told the others. He was the only engineer-spaceman in the company. There had been others but they had been killed in the skirmishes with the Iskarites. The men on the X9 were mostly prospectors, miners, who had landed on Iskar. A ship had landed them a long way from the bear-people and then taken off quickly.

"The X9 is on a warp to some unknown planet. I believe we may be returning to the planet which really owns this ship. If that guess is right, we'll land at Cirees IV."

Exactly twenty-nine hours later Dan Madoc's guess was proved right. A planet loomed up and grew in size from a pin-point of light to a vast landscape of hills and woods.

The X9 flew in automatically, and Dan Madoc did not make any move to the controls. He watched the speed drop as the ship hit the atmospheric belt. Then he felt the motor murmur back to a mere whisper of power. The Automatic was certainly nicely set. The ship nosed across the terrain of the planet at a height of about fifty miles and at a mere speed of five hundred miles per hour.

So this was Cirees IV? This was the world which was colonised by Earthians? Well, they ought to find a welcome, at any rate.

The X9 slid over a vast basin of sand and rock at one end of which was a city. The roofs and domes gleamed in the sunlight. There was an Earthian atmosphere on the planet and so the city was not roofed and pressurised.

The ship eased to "Hover" and then slowly dropped. The craft had slid over the basin at a height of less than five miles, so that the descent was not long.

With the others, now rested and strong again, Dan Madoc and Alix Denyer stood at the lounge ports and watched the terrain. As the ship sank, the city was better seen.

"Looks a fine change from the caves of Iskar," commented Dan. "Our own people, too! Maybe this is as good as returning to Earth!"

"You were right to let the ship take the preset warp," said Alix.

The X9 landed softly. For a moment there was silence. The motor sighed to nothing.

"Open the doors," said Dan. "Let's get out. I'm hungry and could eat some steak. Queer no one has come forward to greet the ship's arrival!"

That was a strange fact. The city seemed dead. No one had crossed the sandy basin. Yet the X9 had arrived on a preset course. Someone had installed that course in the Automatic.

As the nineteen Earthians moved over the sand, the lack of movement in the city struck them like a stark fear.

"I don't like it," said Dan Madoc. "Where are the people?"

The party walked on and finally entered the city. The streets were white concrete, spewn into habitations and buildings by the amazing concrete moulder. This moulder could throw up a house in an hour, or lay a ribbon-like road at a mile an hour. New worlds were being created out of primeval conditions every week by the concrete moulder.

But the splendid little city, alone on the green planet, was deserted. As the party walked down the main street, no one moved from the houses. Nothing human moved. There were only a few Martian dogs, a reminder that Man had lived here.

And then, all at once, as if a warning, there was movement. It came violently.

The party of Earthians were amazed to see a number of furry bodies run towards them, down the white road. There came a snarling sound and "Pog" cries.

"Iskarites!" ejaculated Dan. "How the devil are they here?"

At the moment the question of safety was more important than the other question. The Earthians ran to the nearest building.

The Iskarites hurled after them with animalistic savagery. The pack was nearly a hundred strong, so far as anyone could judge. They seemed to be lusting to fight.

The Earthians reached the building and slammed doors after them. There were shutters on the windows and these were hurriedly closed. The men grabbed at pokers and anything which might form a weapon and stood by the door and shutters.

Dan Madoc went to an upstairs window to look out.

He saw the pack of Iskarites moving around the street on their hind-legs. They were bestially angry. They pawed viciously at the air. They were in a snarly mood.

Suddenly some new arrivals added to the pack. The creatures who came up had red markings on their fur denoting that they were engineers. Their mechanical knowledge was probably very poor.

But the Iskarite engineers held ray guns in their paws. As soon as they got near the building hiding the Earthians, they began snaking the rays over the concrete.

It was actually a waste of radium, for the rays simply blew off a coat of dust off the concrete. But if the rays had touched a human a terrible burn would be inflicted.

"I don't know what the Pogs are doing here," gritted Dan Madoc. "But I can guess they've fought the other Earthians and somehow got control of their guns."

He made guesses as to the presence of the Iskarites on Cirees IV, but the guesses would not help them out of the present situation.

All at once the pack of furry creatures withdrew. The red-marked engineers had barked orders. The pack shambled off down the street, in the direction of the X9. But some others parted from the main pack and made a track for a building on a knoll overlooking the sandy basin. Leading this party were the engineers.

Dan Madoc saw these moves from the upper window and wondered what was going on.

He came down to the others and rapped :

"The Iskarites are making for the ship. They have those ray guns, and I don't know how we can fight them."

"As long as they get off this planet, I don't care if they take the ship," growled one man.

"I'm not so sure they can get off Cirees IV," remarked Dan. "The Automatic needs re-setting and those Pok engineers couldn't do it. They know that, too, I guess."

"What do you advise, Dan?" asked another man, quietly.

"Well, the creatures are not immediately menacing us, so I think we ought to search the houses for ray guns in order to fight back if they attack again."

It was a good idea, and the party of Earthians streamed out to search for guns. It was arranged to meet again near the house they had just left, and no one had to be away more than ten minutes.

Dan kept beside Alix. He did not want any harm to come to her. She was becoming something very dear to him.

He climbed to the flat roof of a house with the girl and he stared over to the X9. He saw the pack of Iskarites streaming all around the ship. Judging by their antics they seemed to be delighted with the appearance of the ship. He guessed they thought they could return to Iskar by the craft. But the Automatic would have to be re-set. And that task was too subtle for Iskarite engineers.

He suddenly saw the creatures re-appear from the building on the knoll. Five humans were dragged out of the building. Dan stared in surprise. So the Iskarites had kept some of the Cirees Earthians prisoner!

Dan forgot about looking for a ray gun. He pointed out the distant play to Alix. They saw the humans dragged to the ship. Dan realised what was brewing.

"The bear-people are taking those humans to the ship—probably to force them to alter the Automatic preset. They'll want a warp to Iskar."

Dan and Alix went down the stairs and crossed the road to the other house. They waited until all the party was assembled again. Only one ray gun had been found. Evidently the weapons had been hidden or destroyed.

Dan Madoc told the others what he had seen and his inferences.

"The Iskarites probably want to return to Iskar. The Earthian prisoners are being taken to the ship to alter the Automatic. Once that is done the Iskarites will leave this planet."

"What's wrong with that?" called a man surlily.

"Just that once the Automatic is preset again on a warp to Iskar the Earthians will be killed. We've got to do something to save the five men."

"We've got only one ray gun," said the man. "They'll wipe us out. Is it good that nineteen should die to save five?"

"Alix and I had the chance to escape from Iskar," rapped Dan. "But we spent some time in rescuing you. We succeeded. I think we ought to help those five Earthians. They are our own people. Give me that ray gun. I'll go over to the basin myself. I might surprise them."

Alix Denyer was suddenly fearful for his safety and yet proud that Dan should decide to help the others.

Dan Madoc took the ray gun from the man who had found it. He started out but not alone. Alix came after him and most of the others, too. The men were armed with strong metal rods which had been taken from some ornamental railings.

The party of Earthians approached the ship, coming through a cleft in the rocks. Then they halted when they realised they had to cross flat ground to get near the ship. All around the X9 were the Iskarites. The five Earthians had been dragged inside. Dan's hunch about the pre-setting of the Automatic Flight seemed very likely now. There was no other reason why the five humans should be taken on board.

"There is another point," muttered Dan grimly to Alix. "We might want to use the X9 to get to Earth,

and those five men held by the Iskarites might be able to alter the Automatic for us. The ship was built here."

In many ways it was important to tackle the bear-people before they succeeded in having the Automatic altered. For one thing, the five Earthians would be killed immediately the ship was set for a flight to Iskar.

"I wish we were invisible again," said Dan grimly.

Alix laughed slightly and held his arm tightly.

Then Dan took her hand off his arm.

"I'm going to attack with this gun," he said. "I might get some of those Pogs carrying the ray guns by surprise. If only we could get those guns, everything would alter."

Swiftly, because he did not want her to detain him, he darted off.

Like a sprinter, he raced over the sand and he got within ray gun range before the Iskarites standing around the ship realised his presence.

He lanced the gun over the pack. The ray snaked out and burned horribly wherever it touched flesh. Sudden cries of pain and rage broke out.

Dan kept racing. A ray gun lanced to him but the ray missed, like a spray of water that is too slow. That was a peculiar fact about the ray gun: the ray was heavy and took an appreciable time to cover even a short distance. The radium ray did not move with the speed of light; in fact it was vastly slower.

Dan veered away from the ship, holding the ray gun over his shoulder so that if the Iskarites pursued, they would run after a ray that snaked viciously.

But some of the red-marked engineers leaped out of the X9 and gave chase. They had more ray guns. They knew how to use them, although the guns were Earthian manufacture.

Grimly, Dan raced in a wide circle for some rocks. He thought he had no doubt led the Iskarites away from the ship, but the price might be his life.

Still, the one-time prisoners of the Iskarites might now have a chance to run for the ship and rescue the five

Earthians. Most of the pack of Iskarites were racing after Dan.

He thought there was no future now for Alix and he. In a moment the bear-creatures would overtake him and circle him. Then a ray would lance out and settle on him, burning horribly . . .

All at once the snarls of the Iskarites increased. Dan sensed the difference. This was not triumph; it seemed like increased anger. He whipped around, chancing the slight delay it caused.

From the rocky cleft about twenty more Earthians were pouring, and they all carried ray guns. Dan heard the shouts.

"We found these men locked in a cellar . . ." It was the voice of one of the ex-prisoners of Iskar. "These men knew where to find hidden ray guns."

Then the next thing was frightful snarls of agony as the Iskarites were sent on the run. The bear-creatures were outnumbered in guns. Dan wheeled and added his ray gun to the others already creating havoc. Suddenly, from out of the crowd, Alix came up and held his arm.

"Oh, Dan, I thought you'd taken too big a risk!"

"I'm all right," he assured her.

The Iskarites suddenly raced away. The red-marked engineers were dead. They still held the guns. The brutes who had escaped had no guns.

The five men inside the ship walked out and the bonds were taken from their hands. It was then that Dan learned the history of events.

"The Iskarites first came here in a hired ship," said the leader of the Cirees Earthians. "They said they wanted to trade. It was difficult conversing, but we managed. Then they tricked us like the wily brutes they are. They attacked and killed hundreds of our unarmed people one night. A lot of our folks fled to the hills, where they are at this moment. The Iskarites made some of us prisoner, mostly those who were engineers. Then the X9 left for Iskar, after the brutes had made one of us fix the Automatic. As you can see, a lot of the brutes were left behind. The ship was to return for them, but it did

not come on the appointed time. The Iskarites on Cirees went mad, making raids into the hills just to kill. They lost a lot of guns on those raids, and many were destroyed when they did not know how to refill the radium charge. It's a good thing two of your party got us out of the cellar in time. We knew where to find guns."

"A good thing for me," laughed Dan. "Another minute and I might have been roasted!"

It was Dan's turn to tell their own chain of events. He ended: "The X9 landed badly on Iskar, and I think the brutes just decided not to return to this planet. Or maybe they were studying the problem. Anyway, it's a good thing we escaped from the machine jail and took the X9 on its fixed course."

"A good thing for all!" exclaimed the leader. "We can get our people down from the hills and round up the weaponless Iskarites. And you?"

Dan looked at Alix, at the clear eyes and smiling lips and knew the answer to that question.

THE END

REVOLT!

by **RONALD ADISON**

CHAPTER ONE

VENUS. Miles and miles of hot, stinking swampland, hellish forests of nightmarish shrubs and crawling beasts, a nauseating copper-red sun that scorched out your eyeballs . . .

And I had thought I would like Venus! As if a man had said he would enjoy a stay in hell. Because that was what Venus turned out to be—sheer, unrelieved hell.

Oh, I had walked into it with my eyes wide open. I knew—or thought I knew—what conditions were like on Venus. How the nights were as black as a bucket of coal tar, how the days seemed to stretch into infinity—an infinity composed of a blinding glare that crept through the thickest of sun-glasses and brought streams of sweat from every pore.

But it was five years ago when I offered to come out. I was just turned twenty-two, sound in wind and limb, possessing the required amount of intelligence and practical knowledge, and just itching to work as a pioneer upon another planet. In other words, like many youngsters of my age, the bug had bitten me. I was space-crazy.

Space-crazy! Hell, I must have really been crazy to come out to this God-forsaken hole millions of miles from good old Mother Earth—and just to act as overseer to a bunch of Venusian slave-miners.

Venus had been conquered now for fifteen years. Although perhaps “conquered” is hardly the word.

We just walked in without a speck of resistance. The Venusians practically waved the warring Earth space-ships in to land. No co-operation, though. Just an indifferent "make yourself welcome" attitude.

And the Earthmen certainly did make themselves welcome. At first, it looked as if the long voyage across space had proved worthless. There wasn't much point about conquering a planet that had nothing to offer. And at first glance that was the kind of planet Venus turned out to be.

But then—underneath those endless swamps, deep down into the planet's interior, was found something that made Venus the most precious planet in the system. Metal.

Just that. Nothing else. But what metal! A hundred times stronger than steel—and a hundred times more durable—it was a godsend to Earthmen who were trying to build space-ships that wouldn't crack-up so often and wouldn't tear themselves apart through external pressure in the heart of space. The metal found on Venus would make space travel incalculably safer—almost as safe, indeed, as driving an ordinary jetocar along a London road. And what is more, it was relatively easy to mine.

So far, so good. But there was one thing that puzzled me. The Venusians. Jim Sanders, I told myself more than once, plenty of those Venusians are just as intelligent as you are—maybe more so.

And yet—and yet when the spacemen arrived Venus was practically a bare planet. No cities, no real signs of habitation, no indication of any form of civilisation. The Venusians there were several millions of them—lived in scattered groups over the surface of the planet, their only dwellings being rough shacks made out of wood from the nearby forests.

Intelligent creatures living like primeval man did on Earth! They had much of science at their finger-tips, they had brains that could work out the most complicated mathematic equations, they had the means of building fine cities and ultra-modern equipment and a new, mighty civilisation—for they must have known of that

all-powerful metal which lay buried beneath their feet. But instead, they preferred living like brutes without the power of reasoning. It beat me.

I talked to a few of them about it every now and then—they had a pretty simple language once you had mastered the essential points, and their vocal organs were shaped much like ours—but they were rather reticent about the matter. You couldn't get anything out of them at all, in fact. They just stared at you blankly, and said that they never wanted to live any other way. Which could hardly be called a very satisfactory answer.

Naturally they didn't particularly wish to mine the metal—we called it zenophyte—but as it would take two or three thousand men to do it effectively, they had to be made to do it.

Their food all came from the forest, in the form of a kind of juicy, pulp-like plant which grew in abundance. Men were posted along the route to the forest armed with guns, and no Venusian was allowed to pass. Work—or starve, they were told. So not unnaturally, they chose to work.

Not exactly democratic, but it was the only solution. The metal could not be mined in any other way.

And so the Venusians on the part of the planet which had been picked as a site did our mining for us. There wasn't anything else they could do. They had to eat to live. Other Venusians tried to smuggle supplies through, but we soon got wise to that, and made sure our little settlement was thoroughly cut off from the rest of the planet.

Besides myself, there were only a dozen or so Earthmen on Venus. Just three of us were in charge of the actual mining operations—the big boss was Henry Slade, a harsh, unemotional spaceman who liked the feel of power and never hesitated to use it. It goes without saying that he was unpopular with the rest of us.

Carl Randson and myself, as his two assistants, had to face—and somehow swallow—more of his rampings and ragings than the rest of the outfit. And sometimes we got pretty fed up with it. Carl was a tall, rangy kind of

fellow, rarely anything but cheerful—unless Slade had been biting more than usual—and looking as if he would be more in place in the American West of two or three centuries ago. He had the appearance of being in the wrong job and even in the wrong period of time. But he was a likeable chap, and he and I got along together fine—though sometimes I wished he wouldn't be so darned cheerful over everything.

The rest of us on Venus were employed on the space-port which had been built—as a dispersal and arrival point for the cargo-ships that ploughed their way across the gulf to carry mighty loads of zenophyte back to Earth. It didn't take more than ten men to keep the space-port in working-order—the Venusians, of course, did all the loading.

As usual I was cursing the day I had been fool enough to sign a seven year contract to work on this ghastly pebble of space, and I looked moodily down at the production sheet for the day's work. Sweat trickled down between my sun-glasses, and my shirt stuck to my back as if it was held there by glue.

Carl Ranson entered, bubbling over with good humour. He looked as cool as a cucumber.

"Hi, Jim old boy! Slaving away merrily, I see. Where's the big cheese?" He thumped me heartily on the back. I winced.

"He's just gone down to the mine. Production level has dropped a fraction, and he's gone to find out why. I don't think he realises yet that the Venusians aren't robots."

Carl grunted. "He's a swine. Sometimes I'd like to grab him by his fat neck and sling him into the swamps. He'll find others of his kind slithering in the mud."

I looked at his frowning face reflectively for a moment. "Hell, this can wait"—I threw the production sheet on one side—"let's go down to the mine and see if Slade's coming any of his funny business. Those Venusians have been taking it from him all along the line, but there's

a limit to what even they can stand—and if he isn't careful they'll be tearing him to pieces."

"That wouldn't be a great loss," said Carl.

CHAPTER TWO

WE went out into the full glare of that awful Venusian sun. The air on Venus was heavy but breathable, and felt as hot as a baker's oven.

The main pit shaft was a couple of hundred yards ahead of us. We could see the burly figure of Slade bellowing and gesticulating by the pit head, almost drowning the sound of the pulleys as they clanked their way down and round the shaft.

He saw us and yelled out: "Hi!—you two. Come here!"

It was evident that we were already coming, but the almighty Henry Slade wanted us to hurry up.

"I expect he thinks we ought to break into a trot," growled Carl.

Slade glared at us as we reached him. "Took your time, didn't you?" He turned to me. "Sanders, you understand the lingo of these swine better than I do. Get some sense out of this devil, will you? I've been asking him for the last half-hour why the rate of production has gone down, and he gabbles back so fast that I can't understand a word he's saying."

I looked at the Venusian with whom Slade had been having his altercation. "All right, Joro, let's have it," I said.

Joro was the foreman over the whole of the Venusian miners. During the fourteen or fifteen years since the mines were established on Venus they were run practically all the time by the Venusians themselves. Earthmen could not work in such an alien climate, and all they

could do—or wanted to do—was sit back and watch, or have an office job like myself. Venusians had even been appointed to hand out the rations of the succulent plant which was their sole food.

Joro said: "We have come to a difficult section of the metal. It is embedded far more deeply into the surrounding rock than we have before encountered; it will probably be several days before we can work completely through it."

I translated this to Slade. His bull-like face broke into a scowl. "That's a lot of piffle," he burst out angrily. "This is just an excuse they've concocted for slacking. Tell him until the production figures reach their normal proportion they'll all be on half-rations."

"Do you think that's wise?" said Carl. "They won't be able to reach a full output, anyway, if they haven't got enough energy to do it."

"I wasn't talking to you," grated Slade. "Keep your opinions until they are asked for." He turned back to me. "Do as I say."

I shrugged, and told Joro of Slade's threat, the main point of which he must have gathered already—the Venusian knew enough of our language for that purpose. But his wrinkled, grey-green face remained passive.

Like all Venusians, he was only about five feet in height, and his skin was entirely that weird greyish-green in colour. He was, like us, a biped, but his arms were proportionally much longer than ours, dangling down almost to his knees. He was rather squat, and resembled more than anything one of those little Egyptian idols that can even nowadays be picked up in the antique shops on Earth.

But the effect, as a whole, was not repulsive. Most people, before seeing a member of an alien race for the first time, somehow imagine that they will find it rather sickening in appearance. However, this rarely proves to be the case. Something unutterably different from anything one has ever seen before does not often seem horrible—on the contrary, it is usually very interesting, and sometimes even fascinating.

And the Venusians, both physically and as a complete race, were indeed fascinating—more especially collectively. As such, they were an enigma. Why, for instance, did they live like savages when they were so intelligent? Why didn't they put up a scrap of resistance to the invading Earth ships fifteen years previously? Why, even now, were they so amenable, and never rebelled against the harsh treatment they sometimes received? These were all questions to which I should dearly like to know the answers. They were a very strange race, and I for one couldn't understand the workings of their minds one little bit.

Joro stood before me, seemingly indifferent to what I had told him. Then he said: "I will tell them of your decision. It is a hard one, and it will mean much suffering. We need food to sustain us even more than you do. But it will still not prove possible to make faster progress on this section of the metal. We are already doing our best. I am very sorry your leader thinks we are not working as hard as we could, but he is wrong in his opinion. I can only repeat that we are doing all we are able."

"Humph!" grunted Slade, when I told him what Joro had said. "Never pay any attention to the word of a Venusian, Sanders. Naturally they'll say they're working harder than they really are. It pays them to, especially if we're fools enough to believe it. But I'm not fool enough, and I think they'll change their tune soon, after two or three days on half rations." He chuckled grimly.

I looked at him, and wondered that any man could be so heartless towards anyone of any race. I tried to keep the anger out of my voice. "I think you are making a big mistake. It won't do any good, anyway, even if you are right. They'll be too weak to do their work properly." Carl nodded in agreement.

Slade glowered at us. "It strikes me that you two are getting a bit big for your boots," he said angrily. "You're here to carry out my orders, not to give some of your own. I know a hell of a sight more about these green lizards

than either of you—I was on one of those space-ships that landed here fifteen years ago, and I've been here ever since. And after all that time I know 'em like the back of my hand. They're liars and, they don't like work. But they're going to like work or starve. They can take their choice. There's plenty more Venusians to take their place if need be."

He waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal at Joro and stumped off towards the building.

Carl and I looked at his retreating back. "The swine," gritted Carl, "the rotten, filthy swine! What does he know about the Venusians? They're just machines to him—machines to fetch out that lousy metal without a minute's rest and at the same rate of progress all the time. He can't see that their bodies need a certain amount of respite the same as anybody else's."

"To hell with him," I said. "I'm going to see that the Venusians get their normal rations, and I'm quite willing to face the consequences, if he finds out."

"Me too," replied Carl. He grinned. "I hope he does find out. It'll give me the chance to let him have a piece of my mind. I've been dying to tell him what I really think of him ever since I came here."

At that moment there was a dull roaring overhead. We looked up, and saw the vast shape of a space-ship swooping in to land.

"Hello," said Carl. "The cargo-ship is a bit early. They must be using up that xenophyte at a pretty rapid rate. Come on, let's go and hear all the latest news. I hope they've brought one or two letters for me—haven't heard from the folks for quite a time now."

We walked towards the distant bulk of the cargo-ship as it lay sprawled like a huge metal colossus in the confines of the space-port.

CHAPTER THREE

SLADE had heard the ship come in and he was there just before us. As we walked up he was talking to the Captain, who had then descended. His pig-like eyes glinted at us. "So you don't want the poor Venusians to strain themselves, eh?" he growled. "The Captain here has just told me that the xenophyte is required to build a complete fleet of ships—and they've used up all the supplies we've sent them, with the result that all work is at a standstill until we can send them more of the stuff. That's right, isn't it, Captain?"

"Yep," was the laconic reply.

I said: "Well, we've got four and a half tons of it in the storage sheds. That ought to be enough to keep them going for quite a time."

Slade answered impatiently: "You don't understand, Sanders. These space-ships which are being built are top priority. All other types of space-ships are being discarded—they are now out-of-date. This metal will be used to construct every ship made from now on. The Earth Council decided this at a special meeting a couple of weeks ago. And they want us to speed up production by twice as much again."

"What!" Carl gasped. "That's damned impossible. The Venusians are working at full stretch as it is."

"That's a matter of opinion. Anyway, I'm going to use another couple of thousand of Venusians—we'll rope them in from other parts of the planet—and work them in shifts, day and night. We should be able to make it all right in that way."

Thus calmly did Slade talk about employing two thousand more Venusians—"roping them in," as if they were a lot of cattle. It sickened me, and I could see Carl felt the same way. Hell, we had already gone far enough

with the Venusians—it was their planet, and we were working them as nothing less than slaves. I still couldn't see how they kept taking it, without once rebelling.

Carl said: "All right. It's your funeral. I don't think the Venusians are going to take very kindly to this new stunt."

Slade sneered. "Still worrying about them rebelling, aren't you? I've been here for fifteen years, and they haven't shown signs of doing so once—"

"It doesn't mean they never will," interrupted Carl. "I don't think they can stand much more—they've just about taken the limit."

Slade laughed. "Believe me, they haven't got the guts to rebel. Besides, where would it get them if they did? We've got guns, they've got nothing. We've a couple of space-cruisers that could knock hell out of them in half an hour—we could burn the lot of them to a frazzle before they had time to lift a finger. Don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

Carl shrugged hopelessly. He looked at me, and we turned to go back to the mine. Might as well let Joro know the worst straight away.

But the voice of the Captain detained us. "Hey," he said. "I thought Venus was completely flat—all swamps and forests—not even a solitary stone on the surface?"

"So it is," I said. "The surface of Venus is all vegetable—there isn't anything mineral at all until you dig down at least a quarter of a mile."

The Captain looked puzzled. "Then what about that cave I saw on my way in to land?"

"Cave?" echoed Carl. "There are no caves on Venus."

"Well, what I saw wasn't a mirage! I was still pretty high up, and travelling at a speed, so I only got a quick look at it. But it was certainly some kind of opening in the ground—and there were one or two Venusians walking towards it. They didn't appear to be at all anxious to be seen, either."

Carl and I exchanged glances. "We'd better investigate this," I said, frowning.

Even Slade looked a trifle concerned. "Probably nothing," he grunted. "Still, no harm will be done by having a look."

"I'll show you where it is," offered the Captain.

"No," said Slade. "You'll be needed here to help with the loading. Let them go on their own. You can give them a rough idea where you saw it, can't you?"

"Sure. It was just outside the forest over there"—he pointed—"and on the other side of it was a spot on which it looked as if a village had once rested. Seemed to have been destroyed by fire."

"I know where you mean," I said. "It's only two or three miles away. And I'm certain there wasn't a cave there."

"I tell you, I saw it," the Captain insisted.

Slade said: "Go and take a look. It won't do to take any chances. Take the 'Firefly'—and better make sure the rocket-guns are in working order."

Carl grinned sarcastically. "You aren't worried, by any chance?"

"Worried, my eye! I don't suppose for a minute you'll find anything. It's just a precautionary measure, that's all."

Carl laughed out loud. "You know, Slade, underneath all that false bravado of yours, you're scared stiff that the Venusians might one day decide to fight instead of just take your rotten orders."

Slade whitened. His knuckles bunched like lumps of iron on his fists. "That's calling me a coward, Randson," he said, his voice shaking with anger. "I could break you for it if I liked to mention it in my report. Insulting a superior officer carries a heavy penalty."

"Sure it does," said Carl. "So do little things like putting Venusians on half-rations and drinking alcohol whilst on duty. Think it over, Slade. I shouldn't be too hasty about making out that report."

Slade swore, and lifted his fist. Carl stuck his chin

out. "Go ahead. There are two witnesses. It would be goodbye to your pension, wouldn't it?"

With an effort Slade lowered his arm. "I won't forget this, Randson, by God I won't."

Carl grinned at him, and gave me a wink. "Let's go, Jim. We'd better set his mind at ease about that Venusian rebellion he's worrying over."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE "Firefly" was one of the two armed space-cruisers we kept on the planet just in case there was ever any trouble. Two was felt to be quite sufficient to control the quiescent Venusians, and as a matter of fact they were practically rusting in the hangars, for rarely were they used apart from a very occasional survey flight. Fifteen years of unruffled resignation on the part of the inhabitants of the planet had made us rather lackadaisical about sending out patrols. It seemed so unnecessary.

"Don't you think you went a bit too far, Carl?" I asked, as we walked up to the shining streamlined hull of the "Firefly."

"No. He can't do anything about it. The Company on Earth aren't so unemotional as to let the thing ride if I told them about Slade wanting to put the Venusians on half-rations. And if I let go that he drank like a fish . . . well, we'd have a new boss here on Venus in no time."

"I suppose you're right. But all the same, I should watch your step from now on. Slade doesn't like being crossed, and he'll be after your blood."

"I can look after myself," said Carl confidently.

We climbed on board. As senior, it was my job to handle the controls. But if need be, Carl could do it just

as efficiently. There wasn't anything very complicated about the controls of a space-ship—most of them were easy to handle, and responded instantly to the proper touch.

Carl settled himself down beside me—the “Firefly” was only a two-seater, but in consequence very fast and carrying a deadly armament.

I opened the locker and took out a couple of jet guns—powerful, snub-nosed affairs which had a terrific velocity and could be practically depended upon to kill anything up to the range of three hundred yards.

I glanced at Carl. “Slip one of these in your belt—just in case,” I said.

Carl grinned. He had by this time recovered both his temper and his composure. “No need to sound so grim about it, Jim. The probability is that we'll leave those guns in our belts untouched for the whole of the trip. You sound as if we were going to meet a murderous band of cut-throats.”

I switched the “Firefly” over to the take-off position, and looked thoughtfully out at the runway. “Maybe I am taking this too seriously,” I mused, half to myself. “But the whole thing seems rather queer to me—a mysterious cave springing up from nowhere, a party of Venusians anxious not to be seen . . . I can't figure it out.”

“Don't forget you're only going on what the Captain told us,” Carl reminded me. “And he was still at a considerable height and travelling none too slowly. I shouldn't worry overmuch about it—my guess is that we'll be back here inside a couple of hours with nothing to report.”

“Let's hope you're right,” I said. The “Firefly” throbbed into life, there was a moment of slight tension, and then we were airborne.

Below us, spread out like a vast, yielding green carpet, were the swamps of Venus. Endless, steaming with an inner life, interjected only with forests and jungles that stood out with vivid clearness against the surrounding flatness of the planet.

Within a matter of seconds we were over the spot described to us by the Captain of the cargo-ship. I looked out. There was the edge of the forest ; there was the burned-out village. But nothing else, not a speck or a sign of anything unusual.

"All right, where's this cave?" taunted Carl, jogging me with his arm.

My eyes swept again the stretch of green below me. "Doesn't seem to be one," I said. "But we'd better go down and make sure."

Carl laughed. "Cautious devil, aren't you? It's as evident as the nose on your face that there isn't a cave down there. Still"—he grimaced expressively—"if you must go down I suppose you must. But watch out you don't put us in a part of the swamp that will swallow us up. I don't fancy providing a dinner for a pile of pea-green filth."

"That's all right," I said reassuringly. "I'll land in the clearing where the village once stood—that should be solid enough."

The "Firefly" swooped downward, and the clearing loomed larger and larger, seemingly tilted like a massive sloping roof.

Carefully I eased the ship back a little, switched the lever on to "landing," and cut the power by three-quarters. The "Firefly" dropped slowly but with deadly accuracy towards the clearing—like one of those old-fashioned helicopters.

I swung the door open and stepped out. Silence greeted us ; the silence of a village long dead.

It was hellishly hot, like everything else on Venus. Perspiration oozed from my forehead almost as soon as I got out of the ship. In my first three months on this accursed planet, before I had relatively got used to the intense heat, I had lost almost three stone. Venus wasn't a place for Earthmen.

"Shall we start looking?" asked Carl, drawing out his jet-gun with mock ferocity and glaring about him with an expression of grim purposefulness.

I laughed. "Don't act the goat, you fool—and put

that damn thing up. It doesn't seem very likely that we'll have to use it."

We trudged away from the ruined village towards the outline of the forest which lay before us. The air was heavy and fetid, and the ground beneath our feet squelched and hissed, and gave a little as our boots sank into it. But years on the planet had given us an insight as to whether the ground would support us or not—there were unmistakable signs if it was unsafe, and those signs were absent from this particular stretch of swamp.

"The hell with it!—there's nothing here," said Carl disgustedly. "We've been sent on a proper fool's errand. Let's get back, this darned heat is getting on my nerves."

"It is pretty hot," I agreed. "All right—it's pretty evident we'll find nothing. Let's go."

We turned, and then stopped in incredulous amazement. I drew in my breath sharply, hardly able to believe my own eyes.

"Good—God," half-whispered Carl.

Before us stood—Joro.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE shock of seeing Joro there, miles from the pithead which he was supposed to supervise, rendered us speechless for a few moments.

And before we had wholly recovered, Joro spoke: "You are surprised to see me?"

"You're telling me!" said Carl feelingly. "How the heck did you get here?"

"I walked. It is only two and a half miles from the mine, Earth-distance. Immediately after you left to board the space-ship"—he gestured towards the distant "Firefly"—"your leader returned and asked me if I

knew anything about a cave. Of course, I replied that I didn't, and he seemed satisfied with my answer. Then he told me of his decision to increase the output of the mine by employing more Venusians. I tried to preserve an outward calm, but I realised that this was—as you say—the last straw. My people have carried the heavy burden which has been inflicted on them uncomplainingly for many years. They have worked and suffered that Earthmen might profit. But now they will work and suffer no more—what your leader has asked is too much to ask of anyone. We will, I know, rebel. And that is why I am here."

Carl and I stared uncomprehendingly at the small, shrivelled Venusian. What he had said was so unbelievable that we failed to understand the import of it at once. For how could the Venusians rebel? They were weak, helpless creatures against the might of the weapons we could use, if necessary.

I said: "Don't be so silly. You can't rebel. We'd wipe you out inside an hour, the lot of you."

"Are you so sure?" asked Joro.

There was an air of confidence about his voice that I didn't like. But I said: "Of course I'm sure. You couldn't even make a fight of it. Be sensible."

"I am being perfectly sensible," said Joro. He inclined his head and gestured with his arm to the right. "In there you will find the answer to my doubtless surprising attitude."

We followed his gaze, and saw—the cave.

Perhaps to call it a cave would be somewhat misleading, but that was certainly what it would look like from the air. It seemed to be made of some kind of silvery substance that glittered in the sun, sparkling and twinkling as the rays caught on its surface.

"Zenophyte!" breathed Carl.

yes, that was it. Zenophyte. The infinitesimally-valuable metal for which we had to dig deep down into the bowels of Venus. And here it was, shimmering on the surface of the planet, its sides forming an arched

entrance to a yawning black pit, which the eye could not fathom.

Carl and I looked at each other. It was evident that Joro wished us to enter the cave. What lay beyond?—that was the question mirrored in our eyes. Then we both remembered the guns in our belts, and felt safe and secure.

“Let’s go,” said Carl.

We would squash therebellion here and now. Whatever was in the cave couldn’t be a match for a couple of jet guns. If necessary we could blast our way out. But here was a chance to end any feeble attempt at revolt—without shedding blood, if possible, but by the use of force if there proved to be no other alternative.

The cave loomed before us. We entered—first Joro, then Carl and myself.

Immediatley the blackness was broken. A beam of light appeared ahead of us, and spread and widened as it approached. Within a matter of seconds it had filled the whole area with light.

We looked around, and found ourselves in a long, narrow passage, which inclined downwards in a gradually descending slope.

Suddenly we heard a rumbling behind us. Carl whirled round. “Back, Jim!” he yelled. The entrance was closing rapidly behind us.

But it was hopeless. Long before we could reach it, it shut with a crash.

Joro spoke: “Do not be alarmed. It is merely a precautionary measure—to hide the entrance from any outside view. Nobody would now suspect the existence of a cave—you are quite safe, no harm will come to you. That I promise.”

He led the way downwards. This was fantastic! Here was unmistakable evidence of civilisation—but I had been on Venus for five years, and in that time not one speck or sign of it had I come across before. The Venusians, although intelligent, had seemed to live entirely like brute beasts. But it looked as if I would radically have to alter my former views. Obviously they

were far from being as backward as they had led us to believe.

Carl nudged me. "Keep a tight grip on your gun," he whispered. "Joro seems friendly enough, but if the worst comes to the worst we might have to fight our way out."

Then the passage broadened suddenly. We came to a door, blocking the end of it. As we drew near it slid noiselessly open.

Joro stood aside. "Enter," he said. Rather suspiciously, and with our hands on our gun-belts, we did as we were asked.

Inside were—machines. Dozens of them. Some large, some small, all beautifully-made and with an air of definite purpose about them. They filled the whole room, their sleek streamlined shapes bulging and spiralling. The sight was incredible.

Half-a-dozen Venusians were also in the room, moving in and out between the machines, industriously checking things here and repairing things there.

"These are the last remnants of our civilisation," said Joro. There was a hint of pride about his voice.

"Last?" I asked, puzzledly.

"Yes. Once we had a great and wonderful civilisation, peopled by a mighty race. It is a long story—too long to tell. But I intend to enlighten you on much of it. To begin with—"

Carl suddenly uttered a roar of rage. "Our guns!" he yelled. "Where are our guns?"

I looked down at my gun belt. It was empty.

A faint smile seemed to flit across Joro's wrinkled old face. "They have been removed," he said. "Just in case of accidents."

"Removed?" I echoed, stupidly.

"An elementary process. Involving the alteration of the molecules of your guns into a microscopic, harmless element which I suppose is now drifting through the air around us. It was quite simple."

"But—but where—?" I began, gropingly.

"Where did the power to do this come from? It

emanated from the machine in front of you. It was trained on you from the moment my friends here knew I was bringing you down. You see, it would be an unnecessary risk to leave you in possession of fire arms. You might be tempted to use them."

"Really?" said Carl, in an attempt to get back some of his old good-humouredness.

"However, I brought you here to tell you why the Venusians intend to rebel. And to do that fully I will have to go back two thousand years in our history. It will help you to understand better what I will tell you afterwards."

Then the lights went out. For a moment I was alarmed. But suddenly, on the near wall, appeared a square of light, which gradually took the form of a picture—a moving-picture, like those ancient movies we used to have on Earth.

The scene was undoubtedly Venus. But not Venus as it was to-day, not remotely like the Venus of the present. This was an entirely different Venus!

CHAPTER SIX

HERE was a great civilisation. Huge cities, towering skyscrapers bigger than those in America, streaming traffic moving at high speeds, people clad in rich, colourful clothes . . .

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" said Joro, half-sadly. "That was the Venus of two thousand years ago, when you Earthmen were little better than savages."

I was gripped by the magnificence of it all . . . this mighty panorama spread out vividly before me, forming a civilisation far in advance of even the Earth of the present day.

"But—what happened?" I managed to say.

"Watch," said Joro.

For a few moments after he spoke the scene from the remote past remained the same.

And then—horror!—ghastly, destroying horror! A red light appeared in the sky, and fell in its crimson mantle upon the city. It touched the top of the highest building. The building shuddered, trembled, and collapsed, like a huge landslide of flaming rocks—leaping and crashing to the streets below, reduced to smoking, scorching ruins.

Like ants the people ran. And like ants they perished, shrivelling into nothingness as the wave of heat and the tumbling masonry reached them.

Soon the whole city was ablaze from end to end—one huge red pile of ruins, flames shooting upwards to the sky. Annihilated. Wrecked. Shattered. Everything and everywhere perished and dead.

The lights went on again. I found myself trembling. Beads of moisture were adhered to my forehead. Never had I seen such wholesale destruction before. It had shaken me to the very depths of my soul.

"Horrible, horrible!" Carl, white-faced, was muttering.

"Yes, it was horrible," said Joro. "But it was only the beginning."

"The beginning?" I cried.

"It was the first blow in a war which lasted only a few short weeks—but which destroyed every trace of civilisation and practically all life on the planet. I will show you another scene, set a few weeks later."

The lights dimmed and disappeared. Once more we saw the surface of Venus. But it was a vastly changed surface. Everywhere was blackened and scorched. There was no signs of life. Just endless ruins—and drifting ashes.

Then the earth heaved. It was an awe-inspiring sight. Parts of the crust were torn away and sent billowing into the sky. Streaming jets of lava appeared, twisting and

spiralling upwards, and then descending again like a cloudburst of molten rain.

As we watched in fascination Joro spoke: "The events which had occurred on the surface proved too much for the inside of the planet. It was jerked into activity by the intense heat which was forced in through the crust. This heat caused explosions deep down, explosions which by natural laws expanded upwards, finally bursting through the crust and sending showers of hot lava on to the planet itself."

We watched the surface of Venus breaking and crumbling, remnants of buildings falling into huge craters which suddenly opened in the earth and swallowed them like a child swallows candy.

Then the picture faded. Mercifully the lights came on and we were back in the world of the present, having witnessed a terrible series of events which had happened two thousand years ago.

"So Venus was destroyed?" said Carl.

"Almost entirely. And by our own folly—the dreadful folly of war. But a few of us survived. The war had been foreseen, and special shelters had been built. Many of them were of course destroyed by the unexpected upheaval of the surface, but one or two remained intact. This was one of them. My ancestors lived here, amongst all that remained of Venusian civilisation"—he gestured to the machines around him—"for generation upon generation, whilst above them the surface gradually cooled. Venus was like a planet just born, and it took time for the lava to settle and form itself into the swamps with which Venus is now covered."

"But how about all this scientific apparatus?" I said. "Surely when you did eventually return to the surface you could have used it to re-build your civilisation?"

Joro smiled. "That was certainly its original purpose. But it was felt that a return to so-called civilisation would lead inevitably to yet another war, with all the resources of science at hand to destroy our planet a second time.

So we decided to remain in a primitive state, living without the aid of science and civilisation as you know it. And for two thousand years we were very happy in the existence we had chosen for ourselves."

"And then?" asked Carl.

"And then you Earthmen came. We were unable to put up any resistance—we had no weapons, no space-ships, nothing. So for the first time in our planet's history we felt the iron hand of the conqueror—an alien conqueror—and it was not pleasant. But for fifteen years we bore it—the majority of us because we did not think we could do anything else but bear it. However, there were a few of us who knew of the existence of these caves and the wonderful instruments within them—for from generation to generation only a few of us had been told of their existence, in case things should ever become unbearably difficult in the life we had chosen for ourselves."

"You mean you voluntarily returned to the primitive state?" Carl asked, incredulously.

Joro gave a wry smile. "Science and advanced civilisation left us little to thank them for. You must remember that our planet was almost completely destroyed by the instruments of science. We could not afford to take the chance of such a thing happening again. So we 'forgot' about the machines stored here which could restore us to our former mode of life. It was a hard decision to make, but at the time it was thought best. And since then, only a chosen number of us has ever known that there were machines hidden away that could bring back those days of long ago."

"And you intend to go on living like this?" I asked.

The answer was emphatic. "No, we do not." Joro's eyes clouded a little. "It has all been a mistake—a natural mistake, but all the same a very regrettable one. Nothing—not even a lasting peace—can atone for civilisation and all the wonders which can come out of it. For the past two thousand years we have struggled like brutes of the jungle whilst we had reasoning power even higher than of Earthmen. All for the cause of peace. But I believe we have learned by the ghastly havoc which

took place long ago, and if we built our world up once again we will not destroy it a second time. And thus we are going to use these machines for their proper purpose, and not leave them here for ever in idleness." Joro drew himself up proudly. "It took you Earthmen to restore our self-respect—you drove us too hard and too far. And now we are going to remove your yoke and have Venus for the Venusians once more."

There was a silence. Joro, we knew, was speaking for the whole of his race.

"You are right," I said at last. "This is your planet. We have no business here. But unfortunately many Earthmen will not see it that way. You will have to fight for your planet. Liberty will not be freely given to you."

Joro smiled. "We fully realise that. But we do not believe we will have to fight so hard as you think we will. At this moment your leader is being told that he is required to free my people from the mines. He is also being told that we do not want to fight, and that certain Earthmen can remain on Venus for the purpose of trading. So much metal for so much material we may need to build our world anew. We hope he will listen to reason. We would like a peaceful settlement."

Carl laughed bitterly. "Slade make a peaceful settlement? Not on your life! He will fight, make no mistake about that."

"We have given him forty-eight hours in which to decide," said Joro. "In the meantime you will remain here as hostages. But have no fear. You will be quite safe."

Carl and I hardly heard his closing remarks. Forty-eight hours!—that was just time enough for a fleet of ships from Earth to be sent to deal with the rebels! It looked as if there was going to be War with a vengeance . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

It seemed a long wait inside that huge room in which was enclosed Venusian science from two thousand years ago. But gradually time passed . . . a whole day, a day and a half, almost two days . . .

Calmly Joro switched on a screen. "Your friends are about due now," he said.

"You mean that you knew ships would be sent from Earth?" I gasped.

"Of course. You surely do not underestimate us? The entrance to the cave is open. They will be able to spot our whereabouts immediately."

The screen showed the surface of the planet, and portions of the sky above it. There appeared a speck in the sky. Then another—and a third, a fourth . . . the space-ships had arrived!

Their purpose, we knew, was to wipe out this nest of Venusians who had the effrontery to want their planet for their own. We knew, also, that our lives would count for nothing. We had walked into this trap with our eyes wide open; now we must take the consequences, and perish with the Venusians.

The ships—fully a dozen of them—swooped lower. They had spotted the cave.

I held my breath. These minutes could be my last. And I was scared—make no bones about it—no man likes the thought of being killed, especially when not being able to hit back. Those men up there were fellow Earthmen. They were seeking to destroy people of an alien race. Even if I could, I would not raise a finger against them.

They tore towards us, and soon their vast shapes filled the screen. I shut my eyes, and waited . . .

Nothing happened. I opened my eyes in amazement.

By this time I had expected to be dead. Carl grinned at me. "Surprise!—they didn't open fire."

"They did," said Joro.

We gaped at him.

"In more or less the same way as your guns were disintegrated, the armament in those ships were rendered useless. The crews, however, are quite safe—the landing apparatus is not interfered with—and doubtless they are wondering why they failed to blow us into extinction."

And they were. Joro, Carl and I walked to meet them as the space-ships, one by one, landed near the cave.

The crews alighted, scratching their heads. To say they were flabbergasted was an understatement. It must have been the quickest and least bloodiest war in the history of the universe.

But the Venusians were looked at with a new respect. People who had a trick like that probably had more potent ones up their sleeves to use if necessary. It wouldn't do to trifle with them, when they could quite plausibly annihilate men in the same way as they had annihilated armaments. This was a case for diplomacy . .

* * *

And diplomacy duly paid off. The situation was discussed at high levels, was passed on to even higher levels, and finally the Venusians were given their independence. No other course was open, anyway.

Not a drop of blood was spilt in the process, the thing was discussed in the friendliest possible manner. And trade relations were opened with Venus, who began their tremendous task of building a civilisation which could compare to that of two thousand years ago.

The metal zenophyte, was of course the remains of that civilisation of the former Venus. And we were allowed Venusians to mine it for us under much better conditions than were allowed them formerly under Slade.

Henry Slade, incidentally, was gently but firmly relieved from his post. The Venusians refused to allow him to stay. Where he is now I neither know nor care—but

wherever he is, I shouldn't think a whiskey bottle is very far from him. I still laugh when I remember that bewildered look on his face when the Captain of the space-fleet told him he had decided to take the matter to higher sources before fighting against the Venusians.

Well, there isn't much else. Carl and I remained on Venus—somehow I didn't like the thought of leaving after all!—and were in charge of trading operations with the Venusians.

Joro is a kind of Prime Minister over all Venus, his wrinkled face looking much happier now. He had achieved his heart's desire—Venus for the Venusians. Which is as it should be. And believe me, Earth doesn't lose by it. The Venusian revolt—short and bloodless—proved a good thing for all concerned.

THE END

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