

TODAY'S SCIENCE FICTION—TOMORROW'S FACT •

AUG. 25c

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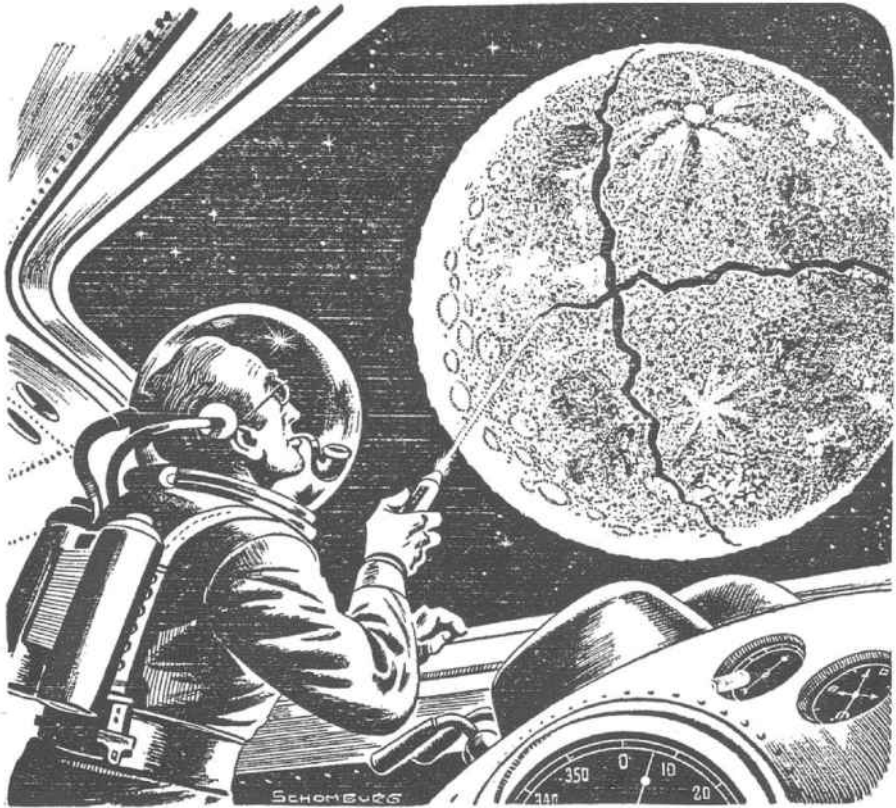
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and **THE HOUR OF THE MORTALS**

a novelet by Kendell Foster Crossen



MAJOR VENTURE and the MISSING SATELLITE

By CHARLES E. FRITCH

*All the World loves a hero, but when
everybody tried to get into the act, the hero
backed off to a world of his own!*

JOE STALLING relaxed behind the controls of his convertible space cruiser as it leaped through the space Earth and peered with a mild degree of interest through his hom-rimmed glasses at the white-grey surface of the Moon coming to meet him.

It was like a mass of thick, dirty dough, an unpalatable place for all but the four persons who lived there, and Joe Stalling sat watching it grow in the forward window and puffed contemplative clouds of smoke at it from the curved pipe he held firmly between tight, colorless lips.

An ordinary man might have been frightened, if not of the bleak desolation of the Moon itself, at least of the four who made it their home of Sam Galileo and his three companions who were not entirely human. But Joe Stalling was not an ordinary man. He was a detective, a man used to facing danger, and he was confident that he could bluff his way out of the situation if the four were there.

But the four were not there. Joe Stalling knew that because he was a friend of Abner Burney, the Marshal of the Planet Patrol, who was a friend of Major Venture and the three non-human inhabitants of the satellite, and with a little patience and a few atomic beers most any secret could be pried from the good Marshal. Joe knew the four were away on some alien world, doing the good deeds for which they were

famous and for which each had been awarded the honorary rank of Space Eagle, the highest award that could be made by the Boy Scouts of Sol.

Joe Stalling's small eyes sparkled behind the thick-lensed glasses, and he smiled through a cloud of smoke. With the four Venturemen away, it would be easy. All he'd have to do was avoid any traps they had left behind to embarrass intruders, and then he'd be set for life. No more detecting for him after that. He had always had a private eye bent in the direction of making money, and he had hit upon a stunt that was sure-fire. All it took was a little courage and a lot of brass, and Joe was convinced he had them in those proportions.

He made his landing with a predetermined insolence, stopping before the very doors of the citadel he was to invade. For a minute he sat there, puffing on his S-curved pipe, surveying the rusting, rectangular structure that leaned slightly to one side. It had tilted early in its life, and the defect had not been corrected by the Venturemen, who saved face by claiming they had intended it that way for their own secret purpose. Joe flipped the fishbowl lid of his spacesuit into place, and immediate black clouds of smoke filled the inside of the plastic bubble. He quickly adjusted a knob on his suit, and the smoke cleared away. Joe Stalling breathed in the freshened air, satisfied that the

smoke smoke from the pipe still in his mouth would be carried away quickly and efficiently and fresh air substituted. And now he was ready.

HE OPENED the door, and the air rushed out in a swift gush that blew white-powdered dust upward. He clambered from the spaceship, his movements clumsy from the bulky spacesuit and the light gravity. He was a detective, not a spaceman, and the forced clumsiness annoyed him to the extent that he puffed furiously at the curved pipe and felt doubly annoyed when the conditioning unit labored in its efforts to clear the helmet.

Joe Stalling went to the doorway of the tilted structure and found that the door was locked. He rang the doorbell, glancing in quiet amusement at the unworn Welcome mat at his feet. Of course no one answered, and he would have been greatly surprised if someone had; it was just a formality. He waited a moment and then he drew out his service blaster and knocked the door in with a bolt of energy. Replacing the blaster, he walked in and stumbled over the first of the Venturemen's traps. Joe didn't bother to replace the tin cans which had fallen from the string stretched across the doorway. He went on and encountered the second barrier, a wide band of flour spread before the inner door.

Joe Stalling paused for a moment in deep admiration for the ingenuity

of the Venturemen. Ordinarily, one would expect electric eyes, recorders, electronic barriers. But this was something the average person would not be prepared for. Even the detective would not have known of it had he not pried the information from Abner Burney, who with Jane Crandall was one of Major Venture's few close friends.

His feet made deep impressions in the flour as he crossed it unhesitatingly. What did it matter if a record of his footprints were left? No one would ever find it. Laughing as if at a private joke, he went into the laboratory.

The laboratory took up most of the Space in the structure, and machines and lab benches and bottled chemicals took up much of the space in the laboratory. Joe Stalling ignored the chemical part of the lab and turned his attention to the machines.

He knew just what he was looking for, but there were so many machines that the finding of it was not easy. At last he pulled it from a cobwebbed corner, blew dust from it, and with a cry of exultation held it in the sunlight streaming through a window.

It looked like an ordinary two-celled flashlight, except there were hundreds of minute buttons embedded in one side of the cylinder. His hands itched as his fingers brushed the buttons, but he forced himself to be cautious, to recall the

operation of the machine as he had, read it from the supposedly secret files in the Planet Patrol office—files from which even Marshal Burney was barred.

He pointed the thing at a huge lab bench in one corner of the room, pressed buttons with infinite precision. A shaft of light sliced out and cut the bench neatly in half. He pressed more buttons. The ray stabbed out again, but this time the two sections rejoined, welded into a solid piece as before.

Behind his thick-lensed glasses, Joe Stalling's eyes glinted in wild triumph, and clouds of exultant smoke poured from the pipe in his helmet.

He ran from the room. In a few minutes he was aloft in space, the top of his convertible space cruiser down. He banked sharply, and pointed the cylinder. A ray of light leaped out, and a long vertical crack appeared in the Moon's surface. He played the light horizontally, and another crack came.

Laughing between teeth firmly clenched on his pipe, Joe Stalling headed for Earth. Behind him, the Moon had split into four pieces.

SEVERAL days later the Orange Peel—the Venturemen's spaceship—returned to the Earth orbit. It was called the Orange Peel because it was painted a deep orange and resembled an orange peel.

"Hot ziggity," said Ergo the android, peering from a window at the green planet. "It'll be great to be home, to see Earth women again."

"Bah!" Crab the robot's heavy voice boomed into the stillness of the control room. "That's all you think about. And you are an android!" He glared at Ergo.

"Maybe if you were even a little human," Ergo accused, "you'd have some affection for such things."

To the uninitiated, it was a remarkable thing to watch Ergo talk, or even to watch him listen. When he was accidentally created in the Moon laboratory by Major Venture's father who was trying to mix a bromo seltzer but got hold of the wrong chemicals, several minor mistakes had been made in Ergo's construction. His vocal chords, for one thing, were located close to his ears, with the result that he used his ears for talking instead of listening, and they flapped like lips opening and closing when he talked. In order to hear, the android had to leave his mouth open to collect the sounds, and often his attentiveness was understandably mistaken for open-mouthed bewilderment.

"At least," wailed the robot, who resented any implication that he had not human feelings, "I wasn't born in a vat of messy, smelly chemicals."

"Aw, your mudder's a garbage can," Ergo retorted uncharitably.

Actually, Crab's mother was an erector set, but the dig hit home.

"Sam," the robot's electronic eyes pleaded with the only human of the four. "Sam, make him stop."

"Okay, you two," the Earthman said, "shaddup!"

Sam Galileo, known to the universe as Major Venture, turned to the brain, Simon Simple.

"Those veil dancers on Alpha Centauri were really hot stuff, weren't they?"

"Indeed, they were, Samuel," Simon answered metallically. "Almost makes me wish I were human again."

The Prodigal Son -----

EVER since Captain Future went to his reward on the special asteroids reserved for space rovers, there have been loud lamentations from faithful fans who wanted him resuscitated, or at least anthologized.

We have so far resisted these blandishments on the grounds that a revival of Cap Future would be a movement back toward the Ice Age of science fiction—don't throw that! But anyway have a look at Major Venture. You may detect certain resemblances, certain familiarities to someone you know. And we'll be disappointed if you don't get a chuckle or two out of his misadventures.

—*The Editor*

SIMON SIMPLE had once been a human, like Sam. But that was a long time ago, before he had gotten his tie caught in that electronic glasswasher at the saloon where he worked. The results might have been catastrophic had not Sam Galileo's father stopped by for a quick one. Almost without thinking, the elder Galileo had operated on Simon Simple, whom he had stretched out on the bar, and quickly removed the man's brain with a forked stirring stick from a Tom Collins. Not certain of what to do with the soggy mass, he had thrust it into a nearby cuspidor, which had

been Simon's home ever since.

Refinements had been added during the years —things such as tentacle-eyes and retractor beams—but Simon Simple was still a bit self-conscious about his unsophisticated container. However, as Sam Galileo pointed out, it had been a handy disguise when they were tracking down the root beer runners in that Alpha Centauri saloon. Messy, but handy, and Simon was consoled.

"Yes," Sam sighed, "it'll seem good to get back to the shack again." He shook his head decisively, and his red-thatched toupee wobbled

precariously. The hair, once a blazing scarlet, had faded, and portions of the material beneath shone through in embarrassing patches. Only the Venturemen knew that Sam Galileo, Major Venture, wore a toupee, and they were sworn to an unalterable secrecy.

Crab the robot moaned. "These feet are killing me," he said. He sank into a chair and reached down with long metallic arms and detached both his feet. "I'll be glad to get into my comfortable pair back at the shack."

"You're getting old," Ergo's ears accused. "Another year and we'll have to sell you by the pound."

"Is that so!" the robot demanded angrily.

He made threatening gestures with his hands and, forgetting he had no feet, rose to grab the android. He missed and fell flat on his metal face. Ergo danced away, laughing, and raced into a wall. From the floor, Crab's laugh was last and best.

Sam Galileo peered into space, and his features took on a puzzled look. "Simon, where's the Moon? According to your figures it should be right ahead of us."

Simon Simple looked as sheepish as was possible for a cuspidor. "You know I was never much good at mathematics," he said by way of apology.

"Well," Sam said, impressed by his own logic, "it's got to be here somewhere. Let's go around to the other side of Earth."

The Orange Peel flipped through space, circling the planet.

"For Pete's sake, chief," Ergo said, looking through the window, "we must be in the wrong place. That's not Earth."

"Don't be a shmoe," Sam Galileo snapped. "Of course it's Earth."

"Look at it," insisted the android. "There's too much water."

They looked. There *was* too much water. In fact, the planet was almost flooded.

"Look." Crab's metal finger pointed to the tip of the planet, where a flare's glow shot skyward.

"The signal," Simon said, his voice hollow in the cuspidor. "Earth is in danger. We've got to see Abner Burney at once!"

"I can't," Sam protested. "Not in this ragged toupee."

"But, Sam, Earth may be —"

"We're going to the Moon first," the man returned stubbornly.

Simon shrugged, and the Orange Peel zoomed through space. But after a few minutes, Sam looked at his companions, in bewilderment.

"Something's crazy here," he said in consternation. "It's not here. The Moon's gone!"

ABNER BURNEY, Marshal of the Planet Patrol, nervously paced the floor of his office on the eighty-sixth floor, just three floors above the water level in the city. He had hair like wisps of cotton, a face of burned, wrinkled leather, and a

drooping, shaggy mustache beneath a long nose.

"Why doesn't he come," he complained. "He must have seen the signal, and flares cost money. I wish he'd get here."

"Hold your jets, Abe," Jane Crandall advised. She hoisted her chubby body onto a desk and carelessly crossed her legs. "I'm just as anxious for him to get here as you are."

"Don't call me Abe!" Burney dropped into a chair and morosely studied her pump legs. "If anybody can do anything about this Moon business and the water, Major Venture can."

Jane Crandall was always happy to hear praise for Sam Galileo, for the pedestal-raising served as a rationalization every time she asked herself why she hadn't trapped him by this time. After all, what girl wouldn't go for a man with such glorious curly hair. She wanted to give her best impression now when he did arrive. She had rowed all the way from her home to the Administration Building that housed the Planet Patrol Headquarters — rowed all the way despite a tight girdle and eyebrows that wouldn't stick in the dampness. But a man worth trapping, she reminded herself, is worth going through hell for.

"You have nice legs," Abner Burney noticed aloud.

"Really!" she said, blushing a little and pretending to be indignant. She

tried to pull her skirt down, but accidentally raised it another inch.

It was about time the old fool noticed, she thought furiously. Sure she had nice legs. Wasn't she once voted by the Retired Spacemen and Old Age Survivors League as "the girl they'd most like to see stranded on Sagittarius?" The wording had always confused her, but she consoled herself that the old deurs had meant well.

Abner Burney's grizzled face brightened. "I think I hear Crab's metal feet thumping on the floor outside. At last Major Venture's here."

Jane Crandall squirmed excitedly on the desktop. She patted a wayward strand of wiry hair into place and quickly surveyed her white-washed face in a pocket mirror. Then she put on her best smile and fluttered her eyelashes at the open doorway.

"Abner! Jane!" Major Venture said enthusiastically. "It's good to see you again."

Behind him trailed the heavy-footed Crab, the open-mouthed Ergo, and the cuspidored Simon who floated several feet off the floor.

"You came just in time," Abner Burney said, warmly clasping Sam Galileo's hand. "We were running out of dry flares."

SAM sat down, ignoring Jane Crandall's fluttering eyelashes. "Sorry we're late. We —" He

grinned self-consciously. "It sounds crazy, but we couldn't find the Moon."

Abner Burney's cottoned head nodded gravely. "It's gone, Sam. Disappeared."

"What?"

Major Venture half-rose in surprise. Crab had started to remove his aching feet, but had stopped, stunned by the news. Ergo's ears hung open in astonishment. Only the cuspidor seemed unmoved.

The Marshal nodded again "Happened only a few days ago. The Moon cracked right down the middle, then across. Split into four pieces, and then it disappeared. Then the water started rising here on Earth."

Crab said in dismay, "My comfortable pair of feet are up there."

"And my best tou —" Sam Galileo began, but then he stopped and looked at Jane Crandall who was curiously studying his ragged hair. He got up and began pacing to present a moving target to her glances.

He said, "We've got to find the pieces. There are a lot of valuable things in the shack," and his three friends echoed the sentiment.

"We've got to do something about Earth first," Abner Burney said, "before it's all under water."

"We'll do all we can, Abner," Major Venture said, laying a fraternal hand on the Marshal's shoulder.

"First, though," Burney said, "there's someone I'd like you to meet." He pressed a button on his desk. "One of the best detectives in the Planet Patrol. He was anxious to help, and I figured he might come in handy."

They looked to the doorway as a short, thin man with a pale face and thick, horn-rimmed glasses entered. Between the tight lines of his lips he had a curved pipe upon which he puffed with casual and infinite regularity.

"Major Venture," Abner Burney said proudly, "I'd like you to meet Joe Stalling."

WITH Ergo at the controls, the Orange Peel skimmed the surface of the raised water. The eight of them Jane Crandall had insisted upon going along —cast about for theories to solve the problem.

"I think," Joe Stalling said through a thick cloud of smoke, "that the Moon just got so old that it cracked up, and the resulting disbalance of forces caused the water to rise. About the only thing we can do is to vacate the planet."

"Ninety percent of the people have already done that," Abner Burney said. "Gone to Mars and to Venus and the Asteroids. But that doesn't solve the problem here."

Sam nodded. "Anyway, for once we can forget about a personal villain behind this. It must be natural

phenomena, no person could do that, unless —" His eyes narrowed at a strange thought.

Abner leaned forward. "Unless what?"

"I was going to say, unless he had the Thingamabob."

"Thingamabob?" Abner Burney scratched his head.

"A little device we didn't know what to name, so we called it the Thingamabob. It looks like a flashlight, but it can slice through, weld together, attract or repulse any mass at which it's pointed."

Abner Burney whistled. "You think —"

Sam shrugged. "I think it's possible. A man could've stolen it, sliced the moon into pieces and dragged the satellite off to some distant part of the universe."

"Except that it's too fantastic," Joe Stalling said. "Why should anyone want to do that?"

"Maybe for a souvenir," Abner suggested jokingly.

Joe Stalling silently puffed a furious smoke message into the air.

"What are you doing, Simon?" Major Venture asked the brain.

The cuspidor hovered over a silent calculating machine, and its retractor beams darted at intervals to the keys beneath. The machine made noiseless movements, presenting figures through a small rectangular window.

"I'm figuring the amount of water that has risen, Samuel," came the

cuspidor's metallic voice.

"Oh," Sam Galileo said thoughtfully, wondering what on Earth for.

Joe Stalling edged over to where the brain-filled cuspidor was busy with its calculations. While he was pretending interest in the procedure, he blew an apparently accidental cloud of smoke into the brain's lens-eyes and with a swift motion pressed several numbers on the calculating machine, which registered the digits with silent precision.

"A fine thing," Jane Crandall was pouring her troubles onto an unsympathetic Crab, "here I am young and beautiful, with a wonderful figure, all alone with a bunch of eligible men, and what happens?" Disgusted, she supplied the word herself: "Nothing."

Crab had no sympathy for her. His feet hurt. He had loosened them, but he was uncertain of the propriety of taking them off in the midst of so much company. He didn't want Ergo to taunt him for his lack of manners.

"Sam!" the brain's voice came from the calculating machine. "Sam, look at This!"

They crowded about him, wonderingly.

"The amount of water," Simon cried excitedly, "is exactly the amount that could be displaced by the Moon."

Major Venture's eyes lit with a wild light, as insight came. He said, "Do you realize what this means?"

The pieces of the Moon must have fallen into the ocean someplace and as a result raised the water!"

Behind his dark-rimmed glasses, Joe Stalling's eyes closed. His teeth clenched the pipe like a vise, and slowly he counted to ten. Simon wasn't too good at mathematics, and he must have made an error in his original figures. The detective groaned inwardly. In trying to throw the Ventureman off, Joe Stalling had depressed keys that had corrected the error!

THE ORANGE PEEL slid swiftly across the ocean bottom searching for a sunken fragment of Moon. Tension had mounted at Sam Galileo's revelation, and everyone crowded about portholes to gaze into the murky water lit by the rocket ship's sweeping beams.

Everyone, that is, except Joe Stalling. The detective sat brooding in one corner of the spaceship-turned-submarine and puffed into the atmosphere. Instinctively, he felt his plans going swiftly and certainly awry, for he knew they couldn't help but bump into something as large as a Moon-fragment.

Sam Galileo's triumphant cry, "There it is," stirred the detective to action. While the others were busy with the discovery, he swiftly donned a space-suit and, with the Thingamabob clutched tightly in his hand went through the airlock.

"You and Crab stay in here with the ship," Sam Galileo ordered Ergo. "The rest of you get into spacesuits."

Anxiously they complied. It was Jane who, being a woman, first noticed that a man was missing. "Where's that Joe —Joe whatsisname?"

Ergo's voice answered, puzzled, as the android peered through a porthole. "He's outside," he said, his voice-ears flapping frantically. The voice turned to panic. "Chief, he's got the Thingamabob!"

Sam Galileo's face turned pale. "What? Then he's the one who's behind it. He's been trying to throw us off all along." He added thoughtfully, "I wondered why Simon's calculations were right, all of a sudden."

"I never was very good at mathematics," Simon Simple apologized.

They were interrupted as a beam from the Thingamabob sliced through the hull of the Orange Peel, splitting it in two and pouring in a torrent of water which scattered the inhabitants about the ocean floor.

Crab landed on the feet he was suddenly glad he had only loosened and not taken off. The robot started forward, but his movements were slow, then slower. With a shock he realized that he hadn't oiled himself in some time, and he knew why Major Venture had wanted him to stay in the ship: the water was beginning to rust his joints!

"Ergo, the oil can," he wailed.

"I'm having troubles of my own," the android complained, and bubbles flitted from his ears as he talked. "The chemicals in my body are dissolving in the water!"

Even as he said it, Ergo's body was thin, almost transparent. "Sam," he cried. "Sam, what'll I do?"

Sam Galileo's spacesuited figure came into sight. "Quick, Ergo, crawl into Crab's left ear. Don't argue now. Just do it."

Ergo thought the idea was idiotic, but he was too desperate to argue, he did it. And surprised himself that a full-size android could have crawled into such a small place.

"What's left on your body is completely pliable from the water," Major Venture explained. "And now, Crab, put your index finger in your ear."

With much creaking, Crab did as he was told, trapping Ergo's chemicals safely in his ear where the water couldn't get at them.

"They'll be okay, Samuel," the brain said, floating a few feet away. "Let's get Stalling."

Sam nodded, but they didn't have to go far. A few yards away the detective was waiting for them, a glint in his eyes, an insolent curl of smoke drifting from the pipe in his bubble helmet, and the Thingamabob poised, ready in his hand.

"Samuel, watch out," Simon cried.

SAM GALILEO ducked as a beam of light stabbed through the water toward him, but he fell, and his toupee slipped down over his face. He couldn't reach it through the bubble headpiece, and the water churned as he shook his head violently in a vain effort to shove aside the hairpiece that blinded him.

"Simon," he said helplessly, "I can't see."

But the cuspidor hovered at bay with the Thingamabob now turned in its direction. He wondered where Abner Burney and Jane Crandall were.

"Crab," he shouted, "do something."

The robot was having a hard time moving at all, but with a desperate effort he kicked out with his right leg. A loosened foot detached itself and sailed through the water in a graceful arc that terminated upon meeting Joe Stalling's helmet.

"Good shot," Simon cried jubilantly.

The helmet cracked beneath the weight of the robot's metal foot. As the water rushed in, a surprised look came over Joe Stalling's face and his pipe went out.

With a tremendous sneeze and a shake of his head, Major Venture had managed to send his toupee flying to a more normal position within the bubble of his headpiece. With a quick motion, he grabbed Simon and shoved the cuspidor down over the head of the drowning

detective.

Simon started to protest. "But, Samuel, I'm upside down —"

"We can't let him drown," Sam told the brain. "He'll be safe in there until we get him back in the Orange Peel."

"But it's cracked in half."

Sam stooped, picked up the Thingamabob, and patted it affectionately. "You forget. This can take care of that little difficulty."

And it did. A few brief flashes of light and the Orange Peel was as good as new. The rusty Crab, with Ergo still in his ear, was carried aboard, followed by Joe Stalling with Simon's cuspidor over his head.

Sam found Abner Burney and Jane Crandall a short distance away, incapacitated by a freak accident. The blast of the Thingamabob had thrown them together and fused their helmets into a single bubble, so that they resembled Siamese twins joined at the head. Sam took them aboard the Orange Peel, relieved them of their predicament, and apologized for his tardiness.

"That's okay," Jane said, blushing and clinging to Abner's hand. "I didn't mind."

Abner Burney giggled hoarsely. "Wasn't bad at all," he said through a lipstick-covered mustache.

Poor fellow, Sam thought, he's got blood all over his mouth. He turned to the brain. "How about you, Simon, you okay?"

"Fine," the brain said. "Joe Stalling

and I were talking while he had his head inside my cus —er —brain case. You know, his ideas aren't bad at all. After all, the Moon wasn't of much use to anybody anyway, and we could always build an artificial one. Be more sanitary, too."

Sam Galileo turned pale. His upside-down position must have unbalanced Simon.

Ergo had come out of Crab's ear, a hardened mold of chemicals. "You know, Sam," the mold said, "Crab and I never realized before what talents we've got. We thought up a terrific idea for a vaudeville act. Sounds like a great idea, doesn't it?"

Major Venture hardly heard the chemical mold that had the android's voice. He suddenly had the strangest desire to walk quietly to the nearest wall and bang his head against it to make certain that both were real.

"I'll wake up when I get home," he told himself.

Dazed, he settled in the control chair, mechanically pulled levers, and with a sickening rush the Orange Peel shot upward.

YEARS passed.

The firm of Simple and Stalling prospered with sales made to all parts of this galaxy and others. The Moon was now a rare thing, a relic of the past, and watch fobs, bookends, and other souvenirs made from it sold easily.

The comedy team of Ergo and Crab became an immediate

sensation, and for many years the Palace in Venus City rocked with laughter at their antics. Crab became quite adept at kicking his feet through hoops held some distance away by a pretty Venusian girl clad in a brief costume, while Ergo's specialty was a disappearing act in a tank of water in full view of the audience; later, of course, he was filtered off and remolded.

The newlyweds, Abner Burney and Jane Crandall Burney, were quite satisfied with the Simple-Stalling artificial moon (model 3A), declaring that it had the same effects as the old, unsanitary one; they stated that on their honeymoon they didn't notice any difference in it. Or in anything.

As for Major Venture—he just disappeared, and the general notion is that he's probably fighting right now on some alien planet many light-

centuries away. But some people think differently.

They quote, for example, the instance of a beachcomber on Mercury whose red toupee, frizzled by long hours in the Mercurian sun, bears a remarkable resemblance to Major Venture's scarlet curls. He is a short, paunchy man whose teeth have long since been melted away by the radioactive liquors served in Mercurian saloons. He has no desire to hear news from any place in the solar system, especially of Earth and its antiseptic moon, and every time he sees an Earth woman or gazes at one of the saloon's cupidors, he shudders at some nearly-forgotten memory. Some people say this is significant.

But of course it's merely speculation.