

15c  
THE WIZARD  
OF SCIENCE

CAPTAIN FUTURE

SPRING

CAPTAIN

SPRING  
ISSUE

# FUTURE

MAN OF TOMORROW

15c

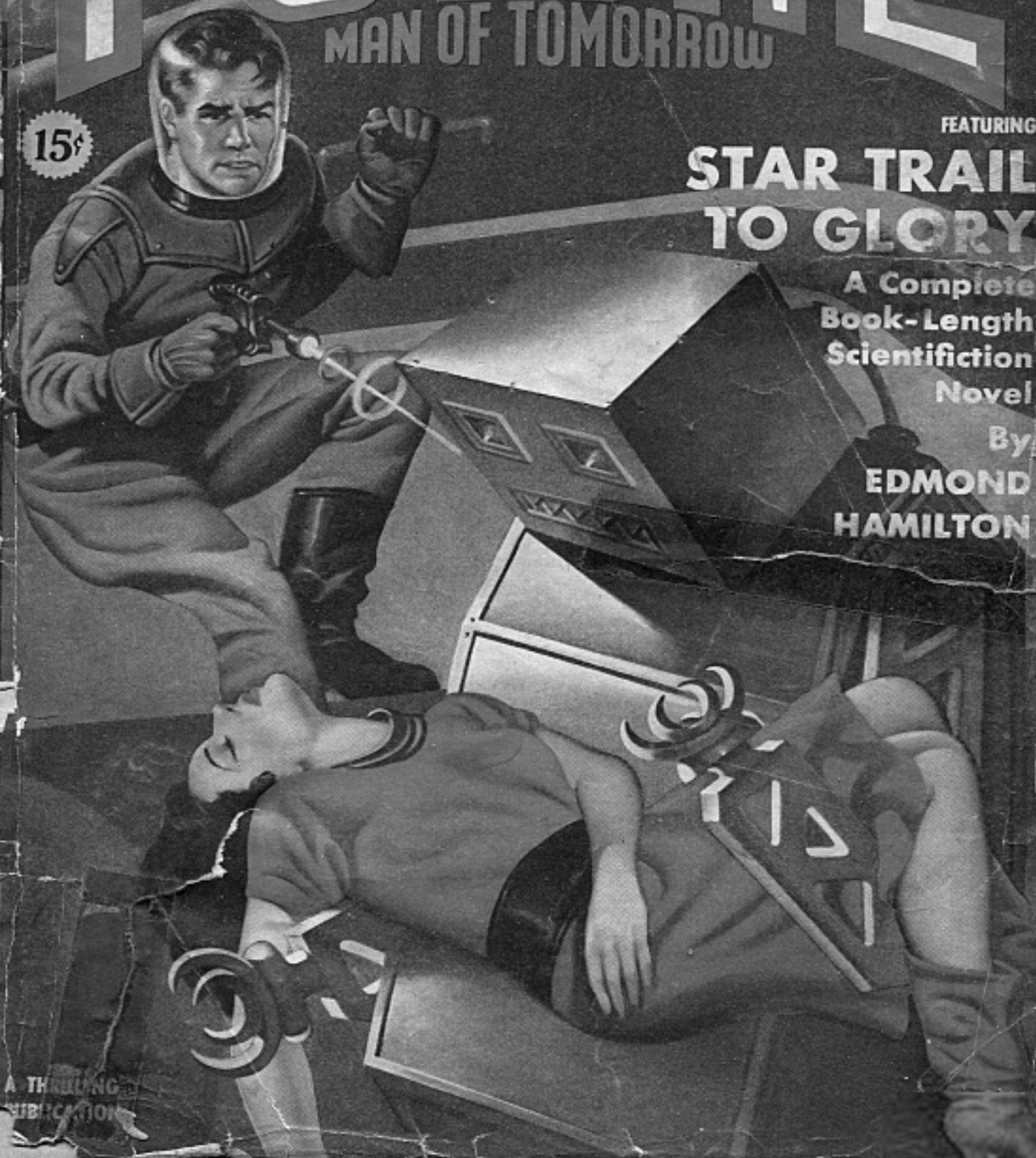
FEATURING

## STAR TRAIL TO GLORY

A Complete  
Book-Length  
Scientifiction  
Novel

By

EDMOND  
HAMILTON



A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION

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(Signed) *W. B. Bolton*

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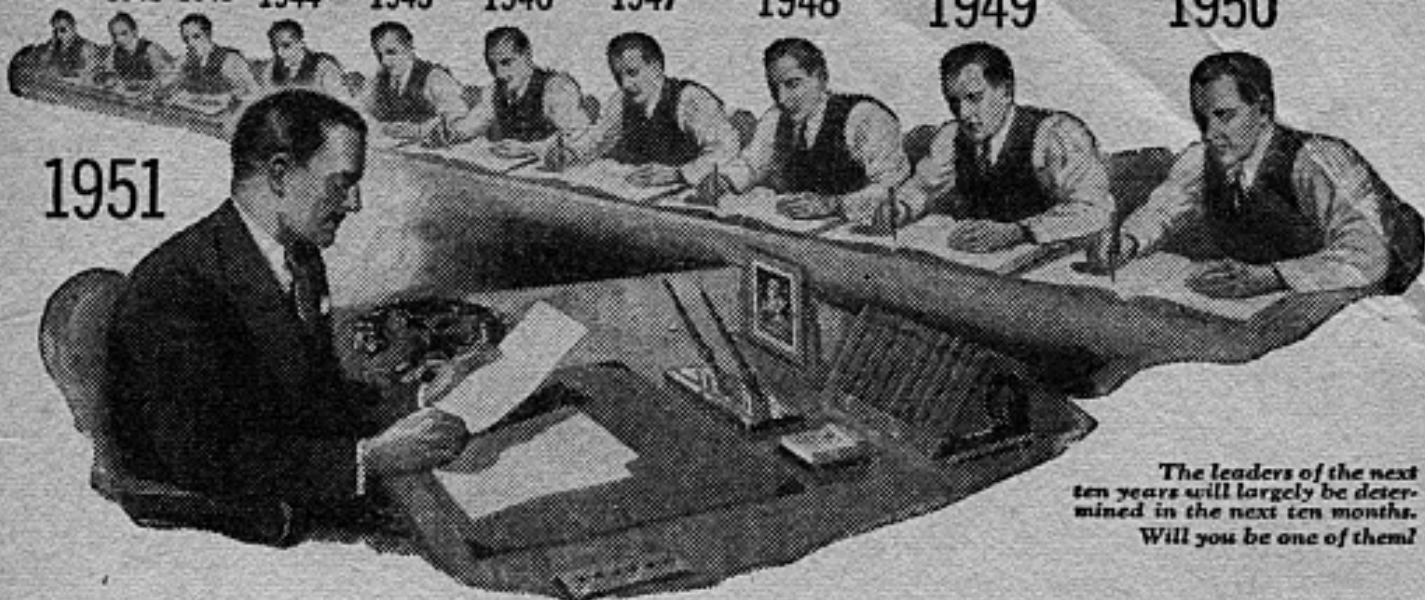
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1941 1942 1943 1944 1945 1946 1947 1948 1949 1950

1951



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# CAPTAIN FUTURE

## WIZARD OF SCIENCE

VOL. 2, NO. 3

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SPRING, 1941

**A Complete Book-Length Scientifiction Novel**



## STAR TRAIL TO GLORY

By

**EDMOND HAMILTON**

*Follow Curt Newton and the Futuremen Along a Multi-Million Miles of Stellar Speedway as They Streak Around the System in Their Greatest Race for Justice!*

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### Scientifiction Serial Novel

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*Concluding One of the Greatest Science Fiction Classics of All Time!*

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Join THE FUTUREMEN, Our New Club for Readers!

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.



# Are You HAUNTED by FEARS like these?

Suppose I am drafted! How can I become more than a private?

Will I stick in this same low pay job another 3 years?

Will a machine be invented that will wipe out my job?

Is there a way out for me? What can I do?

Bills! Bills! Will I ever be more than one jump ahead of the sheriff?

My job will be too tough ten years from now -- what then?

Where or how can I make more money?

You know that LOW PAY is at the bottom of nearly all fears that haunt a man's future. You know too that it takes specialized ability to get into the higher pay brackets. If fear of the future haunts you — if you can't see in the years ahead, security, freedom from money worries, here's an answer to "How can I acquire specialized ability?" Risk a postage stamp — find out what Radio offers.

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Trained Radio Technicians make good money, and you don't have to give up your present job or leave home to learn Radio. I train you at home nights in your spare time.

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Radio broadcasting stations employ operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make \$5 to \$10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, Police, Aviation, Commercial Radio; Loudspeaker Systems, Electronic Devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N.R.I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

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Answer this call! Investigate this remarkable discovery that trims dollars off gasoline bills—gives you worthwhile gas savings—more power—greater speed—quicker pickup—faster acceleration. Proven so efficient, it is guaranteed to save up to 30% and give better performance or the trial costs you nothing.

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Signed *James J. Blaney*  
Notary Public

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"I'll prove that YOU too can be a NEW MAN!"

—Charles Atlas

I KNOW, myself, what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs! I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

Then I discovered "Dynamic Tension." It gave me a body that won for me the title "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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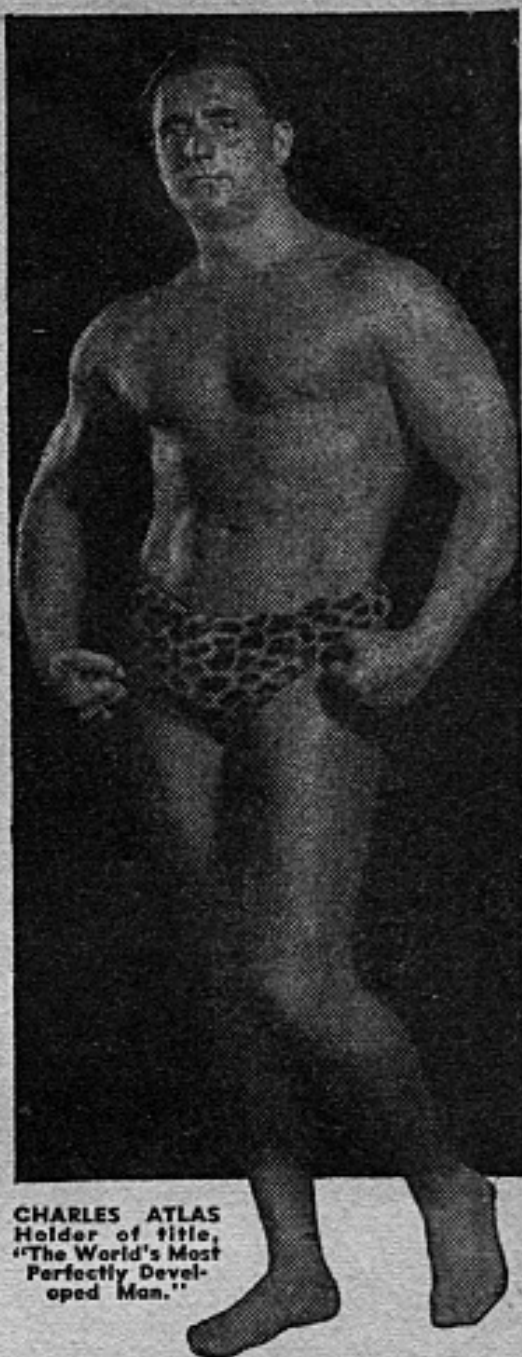
Do you want big, broad shoulders—a fine, powerful chest—biceps like steel—arms and legs ripping with muscular strength—a stomach ridged with bands of sinewy muscle—and a build you can be proud of? Then just give me the opportunity to prove that "Dynamic Tension" is what you need.

No "ifs," "ands," or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, peppy? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about "Dynamic Tension" and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun! "Dynamic Tension" does the work.

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Mail the coupon right now for full details and I'll send you my illustrated book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Tells all about my "Dynamic Tension" method. Shows actual photos of men I've made into Atlas Champions. It's a valuable book! And it's FREE. Send for your copy today. Mail the coupon to me personally. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 77D, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.



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**B**LAST jets, Futuremen! Get ready for acceleration. Your old Sergeant Saturn is about to rocket off on his Milky Way. Hop aboard, all you space-rangers, and you'll be seeing the nine wonders of the nine planets from Mercury to Pluto!

The mail-compartment's loaded tighter'n the Time Capsule this voyage, with spacegrams and ether flashes from you rocketeers. I'll be putting them through the visigraph just as soon as our battered space-crates reaches velocity. In the meanwhile, adjust your radiophones for sound and let the old space-dog make a few announcements.

Next issue of **CAPTAIN FUTURE** offers a fantasy masterpiece that's as rare as a binary eclipse. It's a thrilling scientification classic that will make all you rocket rookies sit up in your space-hammocks and make you forget your orbit.

### HALL OF FAME CLASSIC

Pilots, the yarn I'm talking about is Laurence Manning's unforgettable masterpiece, **THE MAN WHO AWOKE**. You'll want to adventure into tomorrow with the hero of Laurence Manning's yarn. **THE MAN WHO AWOKE** is the **HALL OF FAME** selection beginning in the next issue of **CAPTAIN FUTURE**.

A great fantasy by one of scientification's masters! Look forward to it.

### JOIN THE FUTUREMEN

Spinning Saturn, but that's a growing organization you space buckaroos are helping the old Sarge band together! Scores of peeps the country over are joining The Futuremen.

You can't come aboard ship unless you're a member of our band of star-rovers, The Futuremen. Your membership card is your passport. We told you how to join up last journey. But just in case, here's the dope once more.

Just tear off the name-strip and date line of the cover of this issue, fill out the application blank on page 128, and shoot these items on in with a stamped and self-addressed envelope. Our Futuremen's secretary will do the rest for you—and you'll be receiving a **FREE** silver membership card, suitable for display in your wallet, next stellar express. Send your applications to: **THE FUTUREMEN, CAPTAIN FUTURE MAGAZINE, 10 E. 40th St., N. Y. C., N. Y.**

### SIMON'S NOT SO SIMPLE

Simon Wright's been done right by, at last! He talks—and walks! And without a body, too!

Don't ask me how the Brain moves, space-rats. I won't tell you. But Edmond Hamilton can. And you'll find out how just as soon as you begin reading the feature novel

in this issue, **STAR TRAIL TO GLORY**.

Well, the rockets are roaring now, and reception on sound is perfect. Here's the first spacegram from the mail-sack. Cut in your radiophones, lads, while I adjust the visigraph.

### AUTHOR! AUTHOR!

By R. L. Harrison

I have never taken the time to write to you before because the published letters of your readers seemed to express my opinions one way or the other. But the excellence of this Winter's issue goaded me out of my lethargy, and prompted me to drop you a note.

I have perused every issue of **CAPTAIN FUTURE** since it first came out on the market. But being an author myself, I glance at pulp magazines in a perfunctory manner solely to derive ideas or to discover some struggling young author who is likely to be successful. More or less shamefacedly, I admit that that was my prime purpose when I scrutinized your first issue. But I became so engrossed in the story, and in the vivid imagination of the author that I simply couldn't put down the book until I had finished the last page.

As is the case with most stories of this type, the subsequent plots and narratives were almost identical. But upon closing the back cover of the Winter, 1941, issue, I realized that Edmond Hamilton had written something truly masterful in the realm of science fiction. He has transmogrified his style without diminishing his imaginative ability and marvelous sense of sequence.

Whether it was the ultimate influence of his various readers, or whether it was his own initiative, I am at a loss to know; but permit me to offer my congratulations for allowing **CAPTAIN FUTURE** to meet someone who is almost the competent equal of Future himself; namely—Ul Quorn. By interjecting colthic bits of description here and there, Hamilton has also made the existence of Future and his weird comrades just a little more plausible.

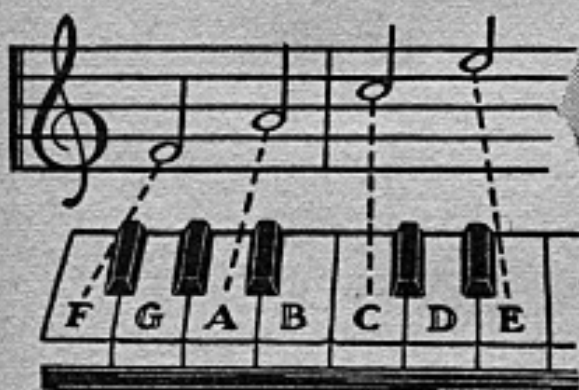
The story of the "Seven Space Stones" is by far the best that has yet appeared. If Hamilton continues to improve his work in such a fine manner, **CAPTAIN FUTURE** will undoubtedly become the most popular science fiction publication on the market.

In conclusion, may I extend sincerest felicitations to Edmond Hamilton, and heartiest good wishes for the continued success of your magazine.—6735 Ridge Boulevard, N. Y.

Scintillating fire-opals of Mercury, but we thought "The Seven Space-Stones" a gem

(Continued on page 10)

# To those who think LEARNING MUSIC is hard...



**P**ERHAPS you think that taking music lessons is like taking a dose of medicine. It isn't any longer!

As far as you're concerned, the old days of long practice hours with their scales and hard-work exercises and expensive personal teacher fees are over and done with.

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The lessons come to you by mail from the famous U. S. School of Music. They consist of complete printed instructions, diagrams, and all the music you need. It's actually fun to learn this simple way. One week you are learning a dreamy waltz—the next you are mastering a stirring march. As the lessons continue they prove easier and easier. For instead of just scales you are always learning to play by actual notes the classic favorites and the latest syncopation that formerly you only listened to. And you're never in hot water. First, you are told how a thing is done. Then a picture shows you how, then you do it yourself and hear it. No private teacher could make it clearer or easier.

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Soon, when your friends say "please play something," you can surprise and entertain them with pleasing melodies on your favorite instrument. You'll find yourself in the spotlight—popular everywhere.

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(Continued from page 8)

of a story ourselves. You'll have to comb the nine planets with an XJ-ray scanner before you can find a yarn that can top that one.

So you thought Ul Quorn a villain worthy enough to test Captain Future's mettle and Grag's metal? Your old sarge thought so too, and you'll be meeting up again with that renegade of the spaceways in Ed Hamilton's next novel, "The Magician of Mars." When it comes to interplanetary tricks, Quorn can pull 'em faster than light!

Supernovae, but here's a rocket rookie who wants us to introduce Dodecahedronal Dice. Sounds like a rattling good game. Cut in on Pilot's Cooper's orbit, Futuremen.

## NEW GAME

By Bob Cooper

I have just finished reading the Winter issue of your swell magazine. It is the second copy of it I have read. The first was given to me by a friend, being the second magazine you put out. "Calling Captain Future" was the featured story. As soon as I had finished it I went out and bought your latest one.

It is decidedly the best sciencefiction magazine I have ever read.

About a futuristic game, how does Dodecahedronal Dice sound? That means twelve-sided dice.

About Joan and Curt, I think that something should be done to bring more of a romance between them. It would take a lot of stiffness out of your CAPTAIN FUTURE stories. I don't approve of them getting married because that would spoil the future stories. But when they say good-by he should do more than shake her hand. He should take her into his arms and kiss her tenderly. (They do love each other.) The trouble, I think, is that Hamilton has no romance in his soul.

Enclosed is the name strip of the magazine with a stamped self-addressed envelope. I am joining your CAPTAIN FUTURE CLUB. Also 25c for the eight sciencefiction booklets. —730 E. 90th St., Cleveland, Ohio.

Twelve-sided dice? Sounds like a natural. Imps of Jupiter's eleven moons, but wouldn't that be a game for Bubas Uum's gambling palace on the Pleasure Planet! But don't let me get those dozen-surfaced ivories in my hand. It's two weeks until payday, and this old space-dog dropped his bankroll playing radium-roulette with a couple of greenies from Venus.

So Ed Hamilton has no romance in his soul? I don't agree with you. And if you'll read the last paragraph of this issue's department, THE FUTUREMEN, you may change your mind. Anyway, we'll be fighting for you in the clinches.

And here's a rocket blast from Space-Veteran Charles Hidley, whose pet pets are Eek and Oog.

With this, the Winter and First Anniversary issue of C. F., I was relievedly gratified to note that at long last Hamilton has departed—at least for the nonce—from the formulated plot that the first four issues of the magazine were emburdened with, and which made so many of the initial readers drop the publication from their lists and only get it as a rather freshish curiosity of stifleaving. I fear, a great majority of children in the ranks of letter-writers.

I felt like Foxy Grandpa or Uncle Don when I noted my letter amongst the bevy of tots—who, nevertheless, are vital and active with their critiques. And how else did the rest of us begin but in this way? Good luck, kids.

Sergeant Saturn offers a cheery chit-chat

(Continued on page 12)



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(Continued from page 10)

with the readers and brightens up observation with two-way correspondence. Beware of making it simpering, though. Let's hope he is here to stay—with reservations.

As before, I was actually encouraged with "The Seven Space Stones" and the title of the next novel almost fooled me into believing that yet another good novel was on the way—but no, a "scientific criminal genius" must step in with "domination of space-lanes" ideas in his noodle, such news leaving naught but fear for Future.

The references to preceding stories only added to the color and interest of the story. Perhaps because a circus locale has always been a favorite this story clicked with me, but I think the logical occurrences and vivid action and fewer unbelievable tricks were mostly to blame for a good yarn. The Wesso illustrations were good, I guess, the best ones being the marsh-tiger cage—all pics should be full-paged and framed like this and the serial book-jacket—and the destruction of Lester; Quorn's costume in the latter was a dilly.

I think, too, that Ed put more humor in this one than in the previous four. At last comes Oog—and with his weird passion for the poor despised Eek only adding to delightful confusion. The hermit, Otho's boastful accomplishments, Grag's simple discomfort, and even Simon's afore-hidden talents of laugh-getting, all were interesting and happy. The robot's birthday was sentimentality at its best; but how can an iron-man "look" astounded? Even the miraculous Grag would find this difficult, I'm sure. The cover, this time really the best that Bergey has done, was actually superb and again demonstrates the artist's talents with humans.—New York, N. Y.

Thanks for the flora, Pilot Hidley. How did Iron-man Grag look "astounded?" Hamilton did it with magnets, I guess. Anyway, what can you expect from a fugitive from a chain-belt?

Twirl my equinox, but here's Buckaroo Grainger with jets a-roaring and cyclotrons throbbing. Easy there, George, or I'll stick you into that cage full of marsh tigers. You can't settle an argument by poking a space-waddie on the schnozola!

## SOCKO!

By George Grainger, Jr.

I would like to punch Stanley Kovan's nose. What kind of a crab or crank is he, anyway? Well, I suppose you just can't satisfy some people even some of the time. Ignore everything he said, please, and in the future don't even bother with printing such trash.

Take it from me, your magazine is one of the best s-f mags I have ever read, and that's saying a lot as I have read 90 per cent of them ever since 1933. I think the Brain should have some rudimentary kind of locomotion, at least, so he wouldn't be such a bother to carry around, and be able to get out of tight spots without having to rely so much on his companions' help. The idea that he would make Grag superfluous is all wet.

I have no complaints to make about Grag and Otho, Eek and Oog, or the others. Trimmed edges would help. Also, you should publish the book more frequently. The time between issues is much too long. As for these suggestions about time-traveling yarns you have been receiving . . . well, I don't know.

It seems to me that Captain Future lives in a period where everything is sufficiently advanced not to need any further progress, and there have been so many, many stories about the prehistoric past that they are tiresome to me, personally. Of course this is only one man's viewpoint.

Why not have an idea about a rocket race around the Solar System, with playboys, soldiers of fortune, crooks, etc., all entered in it? I believe **THRILLING WONDER STORIES** published a story on this order a little over a year ago. Or was it a race around the moon?

(Continued on page 125)

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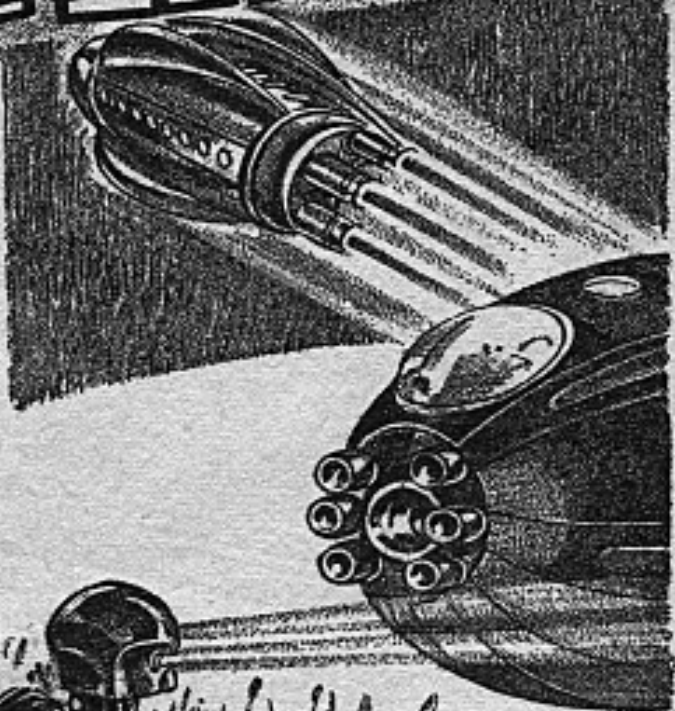
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**CHAPTER I**

*Suicide Station*

**T**HE tall, bronzed young Earthman proudly touched the silver comet-emblem on the breast of his gray space jacket. It was the emblem of the Rocketeer, the highest

rating any space pilot could attain.

Jan Walker's four young companions—a Martian, a Venusian and two Mercurians—all wore the emblem. They had just passed their final examinations, and they were looking as eagerly as Walker through the windows of the speeding rocket-flier. Beneath was the forbidding, savage Cold

Side of Mercury, an eternally dark landscape that never saw the Sun. Tumbled black mountains and frozen black plains seamed by vast cracks stretched in the bitter darkness under the stars.

"Aren't we almost there?" Jan Walker asked the lanky pilot.

"You wouldn't be so anxious to get to Suicide Station if you knew the trouble waiting for you there," the Saturnian grunted.

"We know a good many Rocketeers are killed in this test pilot work," Walker admitted earnestly. "But we're not afraid."

"I'm not talking about the test piloting," declared the pilot. "That's tough enough, but that's just the ordinary risk for a Rocketeer. I'm talking about the way ships have been vanishing here."

"Ships vanishing?" repeated Ilo, Walker's Venusian comrade. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. Fellows here at Suicide Station take a new ship out for its speed and endurance tests. Suddenly they just find themselves floating in space, with their ship gone. It's happened scores of times lately."

"Scores of new ships disappearing?" Jan Walker blurted puzzledly. "Why, there's been nothing in the tele-news about it!"

"Naturally," grunted the older Rocketeer. "They don't want to alarm the System. But it's happening, just the same."

Walker and his comrades looked at each other a little blankly. Anxious to pass the grueling tests that would make them or break them as Rocketeers, they felt their eagerness chilled by the cold shadow of mystery.

The Saturnian eased his controls and nodded downward.

"There it is," he muttered.

Suicide Station, notorious as the destroyer of men and ships! Located on the dark Cold Side of little Mercury, this was the place where space ships turned out by the big factories in the Twilight Zone of Mercury were given exhaustive tests before being pronounced safe. Only the finest pilots could perform the hazardous duty of testing new ships. Jan Walker and

his comrades knew that, and looked tensely down at the place where they had to make good.

**I**N the frozen black plain stretched a big spaceport, rimmed by krypton lamps. Dozens of shining new Rissmans, Tarks and Kalbers were parked on its north end, and near them rose the metalloy barracks and office buildings. Jan Walker felt the bitter chill of the thin air as he and his comrades emerged from the flier and trooped toward the offices. A little knot of veteran Rocketeers was gathered there in the open.

"I'm Ka Kardak, chief Rocketeer here," rumbled a squat, brawny Jovian. "So you're the new pilots! What does the Bureau mean by giving Rocketeer rating to a lot of kids like you? Looks like anyone can get a comet on his chest now, just by asking for it."

"We passed all the Government examinations to win our ratings, sir," Jan Walker ventured.

"You passed the exams, did you?" Ka Kardak growled. "Well, isn't that nice? You did a few loops and space-spins and they pinned a comet on you. So now you think you're real Rocketeers. You'll find out different. A Rocketeer has to be all steel and nerve and brain. Even then, he can blank out easy as not."

A chuckle ran through the veteran Rocketeers watching. Ka Kardak pointed at Ilo, the young Venusian beside Walker.

"You, there. See that Rissman Twelve down on the tarmac?"

"Yes, sir," answered Ilo puzzledly.

"Take it out and blast around Mercury at full acceleration. Then make a straight speed-landing here when you get back."

It was one of the standard tests, Walker knew, designed to test the ability of a ship to make a fast emergency landing.

"Do you mean right now, sir?" asked Ilo.

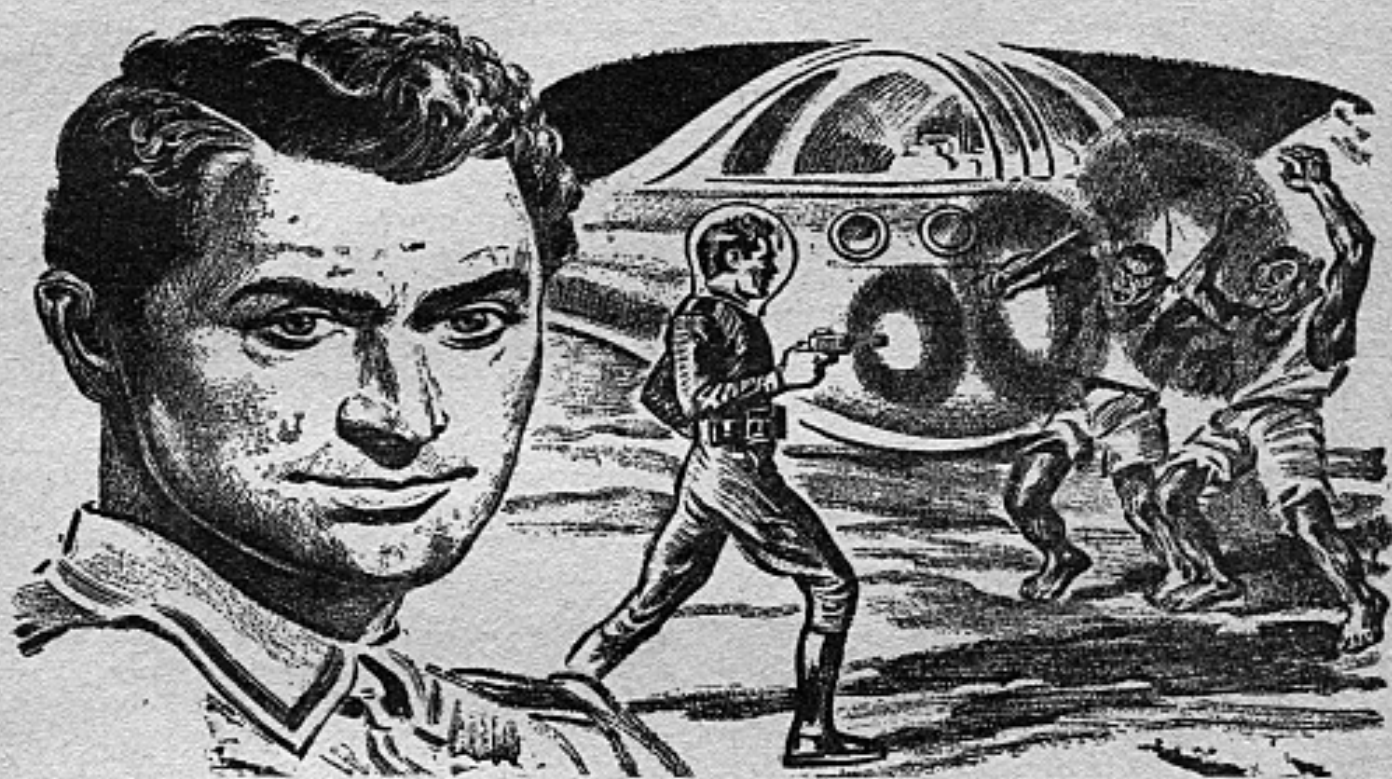
"Of course, right now!" barked Ka Kardak. "Do you expect to loaf around here a week before you start working? Hop to it!"

The Venusian youth dropped his

bag and hurried down the line of parked ships toward the Rissman Twelve. The small cruiser had the curious elongated lines characteristic of all Rissmans, its twelve tail rocket-tubes projecting in a bunched cluster. Walker watched his Venusian friend climb into the torpedo-like craft and shut the door. He guessed that Ka

bow-tubes of the plunging ship spurted flame. The ship slowed its dive.

Abruptly the whole bow of the descending Rissman seemed to cave in. The ship gyrated dizzily, then broke into flame as its cyclotrons exploded. It fell in a blazing mass beyond the spaceport.



CAPTAIN FUTURE

Kardak's idea was to plunge them right into danger without giving them a chance to get scared.

The Rissman Twelve shook to the hum of its cyclotrons. Then its bunched tail-tubes spouted flame, its keel-jets blasted. It zoomed steeply and was gone over the western mountains.

"Good fast start," growled Ka Kardak grudgingly. "He ought to be back around quick enough."

Walker felt his heart thudding. He waited, silent as the others in the freezing dark, staring eastward. At last the high-pitched scream of rockets split the thin Mercurian air. Over the eastern ridges came the Rissman. It dived sharply toward the spaceport. Jan Walker held his breath, then gasped in relief as the

"Crash-cars!" yelled Ka Kardak over the roar.

**W**ALKER heard sirens screeching, saw two crash-cars rocket down across the spaceport toward the blazing wreck.

"It's no use, he's gone," someone muttered.

There was a sick silence as veterans and new Rocketeers stared at the flaming funeral pyre in the distance. Ka Kardak's deep voice broke the silence.

"Defective girders behind the bow-tube thrust-struts. She couldn't take deceleration and folded up."

"Ilo killed—just to test that ship!" whispered a Mercurian cadet.

"Sure he was!" snarled Ka Kardak. "Better for him to be killed than have

a whole shipful of people die later, isn't it? That's what we Rocketeers are for, to make space ships safe for other people. Take that Kalber Twenty off and give it the same test. Pump up speed around the planet and come in for a speed-landing."

The Mercurian's swarthy face went gray. He swallowed, took a few steps forward, then stopped. His face was ghastly with fear.

"I—I can't do it right now!" he gasped. "Seeing Ilo crash like that—I'll have to have a little time to get hold of myself—"

Ka Kardak grabbed the young Mercurian's shoulder and with a big green hand tore the silver comet-emblem from the space jacket.

"You're out," he stated. "Report back to Solar City."

The Mercurian stared. "You mean I'm washed up as a Rocketeer? But if you would just give me a little time—"

"Time is what we don't have in this game," rumbled Ka Kardak. "You can still be a space pilot, but you haven't got Rocketeer stuff."

He whirled on Jan Walker. "You, Earthman! Take that Kalber Twenty up and bring it back in a speed-landing."

Walker felt his bones turn to water. The blazing funeral pyre of Ilo's ship was still bright against the black sky. But he forced himself to move toward the parked craft. It was better to die right here than lose the coveted Rocketeer emblem! He felt stiff and clumsy as he entered the stubby Kalber and shut its door. Numbly he put on a space-suit, as all test pilots must.

He climbed into the pilot chair, shut the switch that started the cyclotrons throbbing. Atomic power blasted back from the tail-tubes as he pulled out the throttles. The spaceport lights of Suicide Station dropped rapidly back from sight. Walker opened the throttles wider. The Kalber, new and untried, bucked and lurched crankily, but it plunged on with increased velocity.

Walker saw the Cold Side flashing past below. Frozen black plains, fissures and jagged hills unrolled at

frightful speed. He was racing westward around Mercury at a speed mounting every minute. The Kalber cometed out of the eternal darkness of the Cold Side into the dusk of the Twilight Zone, the narrow band of habitable territory between the Hot and Cold Sides. He glimpsed in the south the lights of Solar City, the capital, and the towers of the big Rissman and Tark space ship factories. Then he was zooming over the Hot Side.

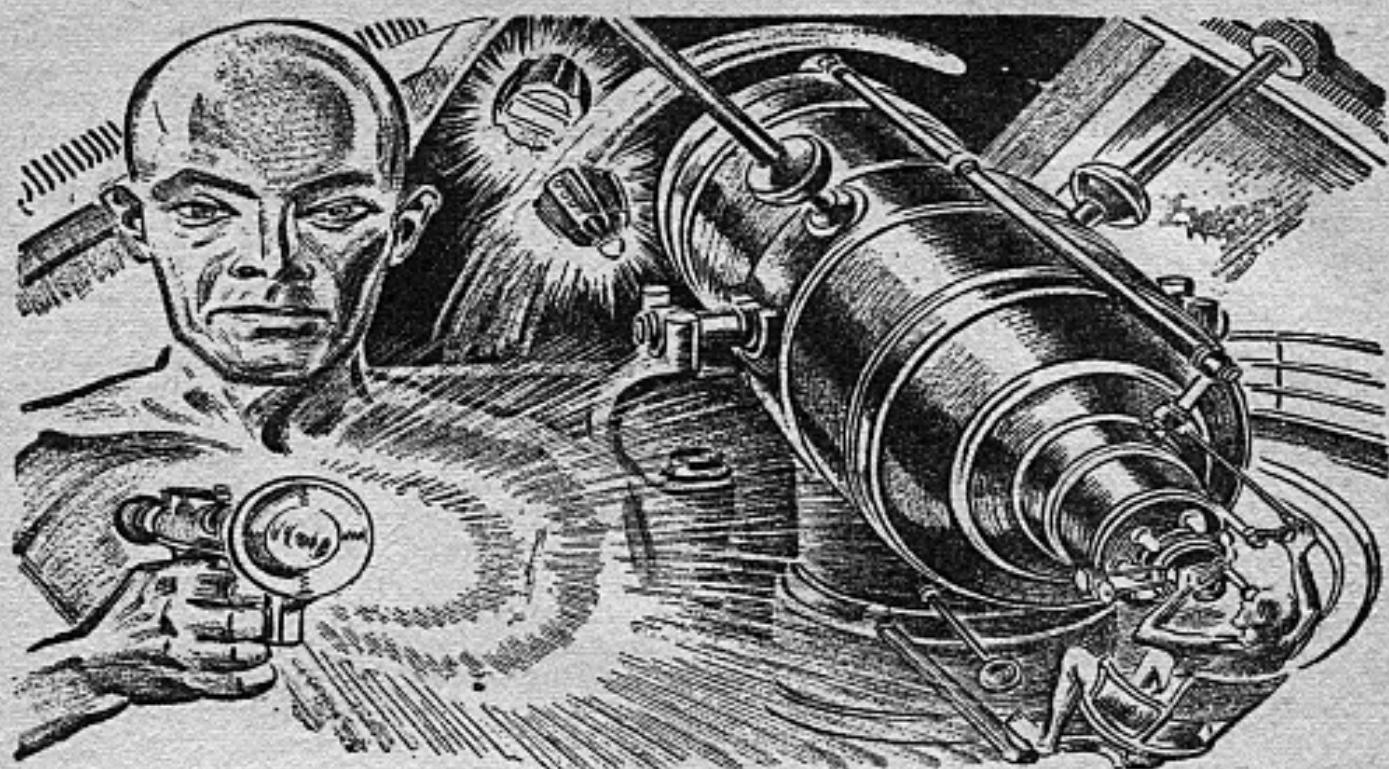
The dazzling glare of a monstrously huge sun beat down on the eternally scorched rocky desert. Far to the south, he could glimpse the gray sheen of the incredible Sea of Lead. Around the Hot Side he flashed, then tore across the Twilight Zone and again was over the Cold Side, rushing back at terrific speed toward the spaceport. Jan Walker felt the hackles bristle on his nape as the krypton lamps of Suicide Station came into view.

"Here goes!" he whispered thickly inside his helmet.

**S**PEED-LANDING a ship—diving and using the bow-tubes for a last minute brake instead of dropping on the keel-jets—was always dangerous. In a new, untested ship it was murderous. Walker was almost over the spaceport. His hands gripped the throttles tightly. He estimated distances, then sent the Kalber diving straight down. The tarmac of the spaceport rushed up toward him. He could not even hear the terrific shriek of split air outside, for the ship was traveling faster than the speed of sound.

"Ah-h-h-h!" he yelled inside his suit, to tighten his ribs and diaphragm and prevent them from being crushed by inertia.

He cut the tail-tubes and opened the bow-jets. The impact of deceleration flung him forward in his harness, with a tortured scream from the recoil springs. He felt the blood roar in his ears and his vision blurred. But the Kalber checked its dive abruptly. It poised, its tail dropping. Walker's shaking hand slammed on the keel-jets and the ship dropped on



OTHO

an even keel to the tarmac just below.

He cut the cyclotrons, got out of his suit and stumbled from the ship. His ears were still roaring as he faced Ka Kardak.

"Test completed, sir," he reported thickly.

"Well, do you expect a medal for making a simple test-landing?" roared the Jovian, but there was a friendly gleam in his eyes.

Walker's comrades all made high-speed landing tests on new ships. Not till they had finished did Ka Kardak give them a rest.

"That's enough for today," he rumbled. "Incidentally we observe artificial day and night here, since the Sun never touches us. Walker, you and Yalu will take that Kalber out for its speed-tests tomorrow."

They trooped into the big barracks. Shaken as he was by the death of Ilo, Walker felt excited pride when he sat down to supper with these veteran Rocketeers. But he was more interested in their stories than in his food. They told of desperate test flights, of dire emergencies in the void, of space-racing and its thrills and perils.

"I say that a Rissman will win the Round-the-System Race again this

year," declared Losor, a gray Neptunian Rocketeer.

"I'm not so sure," drawled old Yalu, the Martian pilot who had been assigned to work with Walker the next day. "They say the new Tark stock model's faster than anything except Captain Future's *Comet*."

"Ho, wait till the race starts!" scoffed the Neptunian. "I hope I have the Rissman and you the Tark. You'll eat my flame all the way."

Twice Jan Walker heard ships landing with roaring tubes on the spaceport outside. They were returning from long-distance speed and endurance test flights. Their Rocketeer pilots came stalking in to take their seats at the tables, calling loud greetings to the others. But two chairs at the table remained unfilled. Walker saw big Ka Kardak looking worriedly at them.

"Where are Uzbo and Smith?" muttered the Jovian. "They should have been back with that Cruh-Cholo ship long ago."

"Same thing must have happened to Uzbo and Smith as to lots of the rest of us," drawled old Yalu, the Martian. "Another ship vanished."

"That makes nine ships in the last

three days," grumbled Losor.

Jan Walker felt the sinister mystery of the missing ships hanging like a black pall over all these hard-bitten Rocketeers. The younger pilots swallowed hard and pushed their plates away.

## CHAPTER II

### *Mystery in Space*



WALKER tossed uneasily in his barracks bunk that "night", dreaming of impossible speed-landings, of Ilo's tragic death, and of space ships that vanished strangely. He awoke with a start.

The bell that signaled "morning" was ringing. He emerged after breakfast to find other Rocketeers already trooping out toward the ships. The daily grind of testing was about to begin.

Suicide Station was maintained by the big space ship manufacturers for this purpose. All the big factories were located here on Mercury, and the manufacturers combined to pay the expense of this lonely station where their new ships could be tested.

Walker found Yalu warming up the Kalber Twenty. The old Martian Rocketeer already had his space-suit on.

"Did those two missing pilots get back with their ship?" Walker asked.

Yalu shook his head, his wrinkled face gloomy.

"Kardak had a televisior call from them after you turned in. Their ship was stolen, like all the rest. They don't know how it was done. They woke up floating in space, after suddenly going unconscious. A Venus-Mercury freighter picked them up. It's getting on my nerves. The Planet Police has one of their ace men here investigating. He can't find out who's doing it, or how."

Walker got into his space-suit while Yalu screwed shut the Kalber's door. At the Martian's signal, he took the pilot chair.

"All right, Earthling, take her off," the old Rocketeer ordered. "We'll run out past the orbit of Venus, cut out of the ship-lane into clear space, and then let her out for the speed trials."

The Kalber's cyclotrons throbbed cheerfully as they blasted off from Suicide Station. They soon left Mercury a dwindling brown ball behind them, and zoomed outward toward the orbit of Venus. Earth was a bright green star with the Moon a smaller silver companion star. Beyond lay the great deeps of the outer System. They throbbed on through space until they were past the orbit of Venus. Then Walker veered out of the standard ship-lane.

"All right, Earthman, let her out for all she's worth," drawled the old Martian Rocketeer.

Walker's hands gripped the throttles, but he never opened them. There was a sudden wild blurring of everything around him, a sensation as though he were being flung at awful speed through a howling vortex.

His senses slowly cleared. He still wore his space-suit, but he was not in the Kalber. He was floating in empty space, and there was no ship in sight. Stupefied, he stared around and glimpsed another man floating nearby. Walker snatched the portable impeller from his belt and drove himself toward old Yalu. The Martian's face was as bewildered as his own.

"Our ship—gone!" choked the veteran, clinging to Walker's arm. "They got it, whoever they are, like they got the others."

"But how?" cried Walker. "We saw nobody! There was just a crazy blurring of everything and then—this!"

"It's some blasted mystery weapon they use," the old Martian groaned. "It's like ghosts had taken the ship from us! We're not far from the ship-lane, so we may be picked up. But how are we going to report another new ship stolen? And how the orange imps of Phoebe are they doing it? Who is doing it? Why?"

For many hours the two men drifted together in space. Jan Walker's thoughts were bitter. In his first day as a Rocketeer, he had lost the valuable ship he was supposed to test.

He felt so discouraged that he almost dreaded being picked up and returned to Mercury.

Suddenly old Yalu gripped his arm and pointed sunward.

"There's a ship! We'll use our impellers to flash a signal."

Frantically they blasted bright flame from their impellers, to catch the attention of the black speck they could see against the Sun. The speck grew larger. The ship had turned and was coming straight toward them. It was a new Garson Sixteen.

When it paused beside them, and they were pulled inside, they found that the craft was piloted by Losor, the tall Neptunian Rocketeer.

"Figured you'd be somewhere in this sector," he declared. "Ka Kardak sent me out to look for you when you didn't return. Where's your ship?"

Jan Walker shrugged gloomily. "It was hijacked from us."

"Same way as all the other hijackings, Losor," said Yalu. "Everything suddenly blurred. Then we found ourselves floating in space."

"This mystery is getting too much for me!" Losor swore. "Three ships gone in two days! No wonder Ka Kardak is burning."

Ka Kardak in fact seemed boiling with suppressed emotion when he came striding out to meet them as they landed at Suicide Station.

"Of all the space-struck idiots!" he roared. "Letting your ship be taken like that—you two must have fallen asleep!"

"No, we didn't," defended Yalu earnestly. "Some queer force hit us."

"Bah, I ought to wash you both up for this! Three of the space ship magnates are here right now, riding me about these vanished ships. And old Gurney, the Planet Patrol ace, is here with them. Come along, you two imbeciles!"

With sinking heart, Jan Walker followed the Jovian and Yalu into the Station offices. A middle-aged Uranian, fat, yellow-skinned and beady-eyed, came forward to meet them. It was Ak Kalber, head of the big Kalber Space Ship Company.

"That new Twenty of yours is gone," rumbled Ka Kardak. "Taken

off these two men of mine, the same as all the others."

"This is too much!" hissed Ak Kalber. "Nineteen of my ships have been lost this way, new ships worth hundreds of thousands of dollars each. Something's got to be done about this, and done quickly!"

Lan Tark, the tall, solemn-eyed red Martian tycoon of the famous Tark factories, nodded emphatic agreement.

"Kalber's right. We need action. We can't stand this heavy loss of brand-new ships."

The third space ship magnate was Gray Garson, an Earthman with deep lines of worry in his homely, rugged face.

"I've lost only six new ships, but that's a tremendous loss for a small company like mine," he said ruefully.

Ak Kalber turned toward the fourth man in the office, a grizzled old Earthman in the dark uniform of the Planet Police. He was chewing *rial* leaf, his faded blue eyes watching everything.

"Marshal Gurney, something must be done to stop these thefts before we're bankrupted!" the Uranian declared.

**J**AN WALKER felt his pulse jump as he looked at the bleak-eyed old Police marshal. This was the famous Ezra Gurney, veteran of the Patrol, a companion in arms of the legendary Captain Future himself!

"You still got no idea who's stealin' these ships, and why, and how it's bein' done?" asked Ezra Gurney thoughtfully.

"I have an idea, yes!" declared Ak Kalber. He looked vindictively at Jan Walker and Yalu. "I believe these Rocketeers are deliberately turning over our new ships to someone, and then coming back with this fantastic story!"

Jan Walker and Yalu bristled at the accusation. Before they could defend themselves, Ka Kardak stepped in.

"No one can call my Rocketeers crooked! They're a bunch of soft-heads. They have to have me riding them every minute to keep them working, but they're not crooks. I'll beat the head off anyone who says they are!"

"Easy, there," drawled Ezra Gurney to the enraged Jovian. "Gettin' mad's not goin' to help things any. These space ship manufacturers have a right to be worked up, they've lost so many valuable new ships. And we Planet Police haven't been able to track down a single one of those hijacked ships, worse luck. If these thefts keep up, they'll disorganize the whole space ship manufacturing industry. And so far we haven't been able to get even an idea where all the stolen ships are taken, or why and how they're bein' stolen."

The old marshal seemed to reach a decision.

"I'm goin' back to Earth and see the System President about this. I'm goin' to ask him to call in Cap'n Future!"

"Captain Future?" Kalber exclaimed. He seemed almost taken aback. "Do you think he would investigate this mystery?"

"He would if the President calls him, and I think I can convince the President," stated Ezra. "We can't let the whole space ship industry be disorganized this way without doin' somethin' about it."

Gray Garson nodded emphatic agreement, a new light of hope on his rugged face.

"If Captain Future could break up these mysterious thefts, he'd save some of us from bankruptcy!"

"Even we bigger manufacturers can't stand such losses long," Lan Tark, the solemn Martian magnate declared. "Rissman and Zamor and the others will all be encouraged to learn that Captain Future may take a hand in this."

Ezra Gurney strode toward the door.

"I'm goin' back to Solar City and then blast for Earth. Remember, not a word of this to anyone except the other manufacturers!"

\* \* \*

**W**HEN Ezra Gurney left Mercury an hour later, he would have been less confident of secrecy had he been able to see into a certain small room with walls of smooth stone, a low cement ceiling and no

windows. A dim clangor came from outside, but it was impossible to guess its nature, or the location of this secret room. Under a cluster of bright uranite bulbs gleamed the square bulk of a powerful televisor. In front of it stood a weird machine that grotesquely resembled a man.

The machine man stood upon girder-legs and had jointed girder-arms. Behind his metal ribs were compact generators and motors and cogged gears, crowded closely together. His head was a big cubical metal box. In one side of it were two visi-plates that served as eyes. From the mouth-like orifice came a deep, humming voice as the machine man spoke into the televisor.

"This is One speaking. Calling Forty-four at Venus Base!"

The mechanical creature who called himself "One" stood motionless, awaiting a reply. The televisor screen glowed with light. Then it showed another metal machine man, similar to One, except that his cubical head or brain-case was not so large.

"Forty-four speaking. What is it, One?"

"Your report, Forty-four?" demanded One.

"Two space ships captured today," said the other machine man. "A new Kalber Twenty and a Zamor Eight. We have them safe here at Venus Base."

"What about their Rocketeer pilots?"

"We tossed them out into space and left them floating, as usual," replied Forty-four. "They have no idea of how we did it, of course."

"Bring those two ships on to Main Base here at once. Use more than ordinary caution not to be spotted as you approach Mercury. The Rocketeers are greatly aroused, and the Planet Police have redoubled their efforts to catch us."

"I understand," replied Forty-four simply. "I will bring them."

One snapped off the televisor. Then his cubical metal head swiveled toward the door of the room. His voice hummed loudly.

"Six, Fifteen!" he called.

The door opened. A clangorous

banging and hammering from the mysterious place outside invaded the room as two machine men stalked stiffly in and closed the door. Six and Fifteen were like One in every detail, except that their cubical brain-cases also were not so large.

"Your orders?" asked Six.

"It has come to my knowledge,"

Government and its laws. And his three assistants, the so-called Future-men, make him even more dangerous. Captain Future's home is on Earth's Moon. When the System President needs this man, he calls him by a certain beacon signal upon Earth's North Pole. Undoubtedly he will soon call Captain Future by this means, to gain



hummed One, "that the Planet Police, having failed to check our activities, are about to call in a certain Earthman named Captain Future to help them."

"I do not know of Captain Future," declared Six.

"You would not, of course," admitted One. "But I know of him. He is only a human, yet he can be dangerous, for he is a master of science and an unswerving champion of the System

his assistance in stopping our activities."

**N**EITHER Six nor Fifteen made any comment, as human beings would have done. They stood silently awaiting orders.

"It is essential," continued One's cold mechanical voice, "that Captain Future and his assistants be prevented from interfering with our plans. It is

your duty to prevent that. You will head for the Moon at once in our fastest ship, with a crew of six. Get there before the beacon signal calls the Futuremen to Earth. You will take Captain Future and his assistants by surprise and overpower them by means of our usual weapon.

"Surprise is vital. Once this man is on his guard, even our powerful weapon might fail against him. Secure them and their ship, the *Comet*, but do not kill Captain Future or his men. Their ship, the *Comet*, contains many valuable scientific secrets of space ship design which only he and the Futuremen understand. Bring them to Venus Base first, and I will notify you when it is safe to come here to Main Base. Then we shall force Future or his comrades to explain all the features of their ship to us. After that we can kill them."

Six and Fifteen, without question or remark, turned and stalked out of the room. Presently, through the subdued clangor outside, came the roar of a powerful space ship's rocket-tubes blasting for take-off. The awesome mechanical figure of the master of the machine men remained immobile, his enormous artificial eyes inscrutable.

### CHAPTER III

#### *The Man of Tomorrow*



CURTIS NEWTON, the young planeteer famous through the whole Solar System as Captain Future, straightened from the work that had intently engrossed him for hours. He stood surveying the object of his

labor. It was a peculiar square case of transparent metal, resting on his laboratory table.

"All finished, at last!" Captain Future exclaimed with relief. "Want to try it out now, Simon?"

A rasping metallic voice answered him. It appeared to come from the odd square case before him.

"Give me a minute to familiarize myself with the controls, Curtis."

"Oh, all right," Curt Newton conceded impatiently. "You're so all-fired deliberate about everything. I want to see how it works!"

Waiting anxiously, Captain Future made a striking figure. The young Earthman was six feet four in height, and his lithe ranginess in his drab zipper-suit made him seem even taller. As he stood running one hand through his mop of torch-red hair, his space-tanned, handsome face and clear gray eyes mirrored his eagerness to test the results of his work.

Curt looked more like a fighting man than a scientist. But the big ring on his left hand—a ring whose nine bright "planet" jewels constantly revolved around a radiant "Sun" jewel—identified him on nine worlds as the System's greatest scientific wizard. The matchless laboratory on the Moon was silent witness to his abilities.

In the uninhabited airless satellite, under the floor of Tycho crater, was the maze of underground rooms of Captain Future's home. The ceiling of this biggest room was a large glassite window which gave a view of outside space. In the black vault bulked the green, huge sphere of Earth, and the dazzling Sun whose rays poured in to glitter off the laboratory's crowded scientific equipment and unfamiliar machines.

"Very well, Curtis, I'm ready to test the projector now," came the rasping voice from the square, transparent case on the table. "But I still wish I hadn't let you talk me into this."

"Think how convenient it will be for you to be able to move about, Simon," Captain Future argued. "Remember how helpful it was in that case of the Seven Space Stones, when you could use that phony Thinking Machine body to get about in? And look how much easier your scientific researches will be, when you can handle instruments."

"It is true that mobility would facilitate my studies," admitted the metallic voice. "That is the only reason I agreed to your proposal."

Simon Wright, whose rasping voice was speaking, had been one of the

greatest scientists in the System. Approaching death had made it necessary to remove his brain and house it inside a metal case whose compact pumps and purifiers circulated the serum which kept the Brain alive. In the front of the case were Simon's lens-eyes, mounted on flexible stalks, and his mechanical resonator-mouth.

Captain Future had just finished installing a new mechanism inside the Brain's case. It was a projector which could shoot magnetic beams of several different orders out through the walls of the case itself. The control of this little projector was connected directly to the nerve-centers of the Brain.

"I'll try the tractor beams for motion first," rasped Simon.

**A** THIN blue beam shot down from the square case, and the Brain at once rose smoothly into the air from the table. He poised there, motionless. Then he jetted a blue beam from the back of his case, and at once the push of the magnetic ray sent him gliding through the air toward the wall of the laboratory. Around the laboratory the Brain flew silently and smoothly, while Curt watched.

"Simon, it's perfect!" Captain Future exclaimed as the Brain came to a halt in mid-air beside him. "You can move in air or space at will now."

"It's true that this expands my powers, without being a drag on my thought processes, as a body would be," the Brain conceded. "There is a certain pleasure in self-locomotion which I had forgotten."

With a sudden jet of blue beams, the Brain flashed again around the big sunlit laboratory, so fast that the eye could hardly follow.

"Fire-imps of Jupiter!" breathed a hissing voice from a door of the room. "Look, Grag. Simon can fly now!"

It was Otho the android who stood in the door, gaping amazedly. Otho was one of the Futuremen, Curt Newton's unhuman trio of loyal comrades. He was a synthetic human being who had been made in this very laboratory, long years ago. He was manlike enough superficially, but not his rubbery white synthetic flesh, the slitted, slanting green eyes in his hairless

white face, the devil-may-care recklessness and humor in his thin features. Unhuman, too, were Otho's speed and agility and skill in disguise.

"I must have been drinking Jovian fern-wine, or else I'm dreaming!" Otho gasped, staring. "Tell me, Grag, do you see it, too?"

Grag the robot, third of the legendary Futuremen, was peering in equal astonishment over the android's head. Grag towered seven feet high, a massive metal giant whose glowing photo-electric eyes, round metal head and mighty metal body gave him an alien majesty.

"What does it mean, Master?" Grag asked Captain Future in his booming voice. "I thought Simon didn't want a body."

"I don't have any body!" the Brain rasped angrily, poising beside them. "I wouldn't have one. A body is just a drag on the mind. But with these beams I can move at will and do things for myself."

In illustration, the Brain jetted two thin blue rays which fastened upon a tool on the table with magnetic grip. Using the beams as arms and hands, the Brain deftly manipulated the tool.

"Swell, Simon!" Captain Future approved. "Now you won't need Otho or Grag to help you in your experiments."

"And now I can be of more aid to you, Curtis, in times of danger," added the Brain, his lens-eyes fixed on the big young planeteer.

"As though anyone could be a greater help to me than you've been!" Curt cried warmly. "You, who took care of me almost from the time I was born, who reared me and educated me here on the Moon—"

"Say, Chief, Grag and I had a hand in that, too!" Otho exclaimed indignantly. "We educated you as much as Simon did."

Curt chuckled. "I'll say you did. I'll never forget the system you two used when I was disobedient. You would catch me, Otho, and then Grag would spank me."

**F**OR a moment there was a little silence. All four had been swept back in memory to past years. The

Brain could remember when he had been Doctor Simon Wright, famous scientist of an Earth university, a colleague of the brilliant Roger Newton. And he remembered how danger had come to Roger Newton. Unscrupulous men coveted Newton's scientific secrets.

He could remember how he and Newton and the latter's young wife had fled from Earth, seeking refuge on the barren Moon.

Here they had built the underground laboratory-home, and here Roger Newton's little son Curtis had been born. And here Newton and the Brain had continued their great scientific experiment of creating artificial, intelligent, living beings. Grag the robot had been their first creation. And Otho the synthetic man was their second.

But the unscrupulous plotters who coveted Roger Newton's scientific secrets had followed them to the Moon. They had killed Newton and his wife and were themselves killed by Grag and Otho. Little Curtis Newton, a helpless infant, had been left in the lonely Moon-home in the care of the Brain, the robot and the android.

Strange guardians for a human child though they were, they had given Curtis Newton an education such as no boy ever received before. The Brain's vast scientific knowledge, the tremendous physical strength of giant Grag, and the speed and agility of Otho, all were transmitted to the growing youth. Small wonder that Curt Newton had reached maturity as a man with superhuman capabilities—a man of tomorrow!

Curt had dedicated himself to unrelenting war against such criminals as had destroyed his parents. He had offered his services to the President of the System Government. He had called himself Captain Future because he felt he was fighting for the future of the System's peoples against would-be exploiters and oppressors. And time after time, Captain Future and his three loyal, unhuman Futuremen had, by scientific mastery and sheer daring, beaten down dark super-criminals and plotters. Otho broke the silence. The android was always the

most restless of them, and he had something in mind which he broached to Curt in a cunningly casual tone.

"Say, Chief, I thought I'd take the *Comet* around to those chasms on the other side of the Moon, for another load of beryllium ore."

"We don't really need any more beryllium now," Curt stated. "You just want to get off on another jaunt over in those chasms. Suppose you crashed in one of them while fooling around."

"Yes, suppose you crashed," Grag boomed loudly to Otho. "Then the *Comet* would be wrecked! Of course, if your neck were broken, that would be all to the good, but we mustn't risk the ship."

"Why, you walking junk-heap—" Otho began to explode.

Curt saw that the eternal argument between the android and the robot was about to begin.

"All right, Otho, get going if you want to," he said hastily.

"Thanks, Chief. I'll deal with this cast-iron museum piece when I get back." The android started for the door. He stopped to pick up a small, gray, bearlike animal with beady eyes and a sharp snout that was sniffing at a scrap of metal by the door. "Guess I'll take Oog along with me. He likes to get out once in awhile, too."

"That's not your pet Oog!" Grag bellowed indignantly, stalking forward. "It's Eek, my pet."

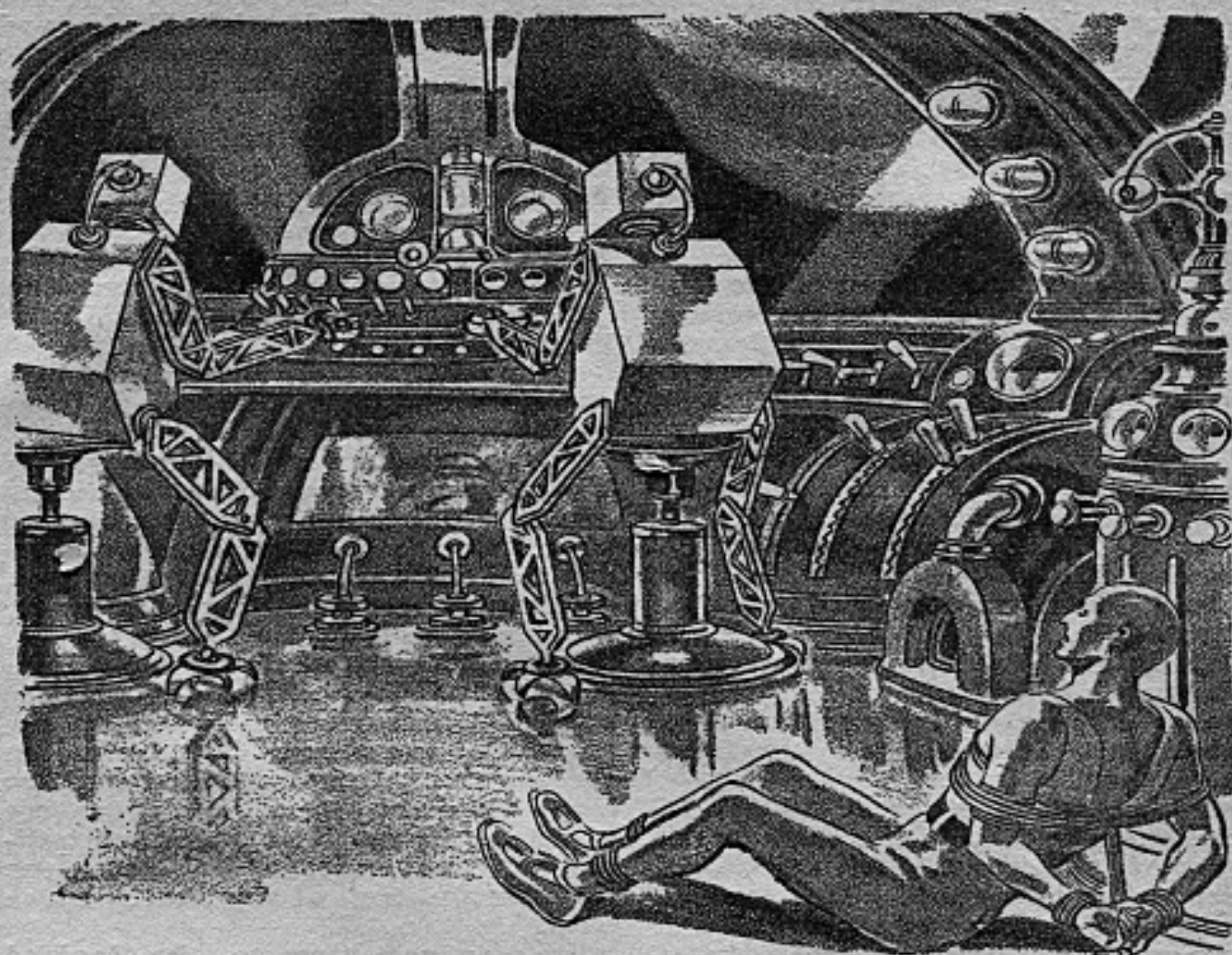
"Your brain is rusting," Otho retorted. "This is Oog."

Grag angrily tore the little animal from his grasp.

"Do you think I can't see? You just thought you'd take Eek with you and drop him in a chasm, because you don't like him—"

Grag stopped suddenly. The little gray, snouted animal he had snatched away had suddenly changed its appearance. Its shape and color shifted bewilderingly, and abruptly it was a completely different animal. It was now a fat, doughy, white little beast, with shapeless legs and big, solemn eyes.

"**W**HY, it is Oog!" Grag blurted, amazed. He dropped the little



Otho came to—he was a prisoner of the machine-men! (Chap. V)

animal angrily. "I won't stand this any longer! He's always imitating my Eek and fooling me!"

"Take it easy, Grag," soothed Captain Future. "There comes your precious Eek now."

Grag's pet was just such a snouted, gray, bearlike little beast as Oog had been imitating. Eek was a moon-pup, a queer species native to the Moon. He did not breathe air. He devoured metal and metallic ores for his food, and he could understand telepathic commands.

Oog, Otho's pet, was a meteor-mimic he had captured on one of the asteroids.

The fat, doughy white creature possessed a power of shifting the organization of its body cells at will. Thus it could perfectly imitate anything near its own size, be it beast, bird or rock. Its faculty was an ex-

treme development of protective coloration.

Otho was chuckling as he picked up his Oog and started into the tunnel leading to the hangar of the *Comet*.

"Back soon, Chief," he said.

"You'd better be!" Curt called after him sternly. "If you try to leave the Moon on some expedition of your own, I'll melt you down and make a new android of you!"

They heard a roar of blasting rockets a moment later. Through the ceiling window they glimpsed a small teardrop ship zoom up into the black sky with incredible speed and roar westward. It was the *Comet*, famous space ship and flying laboratory of the Futuremen.

"Master, I'm getting tired of all these tricks Otho uses to annoy me!" boomed Grag. "I won't stand for it."

"Grag, I am getting tired also of you

two scrapping," Curt Newton declared. "If you don't get out of here with your complaints, I'm going to fit your metal carcass with rockets and launch you out into space full blast toward the star Deneb. For your information, that star is five hundred light-years away. Now will you leave me in peace?"

Sulkily Grag stalked out of the laboratory. They heard him muttering indignantly to Eck as his heavy, clanking steps receded. Captain Future had a rueful smile on his face as he turned to the Brain.

"Simon, what are we going to do about those two?" he appealed. "They'd die for each other, but they'd rather die than show it. Can't we do something?"

The Brain's lens-eyes fixed thoughtfully on him.

"We might be able to devise an aura of hypnotic force that would project a powerful good-will suggestion into their minds. It would take the fight out of them."

"Simon, that's a great idea! It could be done. We'd have them gushing over each other. What a joke on them it would be!" He looked thoughtfully up toward the ceiling, stroking his chin as he spoke. "To construct a small projector of carrier waves for the hypnotic encephaloid vibration, we'll need—"

Curt's voice trailed into silence. He had become queerly rigid as he stood gazing up through the glassite window in the ceiling.

"Simon, look at Earth!" he cried.

The Brain turned his lens-eyes upward.

"The North-Pole signal, lad! The summons from the President!"

**E**ARTH bulked green and huge in the star-studded black sky. On the white North Polar ice-fields of the planet, a brilliant point of light was winking and throbbing. It was the summons to Captain Future! Curt had arranged with the System President to have that North Pole beacon flashed whenever there was urgent need of him.

"They need us for something, Simon! I'll call Otho back at once and

we'll blast off for Earth." He jumped to the big televisor instrument in the corner. A switch tuned it instantly to the secret wave of the Futuremen. "Otho, the chief calling! Turn around and blast back here full speed. The President is calling us."

**O**THO'S voice came from the televisor, yelping with excitement. "That means trouble ahead! I'll be back right—"

Otho's words were interrupted by a strange sound from the televisor. "Say, something's happening! I—"

"Otho, what's wrong?" Curt yelled. There was no answer. Captain Future swung around, his gray eyes blazing now. "Otho's been attacked or overcome in some way, Simon! Come on, we'll use the electroscopic finder to see where he is in the *Comet*."

The electroscopic finder was a massive cylindrical instrument whose conical lenses were mounted on the surface of the Moon. Curt turned on the instrument, and touched a screw that swung the lenses. His eyes were glued on the sensitive gages and indicators. The finder could locate the position and trail of any nearby space ship.

It was sensitive to the ionized atomic rocket blasts of a ship.

"This shows the *Comet* heading away from the Moon!" Curt cried. "It's going in the general direction of Venus!"

"Then Otho's been overpowered by someone who has captured the *Comet* and is making off with it, lad," rasped the Brain, cool as always. "And we've no ship to follow in."

Curt immediately jumped back to the televisor.

"I'm going to call Planet Police headquarters on Earth and have them rush a ship here to us." But when he turned on the televisor again, a deafening sputtering came from it, through which no signal could be heard. "That's not static. Someone has deliberately jammed the ether around the Moon. The same ones who took the *Comet* did it to prevent our calling Earth. They've marooned us here so we can't follow them or answer the President's summons!"

## CHAPTER IV

*The Trail to Venus*

FUTURE could act in an emergency with unparalleled speed, but he never did things in a blind, heedless rush, no matter how grave the peril. Always his powerful mind rapidly assessed the situation, decided

upon the most logical course of action, before he acted. He stood now, his fists clenched, his handsome face hard and grim. A stranger would have thought him speechless with wrath at the theft of the *Comet*.

But the Brain knew from long experience that Curt was examining every factor of the situation in his lightning way.

Then Captain Future sprang toward a tall electrical cabinet in a corner of the laboratory. Its face was bewilderingly covered with dials.

"Whoever took the *Comet* dropped an electro-magnetic generator somewhere on the Moon, to keep the ether jammed," Curt rapped out. "If we can locate it and destroy it, we can get a message through. Call Grag."

The Brain, using his newly acquired magnetic beams for propulsion, went flying out of the laboratory and through the rock tunnels in search of the robot.

He found Grag sulking with Eek in a supply room.

"Trouble, Grag," rasped Simon.

In a few words he explained. Grag jumped up and hastily followed the flying Brain back to the laboratory. Captain Future was turning from the cabinet of sensitive electrical instruments, his gray eyes narrowed.

"They're clever, Simon," he gritted. "They didn't drop their ether-jammer on the Moon where we could find and destroy it. They attached a small rocket-motor to it and left it circling the Moon at a high altitude, where we can't reach it."

"Isn't there some way we can get at

the thing and shut it off?" Grag boomed anxiously. "Maybe we could build a little rocket."

"That would take us days," Curt retorted. "And in the meantime the President's calling for us, the *Comet* is being taken and we don't know what's happened to Otho. We must do something quickly to get a call through to Earth, but I don't know what—"

"Lad, listen!" interrupted the Brain. "You're forgetting my new powers of flight! I could reach that ether-jammer and shut it off."

"I must be space-struck not to have thought of that!" Curt Newton cried. "Wait, Simon. I'll locate the thing as accurately as I can and give you directional readings."

Using the sensitive instruments in the tall cabinet, Captain Future plotted the course and position of the ether-jamming generator that had been left circling the Moon. He told the Brain the readings. Then they hurried to the air-lock which led out to the surface of the Moon. Curt paused inside the lock to pull on his space-suit, first buckling on his flat gray tool-belt and proton pistol. Grag, who did not breathe, needed no space-suit, nor did Simon.

The three comrades went up through the air-lock and emerged on to the lunar surface. They stood on the glaring plain at the bottom of Tycho. The horizon all around them was walled by the fanglike crater peaks that were silhouetted against the black, airless sky.

"Be careful, Simon," warned Curt. "Remember, you mustn't lose control of your beams or you'll hurtle out into space."

The Brain could hear despite the vacuum, for Curt was touching him.

"Wait here," Simon answered. "I'll soon be back."

THE Brain jetted a powerful magnetic beam downward. It sent him flying upward with amazing speed. The floor of the crater dropped rapidly, and Captain Future and Grag became two pygmies. Simon was now so high that he could look far across the parched surface of the Moon. Off to

the horizons stretched the desolate plains, studded here and there with enormous circular craters whose jagged walls rose like giant fortresses. In the black sky overhead bulked the green Earth and the blazing Sun.

The Brain remembered the directional readings Curt had given him. He had already reached the correct height, four miles above the Moon. After hanging in space while he mentally computed the other directionals against the time element, the Brain began to rocket northwestward. He had a cold, utter confidence in the correctness of his calculations. A man might have doubted, but not the Brain. He lived for science and was a master of every branch of it, second only to Curt.

"There it is," Simon told himself a few minutes later. "Now to shut the thing off."

A small black rocket was approaching him, flying around the Moon by an occasional blast of its tubes. It was only a few feet long, the type of rocket used for sending small objects in space. The Brain guessed that the ether-jamming generator was inside the rocket.

"Have to board the thing, I suppose," he thought dubiously.

He drove himself abreast of the rocket, flying beside it in space. Gradually the Brain closed in on it, until he was only inches away. Maintaining his position relative to the rocket, Simon jetted two thin blue beams at the side of the rocket. It took him a moment to open the door there. Inside the hollow cylinder he glimpsed a squat little generator. A flick of his beams shut it off. Another movement stopped the automatic fire-control of the rocket itself, and it dropped toward the lunar plain.

The Brain glided back down toward Tycho in a long, thrilling swoop that brought him to the side of Curt and Grag in moments.

"It's done," he reported. "They had taken a televiser generator, set it to emit a continuous untuned wave, and put it inside a message-rocket. The rocket was adjusted to keep circling the Moon."

"Smart thinking on their part," Curt

admitted. "Come on. We'll get a call through now to Earth."

They returned hastily into the Moon laboratory. Captain Future set their powerful televiser transmitter to the official wave of the Planet Police.

"Calling Planet Police headquarters on Earth!" he said.

The face of a uniformed Police officer appeared in the view screen. He looked startled.

"Captain Future!" he exclaimed.

He disappeared and in a moment appeared a face that the Futuremen knew well. It was the grizzled visage of old Ezra Gurney.

"What the devil?" gasped Ezra. "I thought you'd be blasting for Earth in the *Comet* by now. Didn't you see the North Pole signal?"

"The *Comet's* been stolen," Curt explained. "Get here in the fastest Planet Patrol cruiser you've got, Ezra."

"Sure will!" cried the veteran. "But the *Comet* stolen? Devils of space, I can't understand it!"

IT was hours later before the fast cruiser arrived. During that time, Captain Future and the Brain had rechecked the course of the stolen *Comet* by the electroscopic finder. It was still heading for Venus. Curt, Grag and the Brain were waiting on the surface of the lunar crater when the fast Patrol cruiser roared down to a landing. It was one of the few times any outside ship had ever landed upon this barren world which all the System knew was Captain Future's domain.

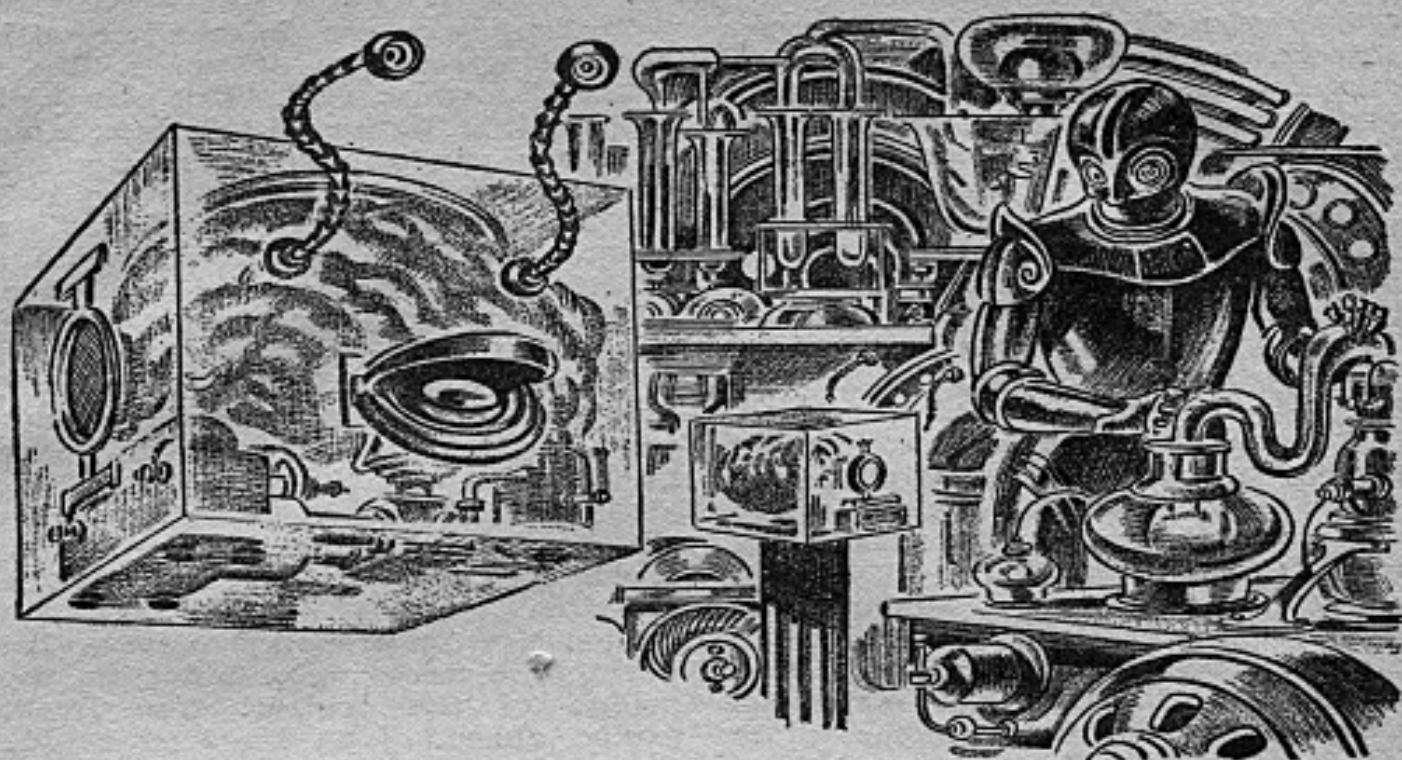
Curt hurried into the ship, the Brain gliding beside him. Grag followed, with his moon-pup perched on his shoulder. Ezra Gurney was waiting, his faded blue eyes still bewildered as Captain Future took off his space-suit.

"Order your crew to blast for Venus full speed, Ezra," Curt requested.

Unquestioningly the veteran marshal gave the order. The cruiser roared up from the Moon into space and curved around till its bow pointed at the white, gleaming speck of Venus.

"Now tell me how Cap'n Future's ship is stolen right under his nose," Ezra demanded.

"Yes, and where's Otho?" asked a



SIMON WRIGHT, THE LIVING BRAIN

girl's vibrant voice.

Curt Newton turned. Beside him stood a dark, pretty Earthgirl in man-nish jacket and space-slacks, her brown eyes kindling with excitement. It was Joan Randall, secret agent of the Planet Police, who had worked with Captain Future in the past.

"I might have known that you would be in on this business," Captain Future declared. "You're always on deck when there's trouble."

Ezra grinned widely. "Sure, she got herself put on detached service so she could bother us men when we had work to do. Do you think I could keep her from coming along when I got your call? Not a chance!"

"It's the only chance I ever get to see you," Joan said calmly to Curt. "You've never been polite enough to invite me up to that Moon-home of yours. And while it's not much of a romance to go charging all over the System with you, it's better than none at all."

"Romance?" Curt retorted. "You're just excitement-crazy. If you weren't so darned good at Police work, I'd have kicked you out into space long ago."

"Don't believe him, Ezra," said Joan.

"It's just a front he puts up. I'll bet he spends all his time on the Moon thinking of me."

"Listen, we've got things a danged sight more important to think of right now," Ezra Gurney protested. "Cap'n Future, who took the *Comet*?"

"I wish I knew," Curt said bitterly. He told of what had happened. "We have only that last interrupted call from Otho about a strange force hitting him, and the fact that they've taken the stolen ship to Venus."

Ezra smacked his knee with his bony hand.

"By the ice-fiends of Pluto, it all ties up together! Cap'n Future, your ship's been stolen by the same mysterious crowd that's hijacked hundreds of new space ships lately from the Rocketeers who were testin' them. That's what the President was callin' you about."

"Hundreds of space ships stolen?" Curt's brows knit. "How were they taken?"

"Same way as the *Comet* was snatched from Otho, it seems," Ezra replied. "A queer weapon of some kind hit the Rocketeers pilotin' them and they woke up in space. The ships were gone. we don't know where. And

maybe you don't think those space ship magnates on Mercury are goin' crazy! I was there investigatin' and I couldn't learn anything, so I blasted back to Earth and had the President call you."

The Brain's voice broke the momentary silence that ensued. Simon Wright had poised behind Curt, listening until now.

"Then the same criminals who have been stealing ships from the Rocketeers also took the *Comet*," he rasped. "They must have intended not merely to steal our ship but to get you, Curtis. They'd figure that we'd all be in our ship, on our way to answer the President's call."

"I believe you're right, Simon," Curt muttered thoughtfully. "But what's the purpose of the organization behind all this? And what's this mysterious weapon they use to overcome pilots inside their ships?"

**E**ZRA GURNEY and Joan had for the first time noticed that the Brain was poising in mid-air on his beams, between Curt and Grag.

"Why, Simon can move now!" Ezra exclaimed.

Curt explained briefly about Simon Wright's new equipment. Then Captain Future continued:

"You were right in having the President call me, Ezra. These space ship thefts are serious. The ring that's pulling them apparently possesses secret new scientific powers against which ordinary precautions are useless. We'll have to fight that outfit. But first we're following this trail to Venus. It's vital that we regain possession of the *Comet* and rescue Otho, if he's still alive. This trail is also our best lead to the space ship hijacking ring. They must have a secret base on Venus."

"How're you goin' to find it if they have?" Ezra demanded. "They got a big start on us and we can't well comb all of Venus."

"I brought along an electroscope," Curt replied, showing the compact instrument under his arm. "Simon and I can use it to spot their space-trail by the ionized rocket blast, if we're lucky."

"I know you can do wonders with them electroscopes of yours, Cap'n Future," Ezra scoffed. "But plenty of ships call at Venus all the time. How in space can you spot the *Comet*'s trail among 'em all?"

"The *Comet*," Curt reminded, "is a unique ship. Its cyclotrons produce an atomic discharge unlike any other. We'll know its ionized rocket-trail, if we find it."

"Hope you're right," Ezra said gloomily. "I'm goin' to see if we can't pump up a little more speed. Space knows we'll need it." He limped off along the corridors. They heard his sharp voice exhorting the crew. "Rev those cys up, you loafers! We're crawlin'."

Curt Newton prepared to set up his portable electroscopic finder in the bridge of the cruiser. The Brain glided ahead. Joan lingered beside Curt.

"You're really glad I came along, aren't you?" she asked him.

"Of course, Joan," Curt replied blandly. "You're a first-class secret agent and you may be a lot of help to us."

"I'm not talking about that and you know it!" she cried exasperatedly. "I might as well use my feminine wiles on Grag."

Grag was plucking Curt's arm.

"Do you really think they would kill Otho when they captured the *Comet*?" he asked.

"I hope not," Captain Future answered soberly. "Otho's pretty hard to kill, anyway. I wouldn't worry about him, Grag."

"Worry about him?" Grag boomed. "The only thing I'm worried about is that maybe he escaped!"

He clanked away indignantly. Curt looked after him.

"Poor old Grag, he's worried sick about Otho, and doesn't want anyone to know it."

Hour followed hour as the fast cruiser flashed on toward Venus. The steady *broom-boom* of the cyclotrons and the roar of the rockets never faltered. The white speck of the cloudy planet grew slowly in size. Captain Future and Simon constantly checked and rechecked with the electroscope.

Only the two greatest masters of science in the System could have detected that faint, impalpable trail of ionized atoms which they were following.

"There are two trails, lad," Simon had reported. "One is the distinctive rocket-trail of the *Comet*, the other that of an ordinary ship."

Curt nodded. "The ship the thieves came to the Moon in, of course. It's accompanying the *Comet* now. That's a break for us. They've had to hold down the *Comet* to the other craft's maximum speed."

AS Venus finally broadened out in full planetary splendor before them, Captain Future never left the electroscope. They were now crossing the rocket-trails left by other ships in passing, and he had to use all his powers of concentration to keep onto the *Comet's* distinctive spoor.

"They headed for the southern hemisphere," Curt muttered to the others in the bridge. "That's where their base must be hidden."

"It's the least inhabited part of Venus, so it'd be the likeliest spot for a secret hideout," Ezra Gurney agreed.

Down into the cloudy atmosphere of the planet they dropped, in the southern hemisphere. Here the rocket-trail ended. Though an ionized rocket-discharge will remain constant a long time in space, it will not do so in an atmosphere, for the currents soon sweep it away.

"From here on, we just hunt," Curt said grimly. "Drop down to low altitude and start sweeping over the surface in a widening spiral. If my calculations are correct, we're over the Great South Marsh."

"There can't be no secret base in that hole!" Ezra blurted. "Why, there ain't even enough solid ground in it for a ship to land on."

They dropped through the last cloud-layer into the clear lower atmosphere. The Great South Marsh lay beneath them. Giant green reeds and tangled, snaky vines choked the spaces between the larger swamp-trees. So dense was the vegetation that it completely hid the semi-liquid

muck beneath. Queer reptilian birds flew above the foliage roof, uttering harsh screams.

"There ain't nothin' in this mess for a thousand miles," Ezra grunted. "Even the Venusians are afraid to go into it."

"That's just why it's a good hide-out," Curt declared, scanning the horizons. "Keep watching for a ship or solid land."

For two hours the Patrol ship cruised in widening spirals over the vast morass. The cloudy sky above was beginning to grow dark. The night fog was rising from the swamp in thickening white mists. The Brain's keen lens-eyes, straining through the gathering darkness, descried something.

"There, lad—to the west!"

Curt peered quickly. He glimpsed something that looked like a big, flat, square metal platform, floating on the marsh. Half a dozen space ships were parked upon it.

"Descend at once before they see us!" he ordered sharply. "We daren't approach in this cruiser. They'd use the same mysterious weapon on us that they used on the *Comet* and the Rocketeers' ships."

"Then what're we goin' to do?" Ezra asked.

"We'll land here and a few of us can get through the marsh to that base," Curt explained. "We can slip in secretly and find Otho and the *Comet*. Then we'll jump these raiders before they can use the secret weapon."

The Patrol cruiser dropped in the gathering night until its keel crushed the vegetation and began sinking into the muck.

"You'll have to keep the keel-jets going to prevent sinking," Curt said. "All right, Ezra. You, Grag, Simon and I will go."

But when they reached the door, Joan Randall was with them.

"Do you think I'm going to miss the fun?" she demanded resentfully.

"This marsh is no picnic," Curt rapped. "You've seen Venusian marsh tigers. The marsh men here are worse."

"I've met lots of Venusian swamp

men," scoffed Joan.

"Swamp men are different," Curt stated. "They're just ordinary Venusian humans who live in some of the swamps. But marsh men are a different species from swamp men. They're an indigenous, amphibious race. They are fierce and hate anyone who intrudes into their great marshes."

Joan shrugged calmly. "I think I'd like to see some of them. They sound sort of intriguing."

"Intriguing?" Curt repeated in amazement. "I give up. Come on, and don't let yourself sink in this muck or you're through."

They plunged down into the sticky marsh, sinking to their knees. Curt Newton led the way, using a broad-bladed swamper's knife to hack a path through the dense vegetation. Joan trudged manfully, while Ezra swore at the blood-flies viciously attacking them. Grag wallowed on with difficulty, but the Brain glided easily on his beams beside Curt.

The darkness was misty, warm and oppressive, heavy with rank swamp smells and flower fragrances. The hum of huge insects, the slap of hanging vines and the suck of their feet in the muck were occasionally drowned out by the distant, appalling screech of a marsh tiger. Curt suddenly halted. They heard a confused swimming sound, a vague rippling swashing in the muck.

"Marsh men!" Curt whispered. "I think they're surrounding us!"

## CHAPTER V

### *Oog Redeems Himself*



him.

The *Comet* was kept in an under-

OTH O was still chuckling as he left Captain Future, Grag and Simon in the Moon-laboratory and made his way to the *Comet*.

"Oog, we out-talked Grag that time," he told the queer little pet who was trotting beside

ground hangar near the Moon-home. Otho entered the compact, teardrop-shaped vessel with his pet, closed the door and strode forward through the laboratory-cabin to the control room. He took the pilot chair and touched the cyclotron switches and throttles. Its keel-tubes jetting fire, the *Comet* rose toward the roof of the hangar. The roof slid aside automatically. The streamlined ship rose above the glaring surface of the Moon and then zoomed westward. Otho put on his space-suit, to be ready for his work in the lunar chasms.

"Am I glad to get out a little!" Otho breathed. "If I'd been cooped up much longer, I'd have turned into an oyster."

Oog heard him. The fat little meteor-mimic instantly shifted his body cells and became a perfect imitation of a giant Neptunian oyster.

"No, no, Oog, I didn't mean for you to imitate an oyster," Otho said impatiently. "You're too quick on the trigger. Snap out of it."

Oog returned to normal. Meanwhile the little ship was zipping at high speed around toward the other side of the Moon. Otho loved to get out alone. The android, beneath his devil-may-care recklessness and gaiety, had a sensitive, brooding mind. He keenly felt the fact that he was an artificial man. He liked to adventure by himself, imagining himself a human being.

He was half around the Moon, traveling at high altitude, when the television beside him buzzed sharply. Curt's voice crackled from it.

"Otho, the chief calling! Turn around and blast back here full speed. The President is calling us."

Otho stiffened with excitement. A glance up at the green sphere of Earth showed that a tiny light was blinking at its North Pole.

"That means trouble ahead!" he cried exultantly. "I'll be right back—" At that moment he felt a movement inside the *Comet*. He turned. There seemed to be nobody but himself in the ship, yet he knew he was not alone. "Say, something's happening! I—"

Before he could say more, invisibil-



Grag seized a marsh man and raised him high above his head (Chap. VI)

forces seized him. Everything became a blur as he was whirled out of the pilot chair with inconceivable rapidity. His senses blanked out.

When he came to himself, he was lying on the floor of the *Comet*. His space-suit helmet was off, and little Oog was worriedly pawing his face. Otho found he was tightly trussed by flexible metal bonds.

"What in the name of ten thousand imps!" swore the enraged android. "Who—"

His voice froze in amazement as he squirmed around and got a full view of the interior of the ship. The *Comet* was blasting through space at high speed. In its pilot chair now sat an amazing figure, and there was another beside him. They were machines that looked vaguely like men, mere open skeletons of metal girders crowded with complex, whirring mechanical organs. They had girder arms

and legs, and their heads were square metal boxes with big glass visi-plates for eyes.

Anyone else might have been too stupefied for speech at finding himself the helpless prisoner of two fearsome machine men, but not Otho. The android was not afraid of man or beast.

"What the devil does this mean?" he yelled.

The machine men paid him no attention. One of them was tuning the *Comet's* television to a certain wave. Then the creature spoke into it.

"This is Six reporting," he said in a humming voice. "We captured the *Comet*, but only one of the Futuremen was in it. What shall we do?"

Otho heard a deep bass voice answer. He could not see the television screen and did not know who was talking.

"You have blundered, Six, in not securing the other Futuremen also,"

it stated. "But don't go back for them now. It would be too dangerous. Bring the *Comet* and your prisoner to Venus Base as planned. Wait till I signal that the coast is clear before coming on to Main Base."

**O**THO heard the machine man who called himself "Six" snap off the televisor before opening the *Comet's* throttles. The ship blasted through space, its cyclotrons droning. Otho glimpsed another ship—a Cruh-Cholo Twenty-four—accompanying them in space. He guessed these queer machine men had boarded from the other ship. The android squirmed and cursed and made futile efforts to break his bonds. The flexible metal bands were unbreakable. Meanwhile the two ships were flying on at mounting speed, heading for distant Venus.

"What a pickle I've got myself into!" Otho muttered. "These freaks capturing me—Grag will laugh himself sick. Oh, well!"

And Otho philosophically fell asleep. There was nothing he could do till they reached Venus. He might as well get some rest.

He awoke to find the *Comet's* bow-tubes blasting. The ship was decelerating as it dropped through a cloudy atmosphere. He knew they had reached Venus. He squirmed on the floor till he was able to look down through the window at the landscape below.

"The Great South Marsh!" he gasped.

Then he glimpsed a big square metal platform in the marsh. It floated on the muck, supported by vacuum caissons. There were low metal hangars and buildings on it, and a row of parked ships of various makes—Kalbers, Zamors, Cruh-Cholos, one or two Tarks. The *Comet* and the other craft landed beside these ships.

The two machine men came back and lifted Otho in stiff girder-arms. Oog fled in fright into a corner, but Otho swore a streak of his best interplanetary profanity as they carried him out into the daylight. The machine men paid no attention. They carried him toward one of the low metal buildings.

The raging android saw more than a score of other machine men stalking stiffly about the floating base, inspecting and servicing the ships. Then he was taken to a windowless little metal room, whose only ventilation came from a barred opening in the door. They dumped him inside.

"Are you going to starve me to death, you unfinished mechanisms?" Otho yelled as they started to leave. "How about something to eat?"

The machine man who bore the number "Six" on his metal skeleton turned toward the other.

"One said that this prisoner was to be kept living. He must eat. Bring food from one of the ships."

The other machine man who bore the number "Twenty-two" stalked out and returned with Jovian cured beef, a flat slab of Martian black bread, some Earth fruit. Otho guessed that the other ships had been captured, and that this food came from one of them. Apparently these creatures didn't eat.

"Are you going to leave me all tied up like this?" he demanded furiously.

Six stooped stiffly and unfastened the end of Otho's flexible metal bonds. Then the two machine men stalked out. The door was locked.

"Remain outside this door on guard, Twenty-two," ordered Six.

Otho rolled over and over until he slipped out of his loosened bonds. Then he leaped to his feet.

"So far, so good," he muttered. "At least I talked them into untying me. Now let's see if there's any way out of this cursed hole."

**T**EN minutes of inspection showed him there was none. The only exit was the locked door, outside which towered the mechanical guard.

"What a mess!" Otho grumbled. "Locked up in this hole and the *Comet* taken. The chief will skin me alive for this. Who the devil are these freaks, anyway? Where'd they get all those ships?"

He gave up wondering, sat down and ate the food, for Otho's synthetic tissues required nourishment. Though he preferred straight chemical solutions of the needed elements, he could eat ordinary food. He was gloomily

gnawing the tough Martian bread when a sliding, rustling sound froze him. He looked up and felt cold at what he saw. A thick white snake with a blunt head was crawling through the barred opening in the door and into his prison cell.

"A Venusian swamp adder!" Otho whispered.

It was one of the most poisonous serpents in the System. Otho looked around for a weapon. There was none. He stood taut as a bowstring, watching the snake slide into the room. The serpent reached the floor and coiled up there. The thick mass of its coils seemed suddenly to run together, to form one solid mass. Then that mass spun in shape. In place of the pseudo-snake was a fat little animal with big, solemn eyes.

"Oog!" Otho gasped. "You little devil! You came sniffing after me, eh, and imitated a swamp adder so you wouldn't be noticed?"

He patted the little meteor-mimic, chuckling. Oog made a purring sound. He seemed content, now that he had found his master. Otho suddenly had an idea.

"Oog, I believe you can help me get out of here!" he breathed.

Otho waited until darkness came. The machine men outside did not seem to require sleep, but darkness would make his break easier. Otho picked up his little pet. He spoke in an emphatic whisper.

"Oog, I want you to be an atom bomb. Remember the atom bombs we used to blast ores out with, on the Moon? Big, black cones, with a switch-fuse on the end of each one? Be one now!"

Oog looked up worriedly. He seemed to understand that a new metamorphosis was required of him. He made a visible effort. The tissues of his strange body flowed and spun and formed a new shape. He made himself a perfect imitation of Eek.

"No, not that now," Otho whispered hastily. Oog bewilderedly came back to normal. "A bomb, Oog, an imitation of an atom bomb!"

Oog imitated one thing after another, everything he had seen Otho handle in the past. He became a

small telescope, a space-sextant, a big flagon of Jovian brandy, a television receiver. Then, when Otho was despairing, Oog flowed into an imitation of a conical atom bomb.

"That's it, Oog!" the android said excitedly. "Now hold it!"

Otho went to the door and called through the opening to the machine man on guard outside. The mechanical creature stalked forward. Otho held up his pseudo-bomb menacingly.

"See this?" he hissed. "If you make a sound of alarm, I'll turn its switch. It will blow this whole base off Venus."

The machine man stared. He might not have been influenced by a threat to himself, but this was a threat to ruin the base and plans of his master.

"What do you want me to do?" he hummed after a moment.

"Open this door!" Otho snapped. "Then walk with me to the *Comet*. Pretend I'm still your prisoner, if we meet any others."

The machine man slowly unbarred the door. Otho exultantly stepped out, still threatening with the pseudo-bomb.

"Now head for the *Comet*!" he hissed. "March, you metal skeleton!"

Oog heard Otho say "skeleton." He changed at once from an imitation atom bomb to an imitation skeleton.

**I**NSTANTLY the machine man understood that he had been deceived. With a humming shout he leaped forward at Otho. Otho nimbly eluded the groping girder-arms and with a vicious shove sent the creature clattering to the metal floor.

"You would have to do that, Oog!" he snarled.

He grabbed up the scared pet and burst out of the building into the dusk. He saw the *Comet*, but it was a hundred yards away. Between him and the ship were other machine men, coming to answer the alarm.

"Devils of space, we can't reach the ship now!" Otho groaned. "And we'll be captured again unless we get out of here fast."

He turned and raced to the nearby edge of the floating metal base, the machine men pursuing with humming

shouts. Otho dived off the edge of the metal platform. He writhed rapidly into the deepening darkness through the tangled vines and muck of the morass. Not until he was so far that he could not hear the humming cries did he halt in a clump of fungi.

"I ought to flay you, Oog!" he scolded angrily. Then his spirits rose. "Anyway, we got out of that hole. Now we'll wait till things quiet down and slip back and steal the *Comet*. They can't find us in this marsh."

Hands grabbed Otho in the darkness, cold, webbed hands that held him despite his furious struggles. Manlike shapes had risen around him in the night. They were strange men with greenish-white, seal-like bodies, short, powerful arms and legs ending in webbed hands and feet, and hairless, bulbous heads.

"Marsh men!" Otho gasped. "I'm worse off than before, but I'll give 'em a fight."

It was not necessary to struggle, he found. The marsh men who had so fiercely seized him had suddenly fallen back with low cries of fear. They were staring at Oog. The little meteor-mimic, scared by the attackers, had instantly changed himself into an imitation fungus.

"This is no man!" gabbled one of the marsh men. "It is a demon, a master of magic. He will destroy us all!"

Otho understood, for all indigenous races of Venus spoke the same language. Otho at once saw an opportunity. He figured these marsh men must have been spying on the base, and guessed that they must hate the machine men as they hated all intruders.

"I am a demon, but a good demon," Otho declared loftily. "I have come to help you against the evil metal ones yonder. You wish to be rid of them, do you not?"

"Yes, lord!" exclaimed a marsh man eagerly. "They came scores of days ago and built their floating place. We tried to drive them away, but they had weapons that blasted us and forced us to flee. Can you with your magic disperse them?"

"I can," Otho assured them, "but I will need the help of all your fighting men. Lead me to your village."

The marsh men excitedly started forward through the morass. They did not walk as ordinary men would do, but in a queer stooped fashion on all fours, half-running and half-swimming in the swamp. By thus avoiding the upper tangle of vines and brush, they could make extraordinarily rapid progress. Otho, lithe as he was, had to work hard to keep up with them as they traveled through the nighted morass.

Oog clung to his neck, shivering when he heard distant roars of marsh tigers.

The marsh men led Otho to the shore of a black lake. Domes of plastered mud rose from its surface. The marsh men dived down into the water and vanished. They had entered the domed huts of their amphibious people. Presently hundreds of heads popped up from the water.

The whole population of the village had been summoned and was coming ashore.

**O**THO eagerly explained his plan to the primitive, fierce marsh men, after he had reduced them to awe by another of Oog's transformations.

"If all of you will follow me to attack the evil metal ones, we can destroy them all," he promised.

The marsh men hesitated. "Lord, we know you are a very powerful demon, but the metal ones are powerful also," the chief said. "They have weapons that blast fire and destroy us before we can get near them."

"They won't this time," Otho declared. "You will all follow me to their base. Most of you will approach one side of the base and make a fake attack. The metal ones will rush to that side to meet you. You'll retreat at once. Meanwhile I and the rest of you will be entering the base from the other side. They'll not be expecting that. I will be able to seize my ship there. It has weapons with which I can blast all the metal ones before they realize what is happening."

The marsh men clustered their seal-like heads together for a few minutes,

whispering.

Then their leader spoke.

"The plan is good. We will do what you ask."

"Come on, then!" Otho said eagerly. And as the whole party started through the marsh, he muttered: "Oog, you redcemed yourself."

There were two hundred marsh men, the whole fighting strength of their village. Yet they made little sound in traversing the vast, choked swamp. They knew every path and dim trail, and advanced on a wide front in the steamy darkness, each marsh man carrying a spear and stabbing-knife. Otho was enjoying this. The reckless android loved such adventures, and the fact that there was desperate battle ahead added zest.

"Lord, there is a small party of beings close ahead!" a marsh scout came back to report. "They are not men like us."

"Then they must be machine men searching for me," Otho decided swiftly. "Surround them and then jump them!"

Even more silently than before the amphibious fighting men spread out in a big circle.

Then they closed upon the small party they could clearly hear floundering through the black swamp.

"Now!" Otho cried when the machine men were surrounded. "Close in and kill them all!"

## CHAPTER VI

### Rocket Clue Sunward



**CAPTAIN FUTURE'S** proton pistol had leaped into his hand as he heard the ominous, swishing sounds in the dark marsh all around them. Grag, Ezra and Joan had halted with him, and the Brain was floating beside him.

"Marsh men are surrounding us!" Curt said in a sharp whisper. "Stand ready, all of you. They mean to attack."

"Good," grunted Grag, clenching his great metal fists. "I'd rather fight than wallow on in this muck."

"Maybe I can talk them out of it," Captain Future cautioned. "If I can convince them we're friendly—"

His words were interrupted by a hissing cry from the darkness.

"Now, close in and kill them all!" it ordered.

"Otho!" Curt exclaimed.

"Here they come!" Ezra Gurney yelled.

With fierce, throaty yells, grotesque figures were charging them from every side.

[Turn page]

## Mr. R--- makes a Confession



**3** Feel like a million this morning. Ex-Lax worked fine. Didn't upset me or keep me awake last night... Boy, watch me tear into my work today!



**1** Almost got fired today. Boss caught me napping at my desk. The trouble is I need a laxative. But I hate to take the awful stuff.



**2** Tom told me to try Ex-Lax and I bought a box on my way home. Took some before turning in for the night. A cinch to take — it tastes just like chocolate!

The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet gentle! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.



Greenish-white, seal-like figures whose webbed hands held wooden spears and daggers aloft rushed in on Captain Futures' little group. Grag seized one of the fierce marsh men in his giant arms. The spear the native stabbed at Grag's breast slid harmlessly off the metal. The giant robot tossed the astounded marsh man bodily into the faces of his charging comrades.

Ezra and Joan had their atom pistols out, leveled to fire.

"Wait, don't shoot!" Captain Future shouted urgently to them. "Otho, call off these maniacs!"

"Imps of the Sun, it's the chief!" rang Otho's cry of amazement. "These are my friends. They are good demons, too. Do not attack them!"

The marsh men recoiled, but Curt Newton could see them still surrounding his party, their spears and daggers raised for action. The amphibious natives were like dark, menacing shadows in the weird jungle-swamp. Otho came splashing through the muck, little Oog clinging to his shoulder.

"Devils of space, I'm glad to see you!" swore Otho. "Chief, I didn't know it was you. I thought it was some of the machine men."

"Machine men?" Curt repeated. "What are you talking about?"

A marsh man was glaring at Grag.

"Look, lord, it is one of the evil metal ones. Shall we kill him?"

"Kill me?" exploded Grag. "Why, you miserable fishy imitations of humanity, I'll—"

"No, these are all friends," Otho interrupted. "The metal one there is not evil. He's just dumb."

"Come on, Otho, what do you have to tell?" Curt demanded.

There was a pause in the dark as Otho hastily narrated his experiences to the others. They listened incredulously.

"Then it's those machine men who've been stealin' the space ships?" Ezra gasped. "Whoever heard of such critters as that?"

"It seems to me," the Brain interjected coolly, "that I remember something about a scientist in the past who constructed such semi-intelligent ma-

chines as you describe. I wish I could remember."

"They don't seem to have much individuality," Otho declared. "They seem to be just intelligent enough to carry out orders."

"Whose orders?" Curt Newton muttered. "Who is using these metal things to steal space ships, and why? And what's this mysterious weapon they use, that can penetrate even the ray-proof walls of the *Comet*?" Captain Future straightened sharply. "But we're wasting time here. We've got to attack this base of the machine men without delay, to get the *Comet* back."

**T**HEY went hastily on through the dark marsh, struggling through choking jungle and oozy muck to keep up with the marsh men. Soon their amphibious allies signaled that they were approaching the base. They could descry the flaring krypton lights of the base through the jungle.

"Otho, you and the marsh men attack from this side," Captain Future ordered in a whisper. "Grag and I will enter the base from the other side in the confusion and grab the *Comet*. Then—"

"Look!" yelled Ezra Gurney. "They are leavin'!"

With a roar of rocket-tubes, a big Cruh-Cholo Twenty-four was taking off from the floating base ahead. It roared up into the fog and was followed by Zamors and Tarks and a Kalber.

"They're going on to their main base from here!" Otho cried. "They'll take the *Comet* with them!"

"We can't let them get away with the *Comet*!" Curt Newton shouted.

His proton pistol leaped from its holster of black Plutonian leather as he plunged recklessly forward. Grag, Otho and the marsh men were at his heels. There was no chance of surprise now, for the machine men were taking away the ships they had captured. Were the Futuremen too late to prevent final loss of the *Comet*?

"There they go in the *Comet*!" Curt yelled as he and his horde burst out to the edge of the base. "Stop them!"

Out on the floating metal base, the last of the stolen ships was rising

with roaring rocket-tubes into the mist. Apparently the machine men had given up hope of recapturing Otho, and were deserting the Venus base before Otho could bring forces to attack it. The *Comet* was the last ship to rise, probably because the machine men were less familiar with the unique controls of the famous ship. But it was already swinging up into the clouds, its under-jets roaring flame as it rose on an even keel.

"They got away with the ship, curse them!" Grag bellowed furiously.

"Not yet, they haven't!" Otho denied.

The android bunched himself and with incredible agility leaped upward at the receding ship. The *Comet* was thirty feet above them. No other being in the System could have reached it—none but Otho, greatest acrobat in nine worlds! He thrust his atom-pistol at one of the heavy tubes and fired it.

The blast from his pistol, penetrating through the tube to the cyclotrons, had the effect of a reverse blast. It exploded one of the *Comet's* cyclotrons. The dull roar inside the ship was clearly audible. The teardrop craft shuddered in mid-air, then tumbled downward and crashed onto the metal base. Otho had flung himself to one side before the impact, rolling over and over as he struck. But when he jumped up, his rubbery body was unharmed.

"I wrecked one of the ship's cyclotrons, but I stopped them, Chief!" he panted.

"Into the ship and get them before they can put up a fight!" Curt ordered.

They tore open the space-door of the *Comet* and burst inside, Curt and Joan in the lead. Two machine men lay sprawled on the floor near the controls, killed by the explosion of the cyclotrons. A third suddenly appeared from nowhere, grabbed up Joan in its mighty girder-arms. The girl screamed and went limp.

"Stand back!" Captain Future shouted to the others in the doorway. "Don't let it pass!"

Realizing he was trapped, the machine man rushed toward Curt. But Future had anticipated a move like

that from the semi-intelligent creature. He seized a hand-hold on the wall and sprang out of the way, at the same instant firing his atom gun at the machine man's cubical head. A neat hole appeared in the metal skull. With a groan the mechanical man dropped Joan and began to fall.

Curt leaped from the wall, struck the machine man's shoulder just in time to prevent hundreds of pounds of solid metal from toppling on Joan and crushing her. The machine man slumped harmlessly to the floor, its strange life gone.

**W**HEN Joan had been revived, they were able to look around the interior of the *Comet*. Everything had been damaged by the bursting of a mighty cyclotron. The damage could be repaired, but it would take hours to construct another cyclotron from spare parts.

"You sure made a lot of work for us, Otho," Grag grumbled.

"You saved the ship for us, and that's what counts most," Curt told the android. "But the other machine men got away with their booty. They probably aren't aware that these machine men aren't following with the *Comet*. We can't pursue them until the ship is repaired, and that will be hours of work."

Swarming over the deserted base, the marsh men were uttering wild cries of victory. Ezra and Joan had arrived with them. The Brain had already glided into the *Comet* and was inspecting the "dead" machine men. The blasted bodies of the three beings were too fragmentary to yield any new information. Curt searched the whole base for some clue of the machine men's mystery weapon, but found nothing.

"They would take their weapons with them when they abandoned this base, of course," Curt muttered. "Well, all we can do is repair the ship and get after them as soon as possible."

Hours went by while Captain Future, Grag and Otho worked at the task of repairing the *Comet*. They had set up a portable atomic foundry, and Grag labored over it to forge new metal plates. Otho welded them into

place, while Curt and the Brain checked the ship's instruments and repaired or replaced those which had been damaged by the blast. Finally all four Futuremen combined to assemble a new cyclotron and bolt it into place.

The Planet Police cruiser in which they had traveled to Venus had come on from its hiding place in the swamp to the floating base. It would destroy the base to prevent its being used again. This fact elated the marsh men.

"Thanks, good demon!" they cried to Otho. "You did this for us."

"What do you mean, he did it?" Grag jealously growled. "All he did was make a lot of work for us by damaging our ship."

The *Comet* rose from the floating base, zoomed sharply up through the paling dawn over the Great South Marsh, and blasted skyward.

"These machine men who left here will be taking their stolen ships on to their Main Base, wherever it is," Curt declared. "We'll see if we can't follow them by their rocket-trail."

Emerging from the cloudy atmosphere of Venus into space, they circled for a time.

Curt and the Brain worked with the electroscopes.

"Here it is," the Brain rasped finally. "See, lad? The ionized rocket-trail of all those ships leads toward Mercury."

"Mercury, eh?" Captain Future muttered. "Then the Main Base of the space ship thieves must be there. That's where the space ship industry is centered, and also where the Rocketeer testing grounds are located."

"Do you suspect that some of the Rocketeers may be mixed up in these thefts?" Joan Randall asked.

"Or that somebody in the space ship industry's behind it?" drawled Ezra Gurney.

"Whoever plans these thefts seems to know just what new ships the Rocketeers are testing," Curt reminded. "Only somebody in the industry, or in the Rocketeers themselves, would know that. Yet where would he get these queer machine men he's using, and what's his motive? We'll follow the rocket-trail to Mercury. I think

the answer to all those questions is there."

Hour after hour the *Comet* tore Sunward while the Brain constantly checked the rocket-trail they followed. Joan Randall came forward to the control room, where Curt Newton was piloting. Her dark, pretty face was eager as she looked ahead at the small planet close to the Sun.

"Do you think we can find them on Mercury?" she asked. "I'd like to see how that mysterious new weapon works. It would be a thrill."

"Haven't you had enough thrills?" Captain Future demanded severely. "I should think that after four years of secret Planet Police work, all you'd want would be a nice, safe home."

"Is that a proposal?" Joan cried instantly. "If it is, I take you up on it right now."

Curt was forced to grin. "You know darned well it's not. Go on back to the cabin and don't bother me. I'm trying to think."

"It's too noisy in the cabin," Joan complained. "Grag and Otho are at it again."

The hissing voice of the android and the booming tones of Grag could be clearly heard, loudly raised in argument.

"Blast them, they never get tired of scrapping," Curt swore. Then his gray eyes brightened. "Simon and I figured out a way to stop their arguments! I'm going to try it now. Take over, Joan."

**C**APTAIN FUTURE left the controls in the hands of the experienced girl agent and went back into the main cabin, which was also a crowded laboratory, one of the finest in the System.

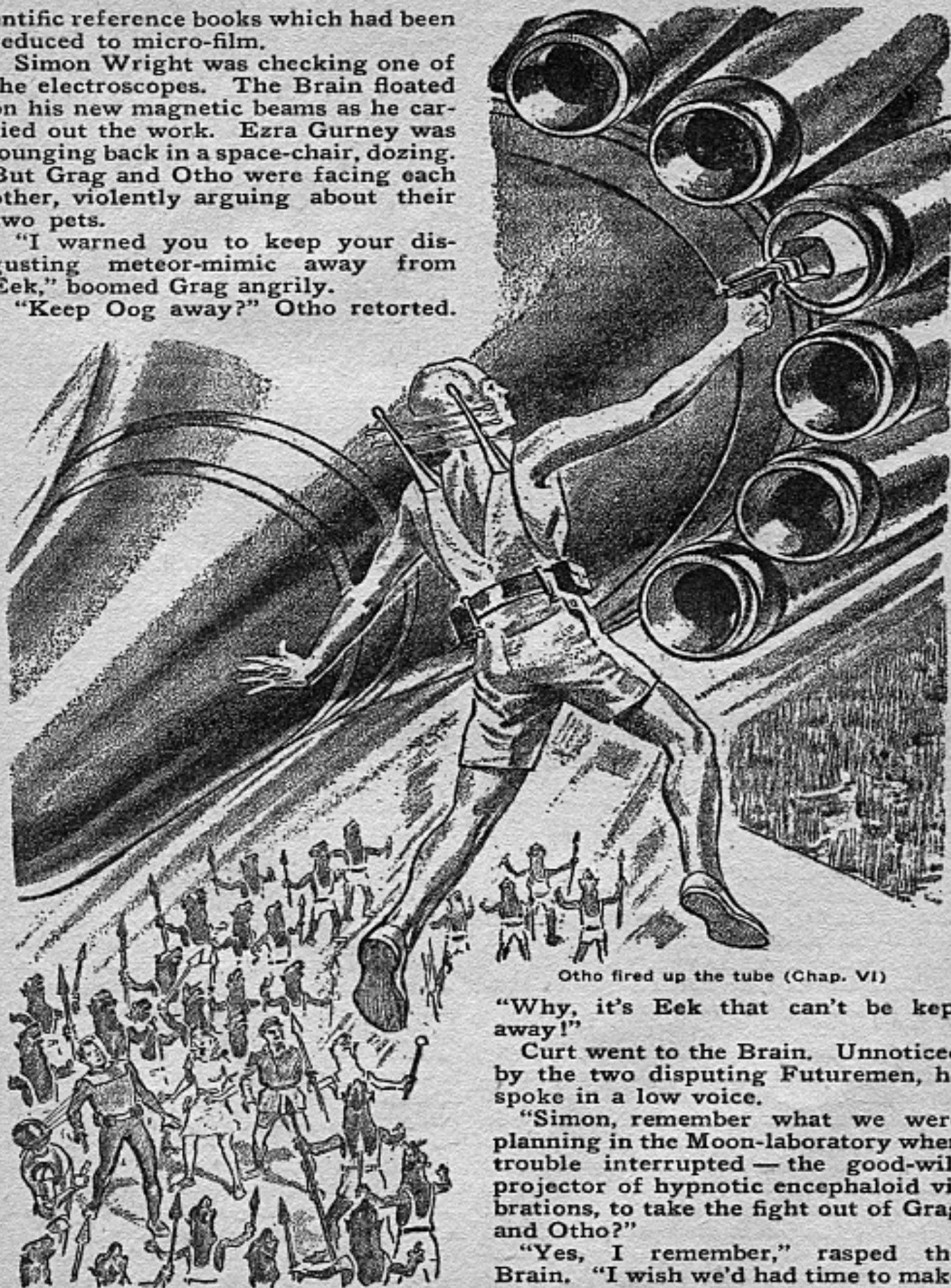
Electro-telescopes and electro-spectroscopes loomed in one corner. A compact folding chemical laboratory occupied another. There was an exhaustive file of spoken records of planetary languages, and a collection of atmosphere samples from every planet, moon and asteroid. A collection of Captain Future's mysterious psycho-scientific instruments was housed in a cabinet beside the one that contained an incredible number of sci-

entific reference books which had been reduced to micro-film.

Simon Wright was checking one of the electroscopes. The Brain floated on his new magnetic beams as he carried out the work. Ezra Gurney was lounging back in a space-chair, dozing. But Grag and Otho were facing each other, violently arguing about their two pets.

"I warned you to keep your disgusting meteor-mimic away from Eek," boomed Grag angrily.

"Keep Oog away?" Otho retorted.



Otho fired up the tube (Chap. VI)

"Why, it's Eek that can't be kept away!"

Curt went to the Brain. Unnoticed by the two disputing Futuremen, he spoke in a low voice.

"Simon, remember what we were planning in the Moon-laboratory when trouble interrupted — the good-will projector of hypnotic encephaloid vibrations, to take the fight out of Grag and Otho?"

"Yes, I remember," rasped the Brain. "I wish we'd had time to make

it. The arguments of those two keep me from concentrating."

"Let's put the thing together now," Curt Newton suggested, a gleam in his eyes. "It won't take long."

He and the Brain set to work, unfolding a table in the corner and bringing forth an array of fine atomic-powered tools and materials. Grag and Otho were so busy quarreling that they paid no attention.

In less than an hour Curt and Simon had completed a small, watch-shaped instrument with a broad lens in one face.

It would project any hypnotic suggestion as a vibration that would dominate the neuron currents of the brain.

Curt took the little blank metal record he had made and, through an encephalograph, recorded a hypnotic suggestion of utter friendliness. Then he put the record into the little projector, touched its switch and surreptitiously turned the lens of the instrument toward Grag and Otho.

They abruptly stopped arguing, looked at each other a little bewilderedly. A broad smile appeared on Otho's face.

"Grag, old pal, what in the world are we arguing about?" he asked. "You're the best friend I've got. We shouldn't be scrapping."

"You said it, Otho," boomed Grag warmly. "Dear old friends like us haven't anything to argue about. It was all my fault."

"No, it was my fault!" Otho said emphatically. "I'm just a low-down space-struck sneak, to talk the way I did to a friend like you."

Ezra Gurney, awakened by the sudden lowering of voices, sat up, his faded eyes almost popping with surprise at the two Futuremen.

"Am I hearin' this, or am I still dreamin'?" he gasped.

Oog and Eek also looked up at their masters in ludicrous astonishment. For Grag and Otho now had their arms around each other's necks. They were looking fondly into each other's eyes.

"Otho, the next time I say a mean word to a pal like you, I hope somebody melts me down to ingots," Grag declared earnestly.

Captain Future doubled up with laughter. As he clutched a stanchion for support, he dropped the good-will projector. It shattered on the floor. At once Grag and Otho reverted to normal.

"You rubbery misfit, are you trying to choke me?" Grag demanded, dazedly tearing Otho's arm from his neck.

Otho also looked bewildered, but he rose to the challenge.

"Why, you cast-iron idiot, you tried to hypnotize me into liking you!"

"It's no use, Simon," Curt chuckled, picking up the broken projector. "We can't keep one of these things turned on them all the time, and you see what happens the minute the good-will suggestion ends."

**M**ERCURY grew to a yellowish sphere of considerable size as the *Comet* drew nearer to it. But the planet did not look large when compared with the colossal, flaming globe of the Sun. The faint rocket-trail of the fugitive machine men led directly toward the dark Cold Side of the planet. They followed it carefully until they entered the thin atmosphere.

There, as they had known they must, they lost the trail.

Beneath them lay the tumbled, frozen black mountains, plains and chasms of the eternally nighted side of the planet. It was a bitter wilderness in the southern hemisphere, in which there seemed to be no life. They circled for a considerable time, but saw no sign of any base.

"It's no use," Curt admitted finally. "Those machine men were too smart to enter the atmosphere right over their base. They did that at Venus, but they didn't repeat the mistake. They entered the atmosphere here and then scooted around the planet to their base. We've lost 'em. That makes things tougher. We'll have to tackle this mystery from another angle. Head around to Solar City, Otho. I want to question these space ship manufacturers who have been losing ships."

Soon they were dropping down through the eternal dusk of the Twilight Zone. It was a parklike land-

scape of fertile fields and rolling, grassy hills, with only a few of the inevitable deep fissures.

They flew southward over this shadowy, pleasant land until far ahead in the twilight appeared lights and towers.

Solar City was a metal metropolis, for metal was abundant on Mercury. Coppery domes, minarets and gables of the peculiarly graceful Mercurian architecture glittered through the dusk. Pink lights shone softly in the streets, and there was a cheerful swarm of rocket-fliers. Out beyond the metropolis could be glimpsed some of the great space ship factories. But Otho headed for the center of the big city.

He dropped the *Comet* expertly into the landing field behind the big, square building that was the Planet Police headquarters. When Curt and his friends entered the building, a young Martian officer in charge stared wonderingly at the weird Futuremen. Then he happened to glimpse Curt's emblem-ring.

"CAPTAIN FUTURE!" he exclaimed. "And Marshal Gurney!"

"Call Lan Tark, Rissman and all the other big space ship manufacturers here," Curt ordered.

The young Martian looked doubtful.

"They're all at the big masquerade ball that Lan Tark is giving in his Space Palace tonight."

Curt frowned. "They are? Well, if they're all together, we'll go to the Space Palace right now to see them. Simon, stay here with the *Comet* and keep trying to figure out that mystery-weapon. Grag and Otho can come along with me in a rocket-flier."

"If you, Grag and Otho appear openly at that masquerade ball," Joan protested, "all the guests there will know Captain Future is working on this space ship robbery case. You don't usually advertise your presence."

Curt grinned. "Nonsense. They'll never suspect we're here. We're going to that masquerade ball at the Space Palace in disguise, of course.

We're masquerading as Captain Future and his Futuremen."

## CHAPTER VII

### *In the Space Palace*



THE Space Palace was unique among private residences of the System. A luxurious mansion, it circled the planet Mercury as a tiny artificial satellite. When Lan Tark, the Martian space ship magnate, had come to Mer-

cury to establish his great factory, he could not become accustomed to the changeless dusk of the Twilight Zone. So he had built the Space Palace at his factory.

A thick disk of super-light and strong metal, a thousand feet in diameter, was the base. Upon this massive platform was built a splendid mansion of the same light silvery alloy, roofed over by the air-tight glassite dome. Heavy rocket-tubes in the base of the structure lifted it out of the weak gravitational grip of Mercury. It was carefully guided out just beyond the thin atmosphere and given an impetus and course that made it fall into a regular orbit around the planet. No further power was needed.

It had its own air generators. Magnetic plates in the base supplied an artificial gravitation. There was an automatic air-lock at one side of the dome of glassite, through which rocket-fliers could enter. When the artificial satellite was over the Hot Side, there was day in the Space Palace. When it was over the Cold Side, there was night.

Rushing through space many miles above the frozen black wilderness of the Cold Side, the whole Space Palace blazed with golden light. Rocket-fliers had been arriving in scores, bringing gay guests from the planet below. Inside the glassite dome rippled laughing voices and brilliant music. The masquerade ball was getting under way.

A few guests strolled in the semi-

dark gardens around the palace. Grown in artificial beds of soil, the gardens seemed transplanted from oases of faraway Mars. Graceful, fronded canal trees, desert-roses, sand-orchids demonstrated Lan Tark's nostalgia for his home world. Most of the guests were crowded in the spacious, golden-lit ballroom in the main wing of the silvery mansion. A famous Venusian string orchestra was playing the haunting melodies of the cloudy planet. Dancing to the music or drifting through the ballroom was a grotesquely attired throng. All were masked, and all in costume.

A Mercurian man swathed in a tight-fitting suit of white fur was posing as a Stygian, a native of Pluto's third moon. He was dancing with a Venusian girl whose artificial white wings showed that she was supposed to be one of the Qualu people of Saturn. A fat Earthman was ludicrously muffled in a fishlike suit to make him look like one of the sea-people of Neptune's ocean. Others of the masked company were impersonating Venusian swamp men, dark-uniformed Planet Police officers, such famous characters in interplanetary history as Gorham Johnson and Jan Wenzl.

As the music halted and the dancing stopped, the roar of a rocket-flier entering the lock could be heard remotely. A few moments later, three new figures appeared in the entrance of the ballroom. A cry of applause went up. All three wore black face-masks. One was a tall Earthman with flaming red hair, an odd black pistol at his belt, and a big, queer ring on his left hand. The second was a giant metal robot, and a third a rubbery-looking android.

"They're impersonating Captain Future and the Futuremen!" was the exclamation everywhere. "Did you ever see such clever costumes?"

**G**UESTS swarmed around Curt Newton, Otho and Grag, admiring their supposed costumes. A pert Mercurian girl prodded Grag's metal chest.

"How in the world did you get into this metal suit?" she cried. "You must

have had it riveted on you."

"It's pretty tight, at that," Grag boomed.

"And even your voice is fixed to sound like a robot's," she marveled. "Come on, we'll dance. It'll be fun."

Grag was thunderstruck. "I don't know how to dance."

"I'll dance with you, lady," offered Otho confidently. "Can you do any Jovian dances? Swell! Let's show 'em something."

The Mercurian girl, who was made up as a Uranian hill-woman, looked up at Otho as he took her arm.

"Why, you even feel as rubbery as you look!"

"That's just my costume," Otho assured her. "Me and my two pals are big gravium magnates from Neptune. We thought up these costumes to make a hit."

Otho danced away, enjoying himself. Always yearning to be accepted as a human being, he relished the situation. But Grag, who knew none of the niceties of human society, was acutely uncomfortable. The big robot shifted from one metal foot to another as gay maskers importuned him to join them.

"I'm unhappy, Chief!" Grag complained to Curt. "I can't dance or make small talk. What am I going to say to these people?"

"That's your problem," Curt chuckled. Through his mask he sighted a tall, dignified Martian approaching. He said hastily to Grag: "I think this is Lan Tark coming. You and Otho stick around and see if you can pick up any gossip about the space ship robberies."

Grag, helpless to resist, was dragged away by a laughing group who believed the robot was only a guest inside a metal costume. The elderly Martian, who wore no mask, came toward Curt Newton.

"I don't recognize you," he told Curt smilingly. "But the disguise of you and your companions are good ones. Welcome, anyway."

"You're Lan Tark?" Captain Future asked quietly.

Tark was surprised. "Of course. If you don't know me, who invited you here?"

The Martian was bald, red-skinned, big-chested and stilt-legged, like all his race. He wore a flowing suit of fine black synthesilk. His aging face had the strength and dignity characteristic of his people.

"I'm not just dressed as Captain Future," Curt told him evenly. "I am Captain Future. I'm here to investigate these space ship thefts. I want to see you and the other manufacturers in private, at once."

Lan Tark looked unbelieving at first.

Then his eyes fastened on Curt's emblem ring, whose "planet" jewels slowly circled the "sun" jewel.

"That ring isn't a fake, as I thought," he muttered. "You are Future!"

"What other space ship magnates are here tonight?" Curt pursued.

"Christian Rissman is here," Tark answered, "and Durl Cruh and his partner, Rin Cholo, Zamor, Gray Garson and Ak Kalber."

"Please have them all quietly summoned to your study," Curt requested. "We'll meet there."

Driven by the force of Captain Future's personality, Lan Tark gave a whispered order to an attentive Mercurian servant. Then he led the way out of the noisy ballroom and into a wing of the Palace. The study of the Martian magnate was a sound-proofed, small, square room, its walls covered by fine mural paintings of Martian desert and oasis scenes. Behind a massive desk, a broad window looked out across the dark gardens of the Space Palace and through the glassite dome

into the sheer immensity of starry space.

CURT took off his black mask. As he did so, the space ship magnates began to appear. None was in costume, apparently considering themselves too old for such nonsense. Lan Tark named them to Curt as they entered the study. Christian Rissman was a square, solidly built Earthman with a hard, blocky face. His penetrating blue eyes showed the energy which had made the Rissman Space Ship Company the biggest in the business.

"What is it, Tark?" he asked crisply. "Have you fellows decided finally to get wise and sell out your factories to me?"

"Not at all," Lan Tark stated. "We rejected your last offer only six weeks ago, if you remember."

Durl Cruh, senior member of the Cruh-Cholo space ship firm, was an aging, worried-looking green Jovian who was chewing narcotic *rial* leaves. Rin Cholo, his partner, was younger, fatter and carefree-looking. They stared at Captain Future curiously. So did Ak Kalber, the plump, yellow-skinned, beady-eyed Uranian manufacturer who entered after them.

"What's up, Tark?" Kalber asked in his soft, slurring voice.

"Yes, why drag us away from the party?" demanded Gray Garson. "I was just beginning to forget my troubles for once."

Garson, a homely, rugged Earthman with lines of worry in his pleasant countenance, had entered with Zamor, [Turn page]



last of the magnates. Apparently these two, who owned the smallest of the space ship companies, felt slightly ill at ease among the more important magnates. Zamor, a wiry, compact Mercurian whose swarthy face and tawny eyes had a look of belligerent suspicion, looked at Curt Newton.

"Who's this fellow dressed up as Captain Future?" he snapped. "Did you haul us all in here just to admire his clever costume?"

"Gentlemen, this is Captain Future," Lan Tark stated calmly. "He's here on Mercury investigating these space ship thefts that are disorganizing our businesses. He has some questions to ask."

CURT was keenly watching their faces. He saw the amazement on them change swiftly. Ak Kalber looked secretive. Durl Cruh seemed more uneasy, while Cholo stared in open curiosity at the tall, famous young planeteer.

"Well, it's about time someone did something to break up these thefts!" Zamor said testily. "I'm glad there'll be action at last."

"I am, too," Gray Garson declared. "Captain Future, your coming in on this mystery is the first good news I've had for weeks. My little company is about ready to go bankrupt, from the losses of new ships we've sustained."

"Have any of you an idea who is behind this ring of space ship hijackers?" Curt asked directly.

"No," Christian Rissman answered. "There hasn't been a single clue. It's a complete mystery."

"You would say that, Rissman," Zamor, the Mercurian, sneered. "A lot of difference it makes to you whether or not this thieving's stopped. You haven't lost any ships."

"Is that true?" Curt immediately asked Rissman. "You have the biggest company and produce more ships than any other, yet none of yours has been stolen?"

"That's right, I've lost no ships," Rissman admitted.

"How do you account for the fact that the hijackers don't bother you?"

The hard-faced Earthman shrugged. "The Rocketeers who test our ships

over at Suicide Station are ordered to take every precaution against theft. No slipshod inefficiency about me! That's why these ship thieves haven't been able to get any of our craft."

"All of us have told the Rocketeers to take precautions when testing our ships in space," Lan Tark said coldly. "Yet our ships continue to vanish, Rissman. Yours don't."

Captain Future was thinking quickly. It was certainly suspicious that not one Rissman space ship had been stolen.

He shot a sharp question at Christian Rissman.

"You were saying something, when you entered, about offering to buy out the other factories?"

"I made them a fair offer," Rissman grumbled. "They wouldn't accept."

"We wouldn't sell out to you and give you a monopoly of the space ship manufacturing industry," Zamor declared angrily. "And after we rejected your offer, these space ships thefts began. It looks like the thefts are designed to bankrupt us, so that we'll have to sell to you."

"That is true," purred Ak Kalber, the plump yellow Uranian. "It has the appearance of a deliberate plan to force us out."

"Bah, your lying accusations don't bother me!" Rissman exploded. "I don't need to resort to crime to force you bunglers out of business. I'm already selling more ships than any of you, simply because my ships are better and the whole System knows it. You can tell a Rissman ship anywhere you see it, not only because it has a different and better design of cyclotron, tubes and hull, but because it performs better. Rissman ships won the last two Round-the-System Races, and a Rissman will win the next race that's coming up. I know how to build ships!"

He turned violently to Captain Future.

"These bunglers are not above getting up this whole space ship hijacking business, just to discredit and ruin me. That may be why none of my ships has been bothered, so that suspicion would be cast on me. They know they can't compete with me fairly."

Zamor, the hot-tempered little Mercurian, made an angry answer.

"You Earthmen are too cocky! You wouldn't be able to make your ships were it not for the metals here on Mercury. Why didn't you stay on your own planet and build your ships?"

"We got our concession from the System Government," Rissman said. "We've complied with all its regulations."

"Yes, all you other-planet manufacturers have come swarming in to Mercury to exploit my world's resources," Zamor accused bitterly. "The Mercury authorities should never have agreed to let you start factories here."

Rissman laughed curtly. "You accuse me of seeking a monopoly, yet you would dearly love to monopolize the metal resources of Mercury, Zamor. It would give you a stranglehold on the space ship industry."

Captain Future had deliberately incited the quarrel between these hostile magnates, and had been listening keenly. Now he intervened.

"We're not getting anywhere with all these charges and counter-charges. I have some further questions to ask."

They subsided, though Rissman still glared angrily at the others.

"Have any of you ever used semi-intelligent machines as workers in your factories, instead of human laborers?" Curt asked.

He was thinking of the machine men who were being used to capture the space ships, though he did not mean to disclose how much he knew. All denied having ever done so.

"You know the Government restricts the use of robots as factory laborers," Gray Garson said.

"Any of you ever have anything to do with the manufacturer of such intelligent machine-workers?" Curt pressed.

Again the general answer was negative. But Curt noticed that Durl Cruh, the senior of the two Jovian partners, had a sudden uneasy look on his aging green face.

"Cruh!" he rapped. "Do you know anything on this angle?"

**D**URL CRUH squirmed. "Well, nothing important, maybe. But

your mention of intelligent machine-workers made me remember something. I'll tell you about it later, when we're alone."

"You can tell me right now," Curt Newton said. "If you don't want to talk in front of these others, we'll go into the next room."

Reluctantly the aging Jovian consented. His fellow-magnates stared at him in suspicious silence as he shuffled to the door of the next room. Curt followed the Jovian into the large library, its shelves lined with rows of metal-cased "stereo-books." Captain Future closed the door.

"Now what is it?" he asked. "I presume what you have to tell me is about one of those men we just left."

"Yes, it is," Durl Cruh answered unwillingly. "It's just something I remembered about one of them when you mentioned machine-workers." Thrusting his hand nervously into his pocket for a *rial* leaf to quiet his nerves, he went on. "Have you ever heard of a Doctor Webster Kelso? He—"

The Jovian stopped suddenly. He looked down at the strange little object he had drawn from his pocket.

"Why, how did this get in my pocket?" he faltered. It was a thick metal disk, two inches across. "It's a spy button!"

Curt recognized the tiny instrument. Spy buttons were often used by the Planet Police. Minute television transmitters, they picked up and broadcast on a chosen wave any sound or sight near them.

"It wasn't in my pocket a few minutes ago!" Durl Cruh cried. "Someone in the study just now dropped it in my pocket, to eavesdrop on us."

"That's too thick to be just an ordinary spy button!" Captain Future yelled. "Throw it away!"

He lunged forward across the library to snatch it from the hand of the amazed Jovian. Before Curt took one flying step, the spy button in Durl Cruh's hand exploded in a blazing flare of atomic force that knocked Curt backward, half-blinding him. Curt staggered up. The Jovian lay in a huddled heap, his body warped and scorched by the blast. He was dead.

There had been a tiny, powerful

atomic bomb imbedded in that spy button. It had been detonated by remote control as soon as it was discovered.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Interplanetary Library*



FUTURE realized instantly the significance of this tragedy. One of the space ship magnates in the study must be connected with the ship-hijacking! That magnate, whoever he was, had dropped the deadly spy but-

ton into Durl Cruh's pocket to learn what the Jovian told Curt. He had detonated the bomb in it when Cruh was about to give his information. Curt Newton swiftly remembered what Cruh had started to say.

"Have you ever heard of a certain Doctor Webster Kelso?" the Jovian had begun.

"Kelso?" Curt muttered. "Of course, I remember now. So that's the connection!"

He sprang to the door of the study. There had been no sound of alarm elsewhere in the Space Palace. The detonation of the tiny atomic bomb had not been loud, and these rooms were all sound-proofed. Captain Future burst into the study. His eyes swept the room. Only two of the magnates were there now. Lan Tark sat at his big desk, calmly going over some papers.

Gray Garson was pacing worriedly to and fro.

"Where are the others?" Curt demanded.

The Martian shrugged. "They drifted back to the ball."

"Did you learn anything?" Garson asked hopefully.

"Cruh's been murdered," Curt rapped. "I'm going to search you two!"

Stupefied, Tark and Garson made no resistance as Curt rapidly searched them. He did not find on either of them the thing he sought.

"Wait here," he ordered, and hastened out of the study.

He meant to find and search the other magnates, but he was too late. In a corridor outside, he found a compact remote control apparatus for the operation of a spy button. The minute microphone that fitted invisibly into the ear and allowed the wearer to hear through the spy button lay beside it.

Curt's tanned face was bleak as he picked them up.

"Whoever he was, he knew I'd be looking for this, and dropped them here," he muttered.

His thoughts were racing. More than one of the magnates had motives, as had been brought out by their mutual accusations. But which was guilty? Captain Future realized that he could not answer that yet. The murderer had been too cunning. His best chance now, Curt decided, was to follow the possible clue that Durl Cruh had furnished.

He sent Gray Garson to summon back the space ship manufacturers. They viewed Cruh's scorched body in stark horror.

"My old partner—killed like this!" Rin Cholo babbled dazedly. "Captain Future, who did it? I'll kill him with my own hands!"

"One of you gentlemen did this," Curt said quietly.

They stared, then looked at each other in quick suspicion. Cholo glared at Christian Rissman.

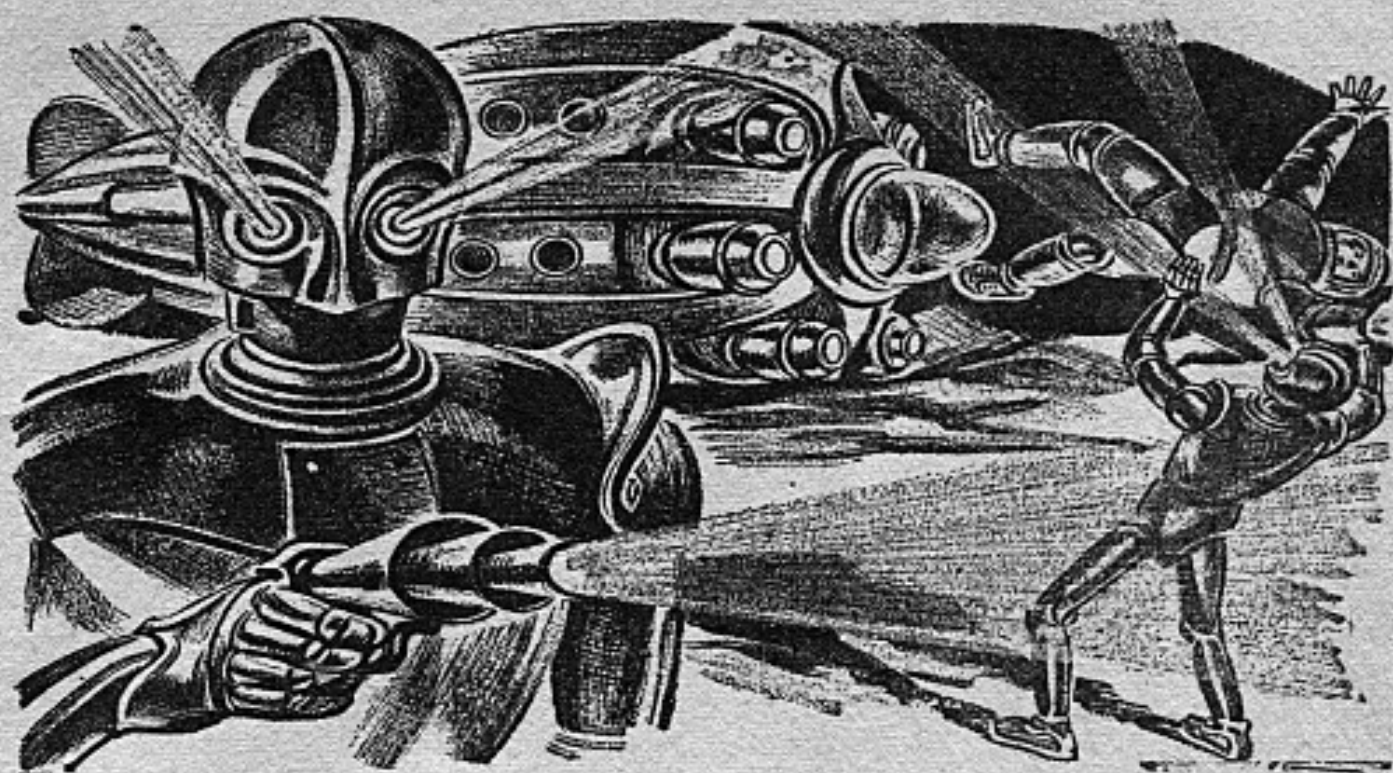
"If I were sure that you were the man—"

"You're crazy!" barked Rissman. "You can't accuse me of this ghastly crime."

"Everybody knows you'd stop at nothing to get a monopoly of the industry," snapped Zamor.

"Gentlemen, the murderer among you will be exposed," Curt Newton said. "In the meantime you're to say nothing of this."

There was nothing more that Captain Future could do in the Space Palace now. Besides, he wanted to follow up the lead Cruh had given him. He went out into the ballroom to find Grag and Otho. Midnight had struck and the guests were unmasking, yet



GRAG, THE METAL ROBOT

he could not see the Futuremen. Then he saw a crowd in one corner, and heard shouts of laughter from it. Curt found that a half-dozen guests were holding Grag. The big robot could have freed himself by exerting his mighty strength, but he couldn't do that without exposing his real identity.

"Take that metal suit off him!" one reveler was shouting.

"Sure, all guests gotta unmask now!" another cried hilariously.

"Just pry at that tin suit and it'll come off easy," Otho was encouraging them, chuckling at Grag's predicament.

Captain Future broke it up.

"Sorry, folks, but my friends and I have to leave," he said pleasantly. "Come along, you two."

**W**HEN they were in the rocket-flier, darting away from the Space Palace through the darkness, Grag exploded.

"I'll get you for that trick, Otho—inciting that bunch to take my skin off! You wait!"

"You should have seen Grag trying to dance, Chief!" Otho gasped. "I'll never forget it."

"There was murder in there, you idiot," Curt interrupted. He told them of Durl Cruh's mysterious death.

Their flier rushed low over the dark, frozen wilderness of the Cold Side. As they approached the Twilight Zone, they passed over great mines. The workings flared with krypton lights. In them hundreds of men toiled to excavate the rich metallic ores of Mercury.

When they reached the Twilight Zone, Curt flew straight southward toward Solar City. They flew above the great Tark and Rissman space ship factories, and a few of the smaller plants. Captain Future glanced down at them broodingly. It was night in Solar City, but the Mercurian metropolis lay unchanged in the eternal dusk, except that few people were now abroad. Day and night were artificially defined here.

When they landed in the court behind Planet Police headquarters, Curt hastened at once into the parked *Comet*. The Brain looked up sharply. Simon had been consulting a reel of micro-film from the ship's reference works. Ezra Gurney and Joan Randall had been watching him, waiting impatiently for Captain Future's return.

The girl came forward eagerly.

"Did you learn anything at the Space Palace?" she asked.

"I learned what a stupid, space-struck fool I am," Curt blurted bitterly. "I let a man who knew something be killed under my nose."

He gave a brief account of what had happened. Ezra Gurney swore in picturesque interplanetary profanity.

"Fiends of Pluto, you mean that one of them big space ship tycoons is mixed up with this ring that's hijack-in' ships?"

"They've all got motives," Captain Future stated. "Especially Rissman, who hasn't lost a single ship. He makes no secret of the fact that he'd like to crush out the others and get a monopoly."

"Sure, I've heard talk of that all the while I've been on Mercury," Ezra corroborated. "They say Garson and Zamor and some of the smaller manufacturers are about forced out now. Only reason they're hangin' on, I hear, is because they're hopin' to win the Round-the-System Race, which would boost their prestige and business."

"You say Durl Cruh started to talk about a Doctor Webster Kelso?" rasped Simon.

Captain Future nodded his red head. "That's about the only real lead I got. You remember the story of Kelso, of course."

"Sure, I remember, too," Ezra cut in. "The old *Star Streak* mutiny." Say, maybe that hooks up with these machine men who are stealin' ships."

"That's my idea," Curt agreed. "But we'll need to dig out more information on the old *Star Streak* tragedy, to learn anything sure."

"What was this *Star Streak* mystery?" Joan Randall asked puzzledly. "I don't remember hearing of it."

"IT happened before any of us were born," Captain Future told her, "but it's still one of the great mysteries of space. Decades ago, the *Star Streak* sailed from Earth to establish a colony on Pluto. Head of the expedition was Doctor Webster Kelso, a brilliant physicist and engineer who possessed a number of potent scientific secrets he'd never

disclosed. Kelso had built a number of semi-intelligent machines that were going to do the heavy work for him and his colonists.

"The *Star Streak* sailed into space and vanished. A broken television message came back that indicated some sort of mutiny or disaster had hit the ship. Space was searched, but the ship was never found. And Kelso's great scientific secrets vanished with it."

"That's the tale," commented Ezra Gurney. "It's always been supposed that Kelso's machines mutinied and seized the ship."

"What a ghastly story!" breathed Joan. "Machines, mutinying—"

"But they were not robots like me!" Grag exclaimed troubledly.

CURT NEWTON'S bleak face softened. He laid his hand on the giant robot's shoulder.

"No, Grag, they were not *human* like you."

Grag seemed to swell with pride.

"Lad, is it possible that these machine men who are hijacking the space ships are the same ones that Kelso made long ago?" rasped the Brain.

"They may be," Curt admitted. "Someone may have found the *Star Streak* after all these years, and got hold of Kelso's intelligent machines and his lost scientific secrets. If that's so, and if we can find out *who* did that—" He made an impatient gesture. "But saying 'if' won't help us any. The first thing is to dig out the stereo-records of the *Star Streak* business and see if these machine men we're after are really the same as Kelso's machines."

"There should be a full record of the case in the Interplanetary Library, lad," remarked Simon quickly. "Luckily we're right here on Mercury."

Curt nodded. "You and I will go over to the library now and check on that. It won't take long. The rest of you wait here."

Interplanetary Library occupied a square, massive metal building in a park on the west side of Solar City. This building held the archives of the whole Solar System. Scholars, historians and scientists came from every

world to conduct their researches here.

Curt Newton landed his borrowed rocket-flier in the park and strode into the massive building. He carried the Brain's square case in his hand, to avoid arousing attention. The attendants inside the entrance thought it was merely some complicated recording apparatus.

In the main rotunda Captain Future looked around curiously. From this hushed, softly lit silvery hall radiated long corridors. Along some of them were the booths used in consulting stereo-books. Along others were the flat, narrow metal cases of the "books" themselves, stacked on endless tiers of shelves. These quiet shelves were the repository of millions of records



of heroism and daring and endurance, of long-forgotten battles and epic feats on faraway worlds.

Curt saw that even at "night" the library was busy. Scholars from almost every world were clustered at the main desk, waiting for the records they had requested. Captain Future got quietly into line. An aged Martian savant ahead of him, peering through thick-lensed spectacles, was making a shrill request of the young Mercurian librarian.

"I want all the stereo-records you have on the Jovian space voyages to Mars during the eighty-eighth century."

The librarian consulted a catalogue and pressed buttons. The flat metal cases popped up on the desk, mechanically conveyed. An eager young Venusian was just in front of Captain Future.

"Do you have the material the late Sus Urgal gathered for his Legends of the Solar System? I'm hoping to

expand his work."

"I'd like all material on the *Star Streak* mystery," Curt asked quietly. "Do you have a stereo-record on that?"

"I think so," said the librarian, consulting his catalogue. "Yes, here it is."

He touched his buttons, and a flat metal case popped up.

CURT took the case, but asked another question:

"Could you tell me if this particular record has been requested lately, and by whom?"

The librarian consulted a file.

"It was asked for almost a year ago, the first time in years. We sent it and some other material out to the Rissman Space Ship Company, at their request."

Captain Future's eyes narrowed a trifle as he moved away, holding the stereo-book in one hand, and the Brain's case in the other.

"So Rissman consulted this record a year ago. That's interesting."

Curt entered one of the projection-booths used for the stereo-books. It was a tiny oblong room with a slot in one wall that was just as large as the standardized book he held. He closed the door of the booth and slipped the stereo-book case into the slot. Automatically the lights in the booth went out.

There was a whirring sound, then a startlingly lifelike scene sprang into being at the other end of the booth. The stereo-book was reproducing the scene taken long ago by the stereoscopic sound-cameras.

"There it is, lad," muttered the Brain. "The *Star Streak*—"

"Listen!" Captain Future interrupted.

The scene before them was a vision of a New York spaceport on Earth, but it was obviously many years ago. The space ships parked on the field were obsolete, clumsy, and the dress of the people who crowded around the field was grotesquely old-fashioned. A bulging ship of considerable size towered up in the front of the scene. On its bow was the name *Star Streak*. In front of it was a small crowd of

men and women and machines. A man stepped out to speak earnestly into the stereoscopic cameras.

"Doctor Webster Kelso, leader of the Pluto expedition, will say a few words before the take-off."

Doctor Kelso was an elderly Earthman with gray hair and a thin, kindly dreamer's face. He was smiling eagerly as he spoke.

"My friends, this is a great day for me. I have long dreamed of bringing the first colony to Pluto. Now my fifty men and women associates are accompanying me to attempt that great feat. I believe we shall succeed in spite of the warnings we have received that Plutonian conditions are so frigid and inimical that we shall not be able to establish a colony. But we are prepared for that. We are taking with us two hundred semi-intelligent machines which I have built for this purpose. They are intelligent enough to obey orders implicitly, and they possess unlimited strength and endurance, as you will see."

Doctor Kelso turned and raised his voice in a command. From the little throng behind him marched a mass of weird metal figures. Their bodies were mere skeletons of girders, with complex mechanical internal organs, cubical heads, and girder limbs.

"They're the same!" Curt Newton whispered sharply. "Identical with the creatures we fought at the Venus Base!"

"No doubt of it, lad," rasped the Brain.

Doctor Webster Kelso was speaking on, in the stereo-picture.

"We have also been warned that the Plutonian natives are hostile and will attack us. But we're prepared for that, too. I am taking with me certain secret weapons of my own invention that will enable me to overpower any natives who attack us, without permanently injuring them."

"Hear that, Simon?" exclaimed Captain Future. "One of those could be the mysterious weapon the machine men are using on the Rocketeers."

"And now farewell, my friends," Doctor Kelso was calling across the years from the living picture. "We

go to achieve a great ambition!"

**T**HE *Star Streak* blasted off with a roar of rocket-tubes. Then the whole vivid scene vanished and was replaced by the stereo-picture of an official Earthman historian.

"The *Star Streak* was never seen again," he said. "For some weeks, as it forged out toward Pluto, its televisor calls came in regularly to report its progress and position in space."

He gave a record of each of the calls, and Captain Future quickly jotted down each date and position.

"The last call came when the *Star Streak* was near the orbit of Saturn. The call was a weak, broken one. It said only: 'Mutiny—the machines tried—disaster—' No further message was ever received. It seems indubitable that an attempted mutiny by Kelso's intelligent machines caused the wrecking of the ship. It was supposed the disabled *Star Streak* must have drifted to Saturn or one of its moons, the only worlds in that sector of space. Though Saturn and all its moons were searched, however, the ship was never found. Its fate remains a mystery."

When the stereo-record concluded, the lights came on automatically.

"We're going back to the *Comet* and find out what did become of the *Star Streak*, if we can," Captain Future declared thoughtfully. "Simon, that old mystery holds the key to this space ship thieving. The machine men and the mystery weapon they use both came from Kelso's ship."

Returning to the *Comet*, Captain Future and the Brain began an intent, intricate calculation. They knew the position of the *Star Streak* and the time when disaster had struck it. They checked back on the position of all celestial bodies in the System at that time.

"Saturn was the only world it could have drifted to," rasped the Brain finally. "And they searched Saturn without finding a trace of it."

"Wait, look at this!" Curt interrupted excitedly. "According to our figures, Kansu's Comet was near that position in space at that date. And if I remember right, Kansu's Comet is

believed to have a solid nucleus."

"I'll soon find out from our comet-file, Chief!" Otho exclaimed. The android hastily consulted the exhaustive record. "That's right. Kansu's Comet is now known to have a nucleus of considerable mass."

"They didn't know that then, so they didn't think of the comet," Curt pointed out. "But it was near that position in space. If disaster disabled the *Star Streak*, the ship must have drifted onto the nucleus of that comet."

"Say, that's swell figurin', Cap'n Future!" admired Ezra Gurney.

"Someone else figured it out, too," Curt rapped out. "That someone visited the solid nucleus and secured the machine men and Kelso's secret weapon. We've got to find out who visited that nucleus recently."

Simon checked his record.

"Kansu's Comet is beyond Jupiter now."

"Let me go out there and find out!" Otho asked Curt eagerly. "I can get to that nucleus and sleuth out whoever has been there."

"You and Grag can both go in the *Comet*," Captain Future decided. "Use every means of scientific investigation to learn who was there hunting for the *Star Streak* wreck. It's one angle we're going to work on. Joan, I want you to tackle another angle. Have Planet Police agents shadow all those space ship magnates. Whichever one's mixed up with the hijacking ring must contact his accomplices some time. And you, Ezra. Try to find out what Durl Cruh knew about machine men that caused him to be murdered. Cruh knew something, all right. Try to learn what."

"I'm going to work still another angle. The space ships are being stolen from the Rocketeers who test them. Well, I'm going to get into a disguise and become a brash young Rocketeer, hoping that the machine men will try to steal a ship I'm testing. I'll have scientific defenses set up to shield me from their mysterious weapon, whatever it is. And I may be able to turn the tables on them, and make them lead me right to their hidden base!"

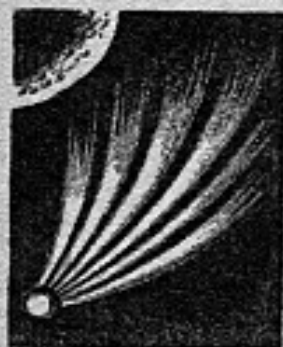


Lan Tark's Space Palace was an artificial satellite (Chap. VII)

## CHAPTER IX

*On the Comet Nucleus*

I'm only a lonely spaceman  
With no world to call my home.  
I've seen all moons and planets  
But I still just like to roam.



CRAG was singing as he sat at the controls of the *Comet*. The great robot's voice rose in a deafening bellow. It did not seem to disturb little Eek, who was perched on his knee, but Otho was holding his hands tightly over his

ears. The ship of the Futuremen was flying out through space, well beyond the orbit of Jupiter. Saturn was a yellow blob over on the left. Straight ahead glowed a misty green speck—Kansu's Comet.

"Gods of Space!" swore Otho as Grag finished. "Next time you intend to sing, please let me know. I'll get into a space-suit and get outside the ship till it's over."

"Eek likes my singing," Grag defended, patting the moon-pup.

"Sure, Eek hasn't got any hearing," Otho said ironically.

"I know, but his telepathic sense gets the idea of the song," Grag declared. "He's very sensitive that way."

"Sensitive?" snorted Otho. "That moon-pup is the biggest coward alive, if that's what you mean by sensitive. Now my Oog—" Otho stopped, remembering something. "Say did I show you the new trick I taught Oog?"

"I'm not interested in Oog and his silly tricks."

"You'll like this one," Otho promised. "Come here, Oog." The fat little meteor-mimic animal came ambling into the control room obediently. Otho picked him up. "Show us what Grag reminds you of."

Oog's queer body shifted shape, its tissues melting and flowing together. He was suddenly a perfect imitation of an ancient tin can. Otho shouted with laughter. But Grag looked

sourly at him.

"You would insult me," boomed the robot, "just when I was planning to do something for you."

"What was it?" Otho demanded skeptically.

"It was to be a surprise. I haven't had time to work on it yet. I meant it as a present for you."

Otho looked a little uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry." Then he asked eagerly: "What is this present you're planning?"

"You can help me make it. I'll put on the automatic pilot. We won't be near Kansu's Comet for hours."

Setting the automatic pilot, Grag rose and stalked back into the laboratory. Otho followed hopefully. Grag looked around thoughtfully, then chose a long copper trough from the laboratory equipment. He put it on the table.

"First thing I need is some mud—lots of mud."

Otho looked surprised.

"Mud? There's none here. How would a solution of ordinary aluminum and silicon salts do?"

"That'll make a pretty fair mud," Grag conceded. The black mass was mixed and poured into the trough. "Now I want some rubber."

"I don't see what you want that for," Otho objected.

"Who's making this for you, anyway?"

"All right, Grag," Otho said hastily. "Here's the rubber."

"Mix it with the mud," Grag ordered majestically. Otho did so. "Now I'll need some dirty old oil. The dirtier, the better."

"Mud, rubber, dirty old oil?" cried Otho. "Say, what the devil are you making, anyway?"

"Why, I'm making another android just like you, to keep you company," Grag replied blandly.

**W**ITH an explosive curse, Otho snatched up the trough and flung it at him.

But Grag stood rocking with bellying mirth.

"I got you that time, Otho!" he boomed. "I'll never forget you honeying me along to get a nice present."

"Laugh, you fugitive from a chain-belt!" Otho said bitterly. "It serves me right for trying to be nice. I only hope I'll have a chance to shove you into a pit or something when we reach Kansu's Comet."

Kansu's Comet grew steadily in apparent size as the teardrop ship flashed on. The great green sphere of its coma glowed like a misty sun, concealing the solid nucleus within. There was no tail, for not until the comet approached the Sun would light-pressure force back particles from the coma to form a tail.

Otho had the throttles of the *Comet* as it swept closer to the awesome celestial body after which the ship was named. The keen, slitted green eyes of the android and the gleaming photo-electric eyes of Grag surveyed the coma intently.

"There are lots of breaks in it," muttered Otho. "We can slide through one without touching, if we're careful. We'd better. That coma has a terrific electric charge."

"If the disabled *Star Streak* drifted in to the nucleus long ago," Grag suggested, "it would touch the coma. It couldn't help it."

"Yes, and that would kill everyone aboard by electric shock," Otho said thoughtfully. "Everyone human, that is. It wouldn't hurt machines."

The ship circled round the comet in a closing spiral. Otho was looking down intently. Through rifts in the glowing green coma, he descried a small world inside. Grag watched also, calling directions as they sank toward the dangerous nebulousity. The two Futuremen, as always, were able to bury their feud when there was actual peril, and when they were on Captain Future's business.

They dropped closer to the flaring coma, seeking a wide rift through which the ship could go. A fine violet brush began to spray from all the metal inside the ship, even from Grag's metal body.

Otho expertly lowered the ship toward a long, ragged fissure in the coma.

"Here goes!" he shouted.

The ship dived with flashing speed, its rockets screaming. Raging seas

of glowing green force surged about them. Then they were through the rift, inside the vast coma.

"Made it," Otho breathed. He peered downward. "Look at that little world. It's got an atmosphere and everything!"

"I see a little domed city!" Grag boomed.

"You're crazy," Otho retorted. "There'd be no sense in putting a dome over a city when this world has warmth and air and—" His jaw dropped. "Why, you're right! I can't understand this." The planetoid that was the solid nucleus of Kansu's Comet was a friendly-looking little planet, blanketed by queer yellow-green vegetation of fantastic shapes. On a small, grassy plain, rose a little city of metal and glassite cubical buildings, covered by transparent glassite.

"It's crazy to build a domed city here," Otho repeated. "We'd better land in that vegetation and reconnoiter."

**T**HE *Comet* came to rest in the yellow-green jungle, crushing fantastic trees and shrubs beneath it. A routine check showed the air was breathable and fairly warm. Grag and Otho locked up their two pets and stepped out of the ship, their gravitation equalizers automatically compensating for the difference in gravity.

A weird landscape greeted their eyes. The trees and bushes about them had straight, rectilinear branches. The yellow-green fruits and leaves were squares, polygons and triangles, as though part of a cubistic dream. Over this strange forest stretched the glowing green coma.

The android and robot started through the jungle. A few small rodents darted through the geometrical vegetation, but there seemed no other indigenous animal life. Reaching the edge of the plain, they stared toward the domed city. They descried figures moving in and around it. Some of them were cleaning the glassite dome, others bearing burdens through the streets inside, still others repairing walls.

"They're machine men like those

who captured me!" Otho cried.

"Yes, and exactly like the intelligent machines that Kelso took with his expedition in the *Star Streak*."

"I don't see any men," Otho declared. "Nothing but those machine men. They must have built that city themselves. But why did they dome it?"

"Let's walk right in on them," Grag proposed. "I don't believe they'd be hostile. They're only semi-intelligent mechanisms."

"The ones who captured me were hostile enough."

"Yes, but they were only obeying orders," Grag pointed out. "These machines have no reason to harm us. They'll probably welcome me warmly, because I'm also a metal man. I won't let them harm you."

"Oh, now you're going to protect me," Otho sneered. "Okay, you ought to know your fellow-mechanisms. I'll go with you."

Grag and Otho emerged from the geometrical vegetation and started boldly toward the entrance of the doomed city. As they neared it, they were seen by a machine man polishing the glassite dome. He uttered a humming cry. A whole horde of the machine men came stalking out.

"Here's where we find out how hostile they are," Otho muttered.

"Don't worry, I can handle these simple creatures," Grag reassured confidently. "They'll look up to me as a superior machine." He raised his hand and spoke loudly in Earth's speech. "We come as friends!"

The machine men paid no attention. They were all staring with their big visi-plate eyes at Otho. A joyful humming cry rose from them.

"It is a man! Another man has come to our world!"

The mechanical horde rushed forward and swarmed about Otho.

"We had hoped another man would come!" their leader hummed. "See, the city is built and ready! What are your orders?"

"You mean you'll obey my orders because I'm a man?" Otho cried.

"Of course," hummed the machine man. "The man who made us told us we must always obey the orders of

a man."

"What do you think now, Grag?" Otho taunted. "Now I'll be big-hearted and protect you."

"You're not a man and nobody but these simple machines would think you were," growled Grag. "I think I'll smack you down, just to show them how little you amount to."

Grag raised his metal fist, pretending to threaten Otho. At the gesture, the machine men surged furiously toward him.

"Destroy him! He threatens the man!"

"Hold it!" Otho shouted, just in time to save Grag. "He wasn't threatening me. He's a servant of mine—dumb, but faithful."

The machine men stepped back. Grag was so angry he couldn't speak.

AS they were led proudly into the city, Otho looked around wonderingly. The little city had metalloy streets and houses, all designed for human occupancy, all clean, shining and unused.

There were even gardens and fountains, and big atomic heaters to warm the air.

"You don't need heaters and a dome on this warm little world," Otho said. "Why did you build them?"

"The man who made us had ordered us to build such a city," the machine man replied simply. "We built it exactly as he had ordered."

"The man who made you?" Otho repeated. "Was that Doctor Kelso?"

"That was the name that other men called him," the machine man said. "They called the ship we came in the *Star Streak*."

"Imps of outer space!" Otho exclaimed. "Grag, these creatures built exactly the kind of city Kelso meant them to build on frozen Pluto!"

"If they were so obedient to Kelso's orders," Grag argued, "why did they mutiny in space?"

The machine man stared wonderingly.

"We did not mutiny. The other men in the ship mutinied against the man who made us. Those other men were weary of the long voyage and wanted to turn back to Earth.

The man who made us refused, so the other men tried to seize the ship. The man who made us ordered us to subdue the mutineers. In the struggle, the ship's cyclotrons were wrecked, disabling the ship completely."

"So that's it!" Otho cried. "That last message didn't mean that the machines had mutined, but that the other men had! The System's been wrong for decades!"

"The ship drifted into this comet," the machine man continued. "When it touched the coma, the electric

the reply. "We welcomed him. He took certain instruments from the wreck of the *Star Streak*."

"Kelso's lost secrets—the mystery weapon of the space ship thieves!" Otho hissed excitedly. "What did the man look like?"

"We don't know, he wore a space-suit," the machine man answered. "He also took fifty of us machine men with him when he left this world. He said the man who made us had bequeathed us to him, so we had to obey him."

"Can you picture that!" Otho exclaimed. "That plotter, whoever he

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charge killed the man who made us and all the other men in the ship, but did not harm us machines. Here we built a city as our maker had taught us, and here we have waited for long decades for men to come and live in our city."

The pathos of the situation touched Otho. Then he remembered something.

"Has another man been to this world lately?" he asked.

"Yes, a man came not long ago," was

is, not only got Kelso's secret weapons here, but also a bunch of these simple-minded machine men to act as his hijackers in space."

"When he left, he said he would come back to rule us some day," the machine man said trustingly. "We thought at first that you were he."

"If they don't know what he looked like, we'll have to find clues to his identity, Grag," muttered Otho. He asked the machine man: "Can you take us to the wreck of the *Star*

*Streak?*"

"It is far across this world," the creature answered. "And it is almost our night period now. We keep day and night as men do. You will rest tonight and in the morning we will start for the wreck."

That night Grag and Otho spent in a shining, unused house in the pathetically perfect city. The machine men served them respectfully, obviously revering Otho as a man.

When morning came, Otho and Grag started with six machine men for the distant wreck. Hours passed as they trudged through the cubist vegetation under the glaring coma sky. The Futuremen began to wish they'd used the *Comet* for the trip. Finally they sighted a corroding metal bulk, the long-lost, famous *Star Streak*.

"There may be some clue here to the plotter's identity," Otho said.

Grag suddenly pointed at the sky.

"Look, a ship!"

A big, strange craft could be seen coming through the coma. Otho's slitted eyes flamed.

"Maybe it's the plotter we're after, coming back here for something!"

## CHAPTER X

### *With the Rocketeers*



BACK on Mercury, before Grag and Otho had left on their perilous expedition, a group of young men stood excitedly in the unchanging twilight of Solar City Spaceport. Mercurians, Venusians, one or two Saturnians and

Jovians, each wore proudly on his chest the silver comet-emblem of the Rocketeers. A tall young Earthman who also wore a bright new Rocketeer badge came striding across the spaceport to join them. He was a lithe, stalwart fellow with coal-black hair and a self-confident, cocky face.

"Are you a new Rocketeer, too?" a young Mercurian asked him.

"That's right. My name's Ray Barret."

"You weren't in our pilot class that just passed the examinations here on Mercury."

Barret smiled. "No, I took my exams on Earth. Just got here, and I'm all ready to see what it's like at Suicide Station."

"Hope it's not as bad as they say," put in a lank blue Saturnian earnestly. "I understand the old Rocketeers haze new men plenty."

"Yes, and I don't like these rumors you hear about space ships being snatched from the Rocketeers testing them," muttered a Jovian youth.

Ray Barret shrugged. "I guess if we wanted a soft life, we wouldn't have become Rocketeers. The grind won't get me down."

"Here comes Losor!" interrupted a Venusian hurriedly.

The tall, gray Neptunian Rocketeer came up to them.

"Where's your certificates?" he grunted.

They eagerly handed him the precious documents which certified that they had passed the examinations and had won Rocketeer rating. Captain Future—for it was he who had disguised himself as Ray Barret—handed over his own fake certificate. Losor merely glanced at the documents and then shoved them into the pocket of his space jacket.

"Another bunch of infants for Papa Kardak to nurse along," he grunted. "Well, come on."

The fledging Rocketeers followed him eagerly to the new Zamor Twenty ship in which he had arrived at the spaceport.

"We're stopping at the Rissman, Tark and Garson factories to pick up new ships," Losor told them. "You kiwis will pilot them over to Suicide Station for testing."

Expertly the Neptunian veteran took the Zamor off the field with a staccato rattle of blasting tubes. The younger men hung around him as he steered north in the Twilight Zone. Captain Future, playing his part, was as youthfully eager as any of the others.

"Do you think any of us has a

chance to get picked as a pilot for the Round-the-System Race?" he asked Losor with assumed cockiness.

"What, you amateurs? Why, that Round-the-System grind breaks the hearts of real Rocketeers! You kids wouldn't last through the first of the preliminary elimination races that decide what pilots will fly the race!"

Presently they came into view of the great Rissman space ship factory. A half-dozen big foundries, stamping shops and assembly plants were grouped around a massive central atomic power house. On the nearby field were parked several brand-new ships, each with the unique slim streamlined hulls that made the Rissman craft different from all others.

"Wait till I get the invoice from the office," Losor grunted, and strode off toward the office building near the power plant.

**CAPTAIN FUTURE** and some of his companions strolled through the great factories while waiting for the Neptunian. Curt Newton was alert to seize upon the slightest clue, but he saw nothing at all suspicious. He peered into the roaring foundries in which raw metal ingots were being melted into the super-strong, super-light alloys required in space ship construction. Endless conveyers carried the hot sheets to a stamping shop in which they were stamped into curved sections, then carried to the assembly plant, into which Captain Future stared.

The assembly line was two miles long. Starting with a framework of girders for a new ship, it moved steadily down the line, and workmen fitted on the plates of inner and outer hulls, the glassite windows and airlocks. Then massive cyclotrons of the distinctive Rissman spherical design, heavy rocket-tubes, controls, oxygenators and other interior equipment were installed. Metallic lacquer was applied, the Rissman trademark of a blazing meteor fixed to the bows, and a space ship was completed.

"Come on!" yelled Losor impatiently.

They ran back to the field. The Neptunian ordered the three Mercuri-

ans and the two Jovians to take the five new Rissmans waiting. Captain Future and those not yet assigned ships returned into the Zamor with Losor. The Neptunian took off, and the others followed in the five new Rissmans. Losor stopped again a few miles farther on, at the big Tark factory. It was similar to the Rissman plant, though not so large. They picked up two new Tark Twelve speedsters and went on. The Garson factory, their last stop, was a small affair, consisting of a couple of big barnlike metal buildings huddled against chasm-split hills.

"What a place to land!" grumbled Losor as he descended. "Garson hasn't enough money to maintain a decent field, and those fissures all around it are a sweet hazard."

Gray Garson himself was waiting beside two shining new Twenties. But the rugged, homely Earthman manufacturer did not detect Captain Future in the tall, black-haired young Rocketeer, Ray Barret.

"Take good care of these two ships over at Suicide Station, Losor," he asked the Neptunian anxiously. "I can only afford to operate my plant part time as it is, and if I lost these two new ships—"

"We'll be careful as we can," grunted Losor. "Barret, you and Kurzal take them."

They had now become a squadron of ten brand-new space ships. Losor led the way around the wilderness of the dark Cold Side. In less than half an hour they were slanting down toward Suicide Station. Captain Future peered keenly down at the lonely metal barracks and frozen tarmac stretching under the icy stars. Here was the focal point of the mystery he must solve. From this place hundreds of new space ships had gone out on test runs, never to return.

Curt purposely made his landing a little sloppy. He didn't want anyone to suspect he was too good. He found himself the target of Ka Kardak's wrath when the newcomers were lined up for inspection by the formidable chief Rocketeer.

"You, Earthman! Where did you learn to make a landing like that?"

"Why, that's the way they taught us at Earth," Curt replied.

"Well, they must be a bunch of space-struck idiots if they taught you that!" thundered Ka Kardak. He pointed a green hand at the new ships. "Let's see what else they taught you. Take that new Zamor up and bring it down in an emergency tail-landing!"

Captain Future saw the veteran Rocketeers grinning at the fun. He realized the gruff Jovian was trying to test his mettle.

"An emergency tail-landing?" he repeated jauntily. "All right."

**H**E went out to the new Zamor. Twenty and purposely took off in a somewhat clumsy way. He pulled up for altitude rapidly and then leveled off for the difficult landing. A tail-landing was used only in emergencies, when bow and keel-jets were disabled. Curt was grinning as his hands tightened on the throttles.

"I'll show 'em some real amateur piloting now," he chuckled.

He slammed the Zamor down into a dive. The black wilderness far below, starred by the lights of Suicide Station, rushed up toward him. Curt stood the ship on its tail as it fell, and then cut in the rear tubes so that their blast would brake his fall. But he deliberately cut them in a trifle too late. Instead of falling straight down on its tail-blasts, the Zamor flopped and rolled in space, apparently out of control.

Curt Newton judged distances by inches. The most expert space pilot in the System was giving a wonderful imitation of a novice pilot in trouble. The Zamor rushed down toward the tarmac, unable to avoid destruction. But at the last split-second, Curt's hands flipped the throttles. The tail-blasts roared, checked the reeling ship's fall just in time. It rolled, bucked, then settled on the tarmac.

Curt found Ka Kardak speechless when he tramped up and reported. The Rocketeers gathered to watch were swearing noisily.

"Of all the blazing, star-scorched luck I ever saw!" Kardak exploded at Curt. "You came within a hair of cracking up that ship!"

"Well, I landed it all right, didn't I?" Curt defended.

"You did, by sheer dumb luck!"

"Kardak, that young Barret's no ordinary pilot," Losor called dryly. "He's talking about piloting in the Round-the-System Race."

A roar of laughter went up from the assembled Rocketeers.

"Well, why not?" Curt retorted, with assumed sulkiness. "Whoever wins out in the preliminaries gets to pilot in the race, doesn't he?"

"Who do you think you are—Captain Future?" Ka Kardak bellowed. "Just because you've won Rocketeer rating, do you think you're a big shot? By the nine planets and the thirty-one moons, I'll sweat that notion out of you!"

"Cut your rockets, Barret," one of Curt's companions whispered to him. "You're getting the chief down on you."

Captain Future, chuckling inwardly, remained silent under Ka Kardak's blistering tongue-lashing. Then the Jovian went on to the other newcomers. He sent them out one after another in hazardous take-offs and landings. Not until all had been tried out did he dismiss them.

"That's enough for today," he roared. "I can't stand to see any more piloting like that. I may be able to make real Rocketeers out of you, but I doubt it." As he turned away, puffing, his eye fell balefully on Curt Newton. "Wants to pilot in the Race! By the fourteen devil-gods of Saturn, I never thought I'd live to see such gall."

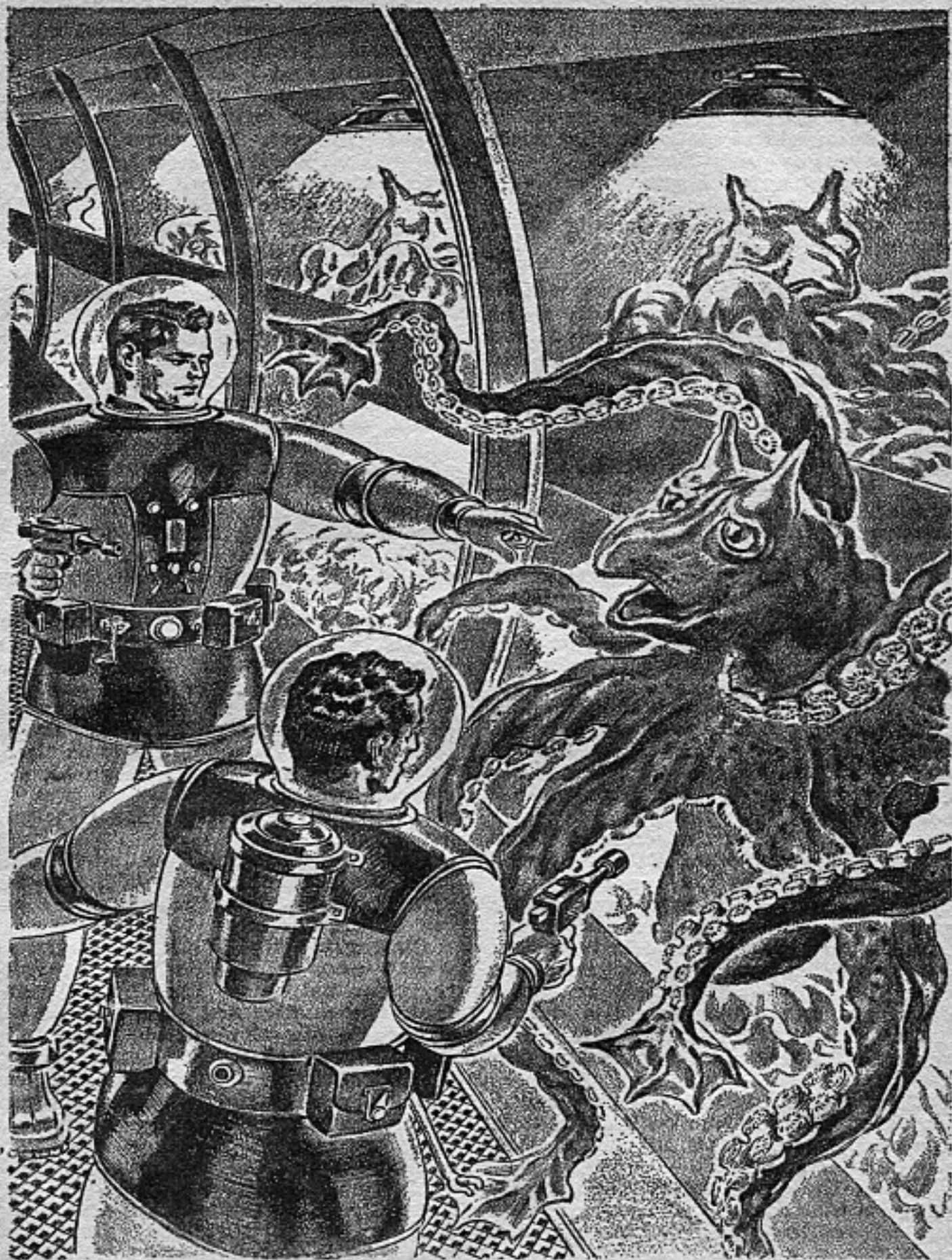
A group of the older Rocketeers approached Curt Newton and his companions. They were still chuckling at Ka Kardak's wrath. One of them, a tall, bronzed young Earthman, held out his hand to Curt.

"I'm Jan Walker," he introduced himself. "I'm pretty new here myself, but welcome to Suicide Station."

"You sure got Kardak going," chuckled Yalu, an old Martian Rocketeer. "I thought he was fit to bust when you made that crazy landing."

Curt kept up his impersonation of a cocky, self-confident novice.

"Aw, that landing was good



The star man swung out of his shelf with incredible speed, his tentacles reaching for them.  
(Chap XII)

enough," he muttered. "If that wall-eyed Jovian thinks he's going to ride me, he's way off his orbit."

"Take it easy, Barret," advised Jan Walker. "You'll find the grind is tough enough here at the Station without scrapping with Kardak."

"I guess you're right," Curt said dubiously. "What's all this talk I hear about you fellows having ships stolen from you in test runs?"

**CAPTAIN FUTURE** was watching the Rocketeers closely as he asked. They looked oppressed and uncomfortable when he mentioned the ship thefts.

"It's a bad business," Walker admitted reluctantly. "It happened to Yalu and me on my first run. It's got us half-crazy. You go out in a ship, blast along peacefully, and then—*zowie!* You pass out and wake up floating in space, your ship gone, space knows where."

"Spooky, I call it." Old Yalu shuddered. "Three more ships vanished like that in the last two days, two of 'em taken in test runs way out past Mars' orbit. How long's it going to keep up?"

"It can't keep up much longer without Tark and Zamor and some of the others going bankrupt," predicted Losor. "Hope to space I get a Rissman to test next. Rissmans aren't ever bothered."

They filed out of the bitter cold and dark into the barracks. Walker showed Curt where to put the space-bag he'd brought. The air was hazy with green *rial* smoke as the Rocketeers sat around, swapping yarns of adventures and talking earnestly of the great race soon to be run. The bell rang for supper and Curt and the others streamed into the dining hall. The eyes of all Rocketeers fastened on two chairs.

"Kiru and Zinzak missing tonight," muttered Yalu. "Not back from testing that Tark. That means another new ship stolen."

When they had eaten, Ka Kardak arose ponderously and read out the list of testing assignments for the next day.

"Jan Walker will take that Cruh-

Cholo Thirty out for its final endurance test. Straight run out past Jupiter's orbit and back." Kardak's baleful eye fastened on Curt. "Walker, your co-pilot will be our new space-wonder, Barret. He wants to be a racing pilot. We'll see how he stands up under the grind this'll give him."

When they left the dining hall, Jan Walker spoke to Curt.

"It's a tough assignment, Barret, but we'll make it all right."

"Sure, I'm not worried any," said Curt.

Next morning he and Walker tested the Cruh-Cholo's cyclotrons. The whole tarmac was vibrant with the thunder of cycs as the Rocketeers tuned up for the day's tests. While Walker was busy checking, Curt slipped back to the barracks. From his baggage he took out a compact instrument he had constructed to emanate a blanketing field of dampening force. He turned it on and hid it in one of the Cruh-Cholo's compartments.

"If the machine men are using some secret beam of force to knock out pilots, as I suspect, it can't penetrate that screen of dampening energy," Curt muttered. "Now if the metal devils try to capture this ship, they'll fail and I can turn the tables on them. Walker and I will be unharmed, and can pursue our attackers so that we can get a direct lead to the hijackers' main base."

"All ready, Barret," called Walker from the control room. "I'll take her off. You can take over when we get out in the clear."

Curt grinned. Walker thought he was a poor pilot and was tactfully trying to help him. They both donned their space-suits and then blasted off. Soon the big Cruh-Cholo was thundering outward away from Mercury. The cyclotrons droned steadily and the rockets roared monotonously as they steadily built up speed for the long test run.

They crossed Venus' orbit. Their velocity was mounting and soon they had passed Earth's orbit also. On and on they throbbed, Curt and Walker alternating at the controls and watching the performance of the cycs.

This long grind was the final grueling test of the Cruh-Cholo's cys and tubes.

They pounded on past Mars' orbit, up over the wilderness of the asteroid zone and on, until they were beyond the orbit of Jupiter.

"Far enough—we'd better cut back now," called Walker anxiously.

Curt Newton heard a vague movement. He turned in a flash, but invisible forces gripped him and whirled him through blurring spaces. His reeling brain was aware of nothing but terrific motion.

His senses cleared, and his heart sank. He and Walker, still in their space-suits, were floating in empty space.

The ship was gone!

## CHAPTER XI

### *Riddle of the Void*



FUTURE was ordinarily not given to profanity, but he felt like swearing when he discovered that his careful scheme had completely failed. He had been sure his force-field would shield them from whatever mysteri-

ous beam the machine men used, yet his defense had proved an ignominious failure.

Therefore it was plain that the machine men were not using any kind of beam or ray at all.

"But then what in the name of space is their cursed weapon?" Curt gritted. "There was nothing but a sound of movement, and then it seemed that something grabbed me and whirled me away at impossible speed!"

The mystery would have to remain unsolved for the time being, he realized as he looked around. He and Walker were drifting in an almost untraveled region of the vast outer spaces, far from any ship-lane. Jan Walker had drawn his impeller from his belt and was kicking himself toward Curt with its little blast. His

face was haggard through his glassite helmet.

"They got our ship!" he cried. "The same way it happened to Yalu and me on my first run. Curse it, Barret, how do they do it?"

"I wish I knew," Curt replied gloomily.

"There's small chance we'll escape from this," Walker said bitterly. "These spaces aren't like the inner regions of the System. Even in ship-lanes out here, you've only one chance in thousands of being picked up, and we're far off the lanes. I had to keep off them with a new, untested ship, according to Planet Patrol space-traffic laws."

Curt knew that Walker was right about the danger of their predicament. The air supply of their space-suits would last a few hours. It was a million to one that they would not be picked up in that time. They might float in this empty region for months without seeing a ship, for all ships gave this region a wide berth because of—

Captain Future suddenly remembered why space ships gave this region a wide berth, and the thought brought a dawning inspiration. It might just be possible by a desperate expedient to escape their fate.

"Walker, do you realize that we're not far from the Sargasso Sea of Space?" he explained.

"That's why I was going to turn back the ship," Jan Walker said. "I was afraid of getting too near the Sargasso."

Curt's keen eyes scanned the star-blazing vault in which they drifted. He was estimating their position, figuring from their last charted position in the ship and from their space drift since.

"I believe that if we kicked ourselves counter to the Sun with our impellers for an hour or so, we'd get into one of the great ether-currents that flow into the Sargasso."

"What in the Sun's name would we want to do that for?" Walker asked, puzzled. "Once in the Sargasso, we really would be beyond hope. No ship that ever goes in there comes out again."

In the young Rocketeer's voice was the awe inspired in all space pilots by the dreaded Sea of Space. For the Sargasso was a port of dead ships, from which no craft ever returned. There were powerful ether-currents in the outer Solar spaces, swift-running tides in the ether itself. The Sargasso was a vortex of many such currents. Ships that were carried into that blind spot of space by the currents could not emerge.

"There are space ships in the Sargasso," Curt reminded his companion. "Some of them are new, big vessels."

"Yet they could never buck out through the currents," Walker argued. "They couldn't escape that graveyard of space."

"That's true," Curt admitted, "but we could use the televisior equipment of some of those ships to call for help. I know that some of those ships have powerful televisors still in working order."

"How could you know that?" Walker demanded skeptically. "You've never been in there. No man has ever penetrated the Sargasso and returned, they say, except Captain Future."

"That's right," Curt agreed.

**W**ALKER'S jaw dropped. He stared in ludicrous amazement.

"You — you're Captain Future? Why, it's impossible!"

"Sorry I can't show you my ring and prove it," Curt chuckled. "You'll just have to take my word for it that I'm Future in disguise."

"If you are, why in the Sun's name are you impersonating a novice Rocketeer?"

Curt explained briefly that he and the Futuremen were seeking to crack the space ship robberies.

"That's right, Marshal Gurney said he was going to call in Captain Future on the case," Walker muttered. He stared in awe at the famous plane-ter. "Good Lord, all of us at Suicide Station, patronizing and instructing *Captain Future!*"

"Grag and Otho, two of my men, are on their way in my ship to Kansu's *Comet* over there," Curt Newton explained. He pointed toward a misty

green speck lying far off to their left in space. "If we can reach them with a televisior call from the Sargasso, they can come and get us."

"But if they go into the Sargasso, they'll be trapped, too," Walker objected. "Even your ship couldn't get out of those currents."

"You don't know my *Comet*. It has power enough to pull a moon away from a planet."

Walker still hesitated. "It's taking a big risk for us to enter that place deliberately. We may never escape from it."

"It's better than floating here till our air gives out. I've been in many a tight pinch from Mercury to Pluto, and I've found that a bold risk boldly taken always lessens the chances against you."

The two men started pushing themselves through space by steady blasts from their impellers, but they seemed to make no progress. The mighty void, spangled with thousands of burning stars, was limitless. Yet Captain Future persevered doggedly. His thoughts were not on their present predicament so much as on the disturbing set-back his plans had received. The mysterious weapon of the machine men wasn't any ray or beam. But what was it?

"I think I begin to see now!" Captain Future muttered excitedly. "It can't be anything else but that!"

They had pushed through space for two hours when Curt's impeller went dead. Its charge was exhausted. Walker's impeller went dead soon after.

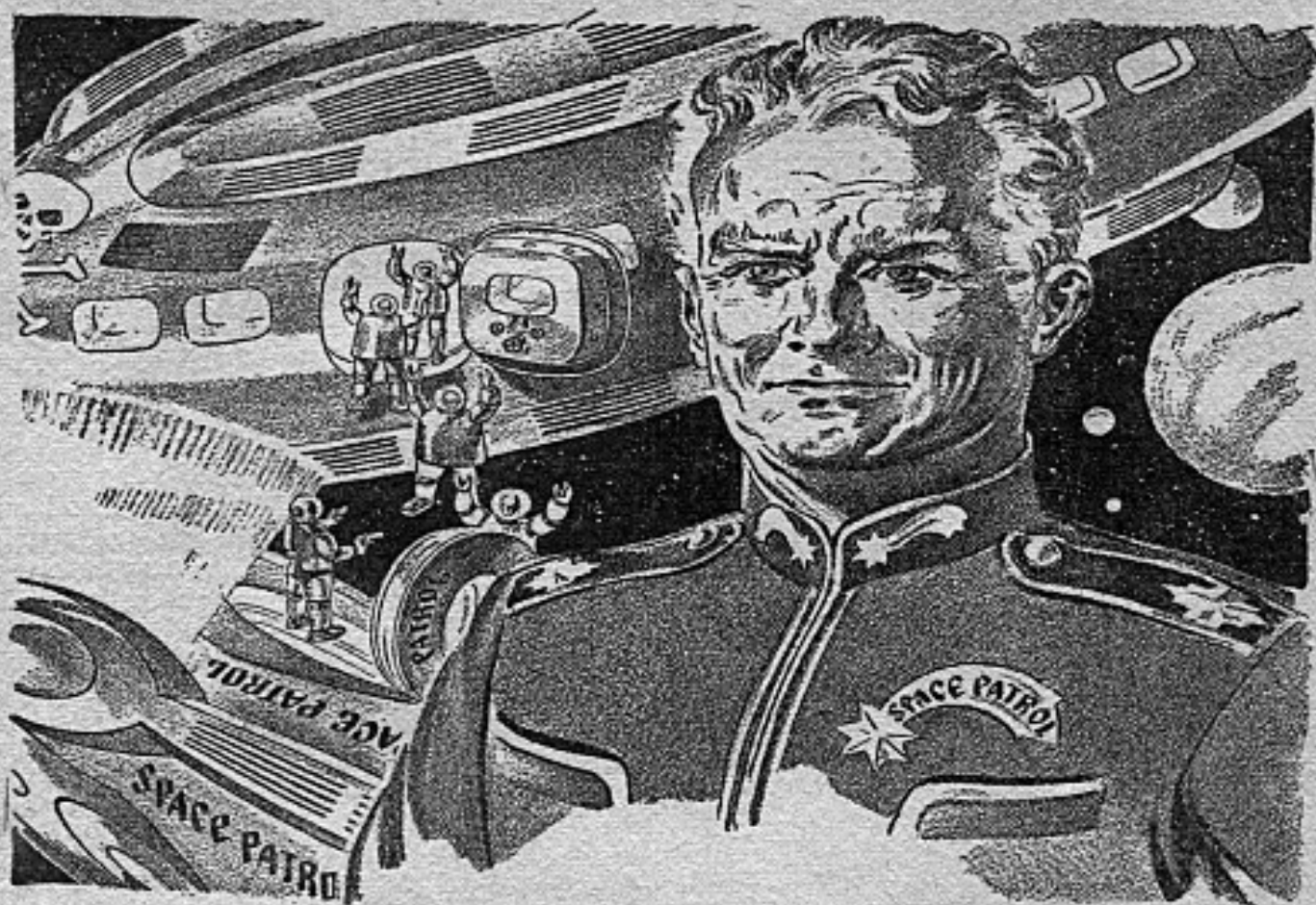
"That finishes even the one crazy hope we had," Walker groaned.

"Maybe not," Captain Future encouraged. "I think we're already in a weak ether-current. Wait and see."

For some time they were silent as Curt sought to check their drift by rough visual triangulation against the nearer planets Sunward.

"We're in a current, all right!" he called jubilantly. "It's flowing toward the Sargasso, too. It'll get stronger, soon."

"I suppose I ought to be thankful for being carried into the Sargasso," Jan said miserably. "I'm not."



MARSHAL EZRA GURNEY

The gentle tide in the ether gradually became so strong that they were being pitched violently and rolled over and over. They gripped hands to keep from being separated.

"We'll suffer plenty at the vortex," Captain Future predicted. "There's a mad whirlpool of currents there around calm dead center."

"Hope—it doesn't get much worse—than this!" Walker gasped.

**SPINNING**, hurled onward at ever-increasing velocity, their progress had become a nightmare. They were entering the zone of conflicting currents that ran together and whirled around the central vortex of this mighty maelstrom of the ether. Buffeted and rocked by soundless and invisible but terrific currents, smashed first one way and then another, Curt and the young Rocketeer plunged onward. They would have been torn apart but for Captain Future's iron grip on his companion. The whole Universe seemed to be

gyrating crazily as the currents flung them about.

Abruptly they were ejected by the racing ether-maelstrom into a dead calm. They floated in space, drifting gently.

"Name of all the space-gods, is it over?" Jan Walker panted.

"It's over. We've been shot into the calm dead area at the center of the ether-whirl."

Walker stared in awe. Ahead of them, at the center of this calm area inside the vortex, floated a vast, jumbled mass of space ships.

"Port of Missing Space Ships!" breathed the young Rocketeer. "It looks weird."

"There are plenty of strange things in here," Captain Future admitted. "But it's all dead, except—"

He did not finish the sentence, but his mouth tightened at the memory of his own unnerving experience on his previous visit here. They drifted slowly nearer the wreck-pack. Walker was able to see that this grave-

yard of space ships contained not only hundreds of ships but also meteors, buckled metal plates, dead men in space-suits who had floated in here. These and other interplanetary debris choked the spaces between the wrecks.

They reached the edge of the pack, bumping into a crumpled wreck that had been riven by a meteor somewhere in space. Captain Future clambered nimbly up to the top of the wreck. Walker followed, stood looking in awe across the floating mass of wrecks.

"The newer ships—those that floated in last—are all around the edges of the pack," Curt explained. "We've got to find one whose televisor equipment is still workable."

The next two craft they jumped onto were hopelessly battered and entangled, apparently by some kind of space-collision. But the fourth ship was a dumpy freighter that seemed fairly new and had suffered no apparent damage. They found its space-door and entered. Dead men, frozen to marble by the cold of space, lay about the decks. A motley crew of Neptunians, Venusians and Earthmen, they had been slain by atom guns. Curt Newton looked into the cargo-bunkers. They held only a little gray dust.

"Gravium," he declared. "Looks like they were on their way from Neptune to Earth when space-pirates jumped them." He found the little televisor room. The instruments were a wreck. "The pirates smashed the televisor when they first boarded, to keep an alarm from going out. An old space-corsair trick."

They went on to the next ship. It was a fairly new speed-liner, a Rissman Fifty whose whole stern had been rent by a tremendous explosion.

"They cut in too much power and the tubes back-blasted into the cyclotrons and exploded them," analyzed Curt. "Let's have a look."

Inside the wreck, the dead interplanetary passengers seemed to be sleeping, preserved by the utter coldness of space. Captain Future strode forward to the televisor room. The televisor was unharmed, and the two

cyclotrons which were its independent source of power had not been damaged.

"Here's what we're looking for," Curt announced. "This ought to be able to force out a signal even through those ether-currents, for a range of a few million miles. That ought to catch Otho and Grag on their way to Kansu's Comet."

CURT rapidly started the cyclotrons throbbing, tuned the televisor to the special wave used by him and the Futuremen, and sent out a buzzing call-signal. Then he waited, but no answer came. Again and again he called, each time without response.

"Your signal isn't reaching them?" Jan Walker queried anxiously.

"No," Curt said, frowning. "Grag and Otho must already be inside Kansu's Comet. No signal would penetrate that electrical coma."

"Then what are we going to do?" blurted the young Rocketeer.

"We're up against it," Captain Future confessed ruefully. "I'd figured they wouldn't have reached the comet by now, but I must have underestimated the speed they made."

"Can't you signal them when they come out of Kansu's Comet?"

"That might not be for days yet," Curt pointed out. "We can't keep a continuous signal running all that time. The power of this set would soon run down. And if we used intermittent calls, the odds would be thousands to one against our just happening to catch them before they were out of range on the way back to Mercury. I'm afraid my idea of calling them to come for us here has turned out to be a dud."

"How did you get out of here before?" Walker pursued.

"We put a great number of cyclotrons in one little space boat and used all that terrific power to shove us out," Curt answered. "But we used every cyclotron in the wreck-pack that was in good condition. Most of the cycs in these wrecks are no good, you know, exploded or run down. There aren't enough good cycs in the pack to repeat that trick."

"Then we're trapped in here?"

Walker asked calmly.

Curt liked his coolness.

"Never say die, Rocketeer," he replied. "I've been thinking. There's one ship in here that we might use to escape in."

"What kind of ship?"

"A very strange craft," Curt said gravely. "The crew in it is strange, too, and they're not dead, either. If we could start that ship—"

Captain Future turned abruptly and led the way out of the wrecked liner. Wonderingly Jan Walker followed the wizard of science as Curt headed in toward the older ships at the center of the pack. Here floated clumsy-looking rocket-craft of a type long obsolete. Among these ancient wrecks floated an utterly different ship. It resembled a cylinder of blank gray metal, several hundred feet long.

"Why, it doesn't look like a space ship at all!" Walker blurted.

"I looked into it when I was here before," Curt muttered. "It's a ship from somewhere outside our System—a star ship from alien regions of the Universe, which must have drifted into the Sargasso long ago. Its crew isn't human. They're not dead, but lying in suspended animation."

His gray eyes narrowed purposefully.

"This craft must have tremendous power, Walker. If we could figure out how to operate it, it would get us out of here, I believe. But we mustn't let its unhuman crew awaken."

Curt Newton approached the cylinder. There was no sign of a door anywhere in its curved side. Curt hurled a thought at the ship.

"I want the door to open!" he thought.

Obedient to his mental command, a door began to open in the side of the star ship. It opened like the shutter of a camera. At first it was only a tiny hole, but it widened out until it was a large circular aperture.

"It's telepathically operated," Curt explained to the gaping young Rocketeer. "Follow me—and for your life, don't touch anything!"

## CHAPTER XII

### *Saga of the Stars*



THEY entered the giant cylinder. Inside was a bewildering maze of girders and bracing struts, through which a central catwalk led toward one end of the cylinder. In the shadows at both ends of the strange craft

towered complex, grotesque machines whose purpose and design were an utter mystery. The very substance of which they were constructed was totally unfamiliar.

Curt led the way forward along the catwalk. His extreme caution set Jan's nerves even more on edge than before. In the absolute silence the young Rocketeer's gasp of horror sounded shockingly loud.

The eerie occupants of the ship lay in bunklike metal shelves. Above each shelf was suspended a purple lamp, its weird glow falling downward to bathe the grotesque sleeper below. They were huge and scaly, with multiple tentacles—like intelligent and malignant octopi!

"Gods of space, what are they?" gasped Jan Walker.

"Creatures from some other solar system," explained Curt. "Evidently they do not need air." He pointed to the empty tanks along the wall that bore traces of a red liquid. "Their food was synthetic blood. When they ran out of it, they cast themselves into a state of suspended animation. The purple lamp over each sleeper casts a force that keeps them preserved in a sleep of suspended animation. When we ventured in here before, we nearly woke all the creatures up. As soon as those purple lamps are turned off, they awake."

Curt went on to the front of the strange ship. Jan Walker followed hesitantly. In the front end was a towering control board, its switches, gages and indicators wholly unfamiliar in design. For the next hour

Walker watched helplessly as the wizard of science closely inspected the controls and gages, and then the towering, enigmatic mechanisms in the rear of the ship.

"It's a puzzle," Curt admitted. "Apparently the craft operates by some kind of beam-pressure instead of rocket-tubes, but I can't fathom the mode of operation. I could figure it out in time, but it might take weeks."

"Then what are you going to do?" Walker asked a little hopelessly.

Curt's eyes had strayed to the empty tanks along the wall. He went to one and closely examined the traces of reddish liquid in it.

"A queer kind of synthetic blood, as I thought," he muttered. "There's no doubt that the creatures used it for food, and ran out of it. It's made of combinations unknown in our System, but I'm sure I could duplicate the stuff from ordinary elements here."

"What good would that do?" asked the young Rocketeer.

Captain Future's face was grave.

"I'm going to take a big chance. We've got to get out of here and contact my Futuremen. This star ship could get us out of the Sargasso to wherever we wanted to go. We can't operate it, but these sleeping star men can."

"You mean—" Walker's voice trailed off unbelievably.

"Yes," Curt Newton said. "I'm going to take the chance of waking these star men. It's possible we can bargain with them to take us out of the Sargasso."

"Bargain with them? What can you offer them?"

"You'll see," Captain Future predicted grimly. "Want to get out of here before I wake them? They may jump us, you know."

"I'm sticking with you," stated the young Rocketeer.

"Good boy," approved the wizard of science. "All right, here goes. Snatch out your gun and stand by for trouble!"

**C**URT went to the first of the sleeping creatures. He reached up and fumbled with the lamp till he found a switch. The purple light went out

and the weird sleeper stirred slightly. He opened white eyes whose pupils were a fiery red and looked up into Curt's face. Instantly he swung out of the bunklike shelf with incredible speed, his tentacle arms reaching. Captain Future shot a quick thought at the star man.

"We are your friends!"

The star man paused, his red eyes searching their faces suspiciously. Then a powerful thought beat on Curt and Walker's minds.

"What manner of creatures are you? Why do you wear those suits?"

"We cannot live without breathing a mixture of nitrogen and oxygen," Curt thought back quickly. "We are natives of this Solar System. You are from another star, are you not?"

**T**HE star man's suspicions seemed to be abating a little.

"Yes, we come from a giant red sun far away across the Galaxy from this little system. For a long time I and my comrades have been searching the Galaxy for a new sun similar to our native one, to which our whole race can migrate."

"Why do you wish to migrate from your native star?" Captain Future asked.

"Because our sun is dying," was the star man's telepathic answer. "Therefore we were sent forth in this ship to explore the Galaxy in search of a sun possessing worlds upon which we could live. They must be worlds with certain elements without which we cannot exist and they must not be too warm. They must also be worlds without air, for we evolved upon an airless world and could not stand the crushing pressure of a planetary atmosphere."

"For long we have been cruising the Galaxy in search of such a system. We carried large supplies of the synthetic blood which my people inject into their bodies for nutritional purposes."

"But while searching this section of the Galaxy, our supply of synthetic blood gave out. We faced slow death by starvation, so we sent a message back to our home system far away by space torpedo. Then we placed our-

selves in suspended animation.

"We had asked our people, in the torpedo-message, to send a relief expedition after us. But the space torpedo must have met with accident in the vast interstellar reaches, for I perceive that a long time has passed and the relief expedition has never come."

"I understand," Captain Future thought. "Your ship, with all of you in suspended animation, drifted on toward our Solar System and was sucked into this Sea of Space, where it has remained ever since."

"Will their ship be able to get out of here?" Walker blurted.

The octopus-like star man received the thought, and turned his red-pupiled eyes on the young Rocketeer.

"Yes, this craft can easily break out of this ether-vortex. But we are still without nutritional supplies. We must somehow secure a new supply of the synthetic blood before going on with our search of the Galaxy for a new home. At this moment we are very near starvation."

"That works out well!" Captain Future thought elatedly. "The reason I awoke you was to offer my help in making new supplies of the synthetic blood. In return I ask only that you take us where we wish."

"The bargain is accepted," the star man telepathed instantly. "Not knowing the chemistry of this alien system, it would take us long to devise from its unfamiliar substances the complex compounds that make up our nutritional liquid. You are familiar with the elements and compounds of this System and can aid us greatly."

"You don't suppose these creatures would trick us?" Jan Walker whispered uneasily to Captain Future. "They're looking for new worlds for their people. What if they decide to invade our System's worlds?"

"I comprehend what you are saying," came the calm, powerful thought of the star man. "Your apprehensions are without foundation. I have already read from your minds a description of this System's worlds. They all have atmospheres, and we could not live on such worlds."

"That's true," telepathed Captain Future shrewdly. "That's one reason why I took the risk of awaking you. It was obvious that you were non-breathing creatures who could not long exist on our planets."

"I will now awake my companions," thought the star man. "We shall have to prepare synthetic blood before doing anything else. Our bodies are badly in need of nutrition."

**H**E moved rapidly down the rows of shelves upon which his companions slumbered in suspended animation. He turned off the glowing purple lamp over each sleeper. Soon there were scores of the creatures awake and gathered around the leader whom Curt had first revived. Curt and Jan Walker vaguely sensed an interplay of swarming telepathic messages as the leader of the epic expedition explained the situation to his comrades.

"We are eager to begin preparing our nutritional liquid," he finally ex-  
[Turn page]

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plained to Captain Future. "Our bodies are weak from hunger and we cannot maintain physical activity for very long."

"Carbon, chlorine, nitrogen, sulphur and bismuth are the bases of your synthetic blood, are they not?" Curt thought. "Those elements are plentiful in this System."

"Yes, but they are in unfamiliar compounds. Long before we could analyze and break them down, we would have perished. That is why we need your help. If you can quickly furnish us a supply of those elements—"

"Follow me!" Captain Future telepathed rapidly. "You too, Walker. We'll have to get the necessary raw materials from the wrecks outside."

He led the way hastily out of the ship. The star men were obviously in an advanced stage of weakness, yet their resolution was unflinching. They clambered over the wrecks with Captain Future and the young Rocketeer. Curt picked out masses of minerals from wrecked freighters in the pack. The star men staggered back to their ship with containers of the precious mineral gripped in their unhuman tentacle arms.

"I think we have enough raw materials now," Captain Future stated, lifting a heavy metal case he had filled with minerals. "Hurry, Walker!"

When they entered the star ship, they found some of the octopus creatures had already collapsed. Suspended animation had only postponed death from starvation.

"Got to be quick about this," Curt declared tautly. "Wish I had the *Comet's* laboratory here. I don't know this equipment."

The leader of the star men weakly assisted Curt Newton, bringing the necessary chemical apparatus and explaining its design. Captain Future hastily began breaking down their raw minerals into the chemical elements. He was working against time, for the life of the star men seemed to be fading fast. By the time he had accumulated sufficient stores of the necessary elements, the octopus creatures were too feeble to take up the work of synthesizing them into the nutri-

tional liquid.

"It is—too late—stranger," came the weakening thought of the leader from where he lay. "You have tried—to help us— We are grateful— But here ends our vain—search for a new—home for our race."

"No, don't give up!" Curt telepathed urgently. "Think the directions for the synthesis to me. I'll try to carry them out."

**J**AN WALKER'S bulging eyes witnessed an amazing scene as the dying leader began telepathing his instructions to Captain Future. The wizard of science, following those instructions with unfamiliar equipment, was building up the formula of synthetic blood. The complicated mechanism of glass bulbs, tubes and chambers into which he was pouring his elements began to function. From its bottom tube, a stream of dark red fluid poured into the supply tanks.

"We are—too weak to—feed ourselves," came the feeble thought of the leader. "Use—the injector you see by—the—tank."

Curt snatched up the super-hypodermic needle which he filled with the synthetic blood. At the dying star man's direction, he injected the red nutritional liquid into the octopoid body at the neck. The result was astonishing. In a few minutes the leader rose to his feet, strength returning to him incredibly fast. He took over the task of feeding his comrades by injection. It was not long before all the star men had recovered full vigor.

"Whew!" breathed Captain Future. "That was as tough a job as I've had for a long time."

"You have saved our lives, stranger!" The star man's thought throbbed with gratitude. "You have enabled us to continue our search of the stars. We shall keep our bargain. Where do you wish to be taken?"

Curt pointed out the misty green speck of Kansu's Comet, far over in space.

"To the little solid world inside that comet."

The leader went to the towering control board of the strange ship. His four tentacle limbs moved over the

bewildering array of switches, relays and levers. There was no sound, but the giant cylindrical craft rose smoothly out of the wreck-pack that had long surrounded it.

"This ship is powered by some form of force-pressure, is it not?" Captain Future asked keenly.

"That is so," corroborated the star man's thought. "The reactive push of a powerful vibration against the ether drives it forward."

There had seemed to be no windows in the ship, but Curt and Walker found that parts of its walls could be made transparent. The star ship hovered above the floating pack, then shot forward with breath-taking velocity. It tore through the maelstrom of ether-currents and flew at tremendous speed toward the far green speck of Kansu's Comet. Their speed was unguessable, since the gages on the board all bore undecipherable markings, but it seemed an incredibly short time before they were approaching the comet.

"That coma possesses a powerful electrical charge," Captain Future warned the star man. "Can your craft penetrate it?"

"Yes, and it will not harm this ship. The metal of its walls is a perfect dielectric."

**T**HE glowing, flaring coma of Kansu's comet was like a green sun. Boldly the star ship dived down through it. Without harm it ripped through the flaring shell of electrical force. Beneath lay a small world blanketed by fantastic yellow-green vegetation.

"Circle this world," Curt asked the star man. "We seek an ancient wreck that should be somewhere here." He turned to Jan Walker. "Grag and Otho are here hunting for the wreck of the old *Star Streak*. If we find the wreck, we should find them."

"I see a wreck of some kind down there now!" Walker exclaimed.

His eyes had caught the dull gleam of a long, corroded metal mass half-concealed by vegetation that had grown up around it.

"That must be the *Star Streak*—and there are Grag and Otho!" Captain Future cried.

**H**E asked the star man beside him, in a quick thought, to land there. They saw Otho's lithe rubbery figure and Grag's giant metal form standing in front of a group of strange, erect mechanisms.

"What in the name of space are those things?" Walker stammered.

"They're machine men, semi-intelligent mechanisms of the same kind as the space ship hijackers," Curt replied. "What's happening down there?"

Otho and Grag had drawn their atom guns and were standing ready to defend themselves as the giant cylindrical ship rushed down, thinking the space ship thieves were returning. But when Curt Newton emerged, a glad cry went up from the android and robot.

"Chief!" yelled Otho joyfully, running forward. "What are you doing here? I thought you were with the Rocketeers!"

Then both Otho and Grag shrank back at sight of the octopus-like star men.

"Devils of space!" yelled Grag. "Who are those things?"

"They're friends, and good ones," Curt assured quickly.

In a few brief words, he told of Walker's and his experience. He was interrupted by a thought from the star leader.

"If you wish nothing further from us, we would like to leave you. We now have sufficient nutritional supplies for a long time, thanks to you. And we are eager to continue searching the Galaxy for a new home."

Captain Future impulsively held out his hand. The star man a little hesitantly, for the gesture was strange to him, grasped it in his own strange tentacle-arm.

"Good-by, and good luck in your search," Curt wished warmly. "I hope you find a splendid new home."

The star ship rose smoothly into the air, arrowed out through the glowing coma and disappeared in space.

"Now, what did you learn here?" Captain Future demanded urgently of the Futuremen. "Where did you pick up these machine men?"

Otho explained volubly how they

had discovered the city of the machine men, built here by the semi-intelligent mechanisms of Kelso's ship. He told also of their disclosure that another man had been here and had taken Kelso's scientific secrets and some of the machine men.

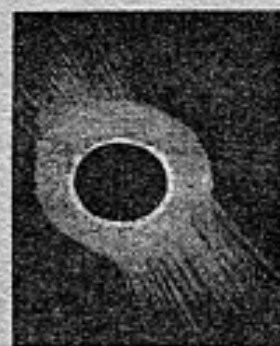
"That's the man we're after," Curt declared. "You say they couldn't describe him?"

"The devil was cunning enough to wear a space-suit here," Otho said. "Chief, what in space is the mystery weapon of Kelso's that that plotter got here? Have you any idea?"

"Yes, but it seems almost incredible. Come on, we'll search the *Star Streak*. I wish I could be sure I was right."

## CHAPTER XIII

### *Quest of the Brain*



HE and Grag and Otho, followed by the bewildered Jan Walker and the stolid machine men, hastened to the corroded wreck. Weird cubistic vegetation hemmed in the ill-fated ship. They found the door and

entered. The wreck was almost empty. The machine men had used all the equipment in it in the construction of their pathetic city.

"We did not touch the secret devices of the man who made us," hummed one of the machine men. "He had said we must never touch those things without permission. But the other man who came took them all."

"Yes, that cunning plotter would take everything," muttered Curt, surveying the empty cabinets that had held Kelso's instruments.

"This looks like Kelso's log-book!" Otho exclaimed, bringing a time-faded book he had found amid a mass of papers.

Captain Future grasped it and eagerly perused the angular handwriting of the long-dead scientist. It was a day-to-day log of the voyage of the

*Star Streak*, but it contained nothing of scientific value.

"Wait, here's an entry that gives a clue!" Curt exclaimed.

November 30, Saturday—Near Jupiter's orbit. We should reach Pluto in four more weeks. My associates tiring of the voyage, and very anxious to turn back. They say now that the fierce native Plutonians will destroy us. I have assured them my "speed-up" device will enable us to crush any Plutonians who attack us, but they don't understand the device's power.

Curt's gray eyes gleamed.

"His speed-up device! That's the mystery weapon the space ship thieves are using, just as I guessed!"

"Speed-up?" repeated Grag blankly. "I don't understand, Master."

Captain Future was lost in thought.

"If I could duplicate Kelso's device, I could meet the ship thieves on even terms at last. It'll be a terrific job, but Simon and I should be able to do it." His head jerked up. "Walker, the Round-the-System Race starts next week, doesn't it?"

"That's right," Walker replied. "The prelim-races begin soon."

"Every space ship manufacturer will have his finest stock model in that race," Curt declared. "The ship hijackers will certainly try to seize those ships. If I can duplicate Kelso's device in time, I'm going to be piloting one of those ships. Then I'll finally be able to penetrate their organization and smash them for good."

"Captain Future—piloting in the great Race?" gasped Jan Walker.

"I'll still be Ray Barret," said Curt. "And my co-pilot will be Otho, disguised as you, Walker!"

"Swell!" cried Otho eagerly. "I always did want to be a racing pilot. Clear space, everyone. Here come the racing Rocketeers!"

"We've got to blast back to Mercury in a hurry," Curt said. "Everything depends on whether the Brain and I can duplicate Kelso's speed-up invention before the race begins."

Soon the *Comet* rose from the little world, felt its way carefully out through a rift in the glowing green coma, and then headed for Mercury with all its rocket-tubes roaring a song of power.

"But, Master, what is this speed-up device you talk about?" Grag queried puzzledly.

"It's something that even I can hardly yet believe," Captain Future replied. "Somehow, though, the Brain and I must duplicate it, if we're to conquer and capture the man we're after." He reached toward the televisor. "I'm going to call Simon now and tell him what a job's ahead of us. He'll have time to get everything ready for our task before we arrive."

The powerful call-signal of the *Comet's* televisor, tuned to the Planet Police wave, hurtled Sunward.

"Calling Mercury Police headquarters!"

He got Ezra Gurney in a brief time. The old marshal's grizzled face was astonished and his eyes popped as he recognized Curt in the screen.

"Thought maybe you was done for, Cap'n Future! Heard how the ship you and Walker took out was missin'."

"I'll explain later, Ezra," Curt answered urgently. "Put on Simon Wright. I want to talk to him."

"Cap'n Future, I can't put Simon on!" babbled Ezra. "The Brain has disappeared!"

\* \* \* \* \*

**S**IMON WRIGHT had remained in the Planet Police building of Solar City, back on Mercury. He had requested a small room to use as a temporary laboratory, and had equipped it with certain instruments from the *Comet* before Grag and Otho left in the ship.

In this makeshift laboratory, after Captain Future had gone in his disguise to join the Rocketeers, the Brain had begun work.

He was entirely alone. Both Ezra Gurney and Joan Randall had left to supervise the secret Police agents who were to shadow the space ship magnates.

The Planet Police officers on duty in the building had such awe of the unhuman Brain that they did not dare disturb him.

Hours passed into days, but the

[Turn page]

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eternal twilight outside did not change and the Brain needed no sleep. His square, transparent case poised upon his new traction-beams, using other beams with which to handle his instruments and materials. His lens-eyes carefully scrutinized every detail of the device he was making.

"It is certainly true that these beams make my work much easier," thought the Brain. "Grag and Otho are skilful, but it was irritating to be forced to direct them in every small detail. Curtis was right when he claimed I would be glad I had these new powers."

Undisturbed by the demands a body would have raised, from eating to sleeping, he continued working without interruption.

"Finished at last," he rasped, laying down his tools and contemplating the compact, double-cylindrical instrument he had made. "This should help locate the ship hijackers' base, if the other methods fail."

Joan Randall entered the room. The girl secret agent looked weary and discouraged.

"You've been having the space ship magnates shadowed, as Curtis asked?" inquired the Brain.

Joan nodded. "We've had our best Police agents on it. Every move of Rissman, Tark and all the rest has been watched. We haven't learned anything. None of them has contacted the secret base of the hijackers, nor have they made any other suspicious move." She looked puzzledly at the instrument the Brain had built. "What's that, Simon?"

"It's a new, more sensitive electro-scope I've devised," the Brain explained. "I'm hoping it will be sensitive enough to follow an ionized rocket-trail even through an atmosphere."

Ezra Gurney burst into the room, his grizzled face grim.

"Just got some bad news, folks. The chief Rocketeer over at Suicide Station just reported that another new ship has disappeared. Its pilots were Walker and Barret."

"Barret—Captain Future!" cried Joan. She went pale. "What happened to them?"

"Nobody knows. The last call they had from the ship, a new Cruh-Cholo Thirty, was from a position just beyond Jupiter's orbit. Then it went silent."

"Then it is obvious that the ship thieves managed to overpower Curtis in spite of his preparations and took the ship," the Brain said calmly. "They doubtless left Curtis and the other pilot floating in space as usual."

"If that big, crazy redhead has let himself be killed, I'll never forgive him!" Joan cried illogically. "Ezra, can't we do something?"

"We'll call the Planet Patrol commander at Earth and have him send Patrol ships to search that part of space," Ezra said.

The veteran and the anxious girl agent hurried out, leaving the Brain alone.

**S**IMON brooded in thought. He was not greatly worried about Captain Future. None knew better than Simon Wright the resourcefulness of Curt in extricating himself from a perilous situation. The Brain was thinking about the new Cruh-Cholo ship that had been taken from Captain Future. The thieves would have to bring it to their main base, since they no longer had a Venus base to use as an outlying post.

"They'll fly it straight toward Mercury from that position in space," ruminated the Brain. "And if I were out on that space-lane, waiting—"

He made a quick decision, for he saw a chance to discover the location of the hijackers' secret base. Rapidly he made a trial to assure himself that he would be able to use the electro-scope. Then he attached it to his square case.

Silently as a shadow he rose upon his traction-beams and glided out of the room. No one noticed him as he glided down the corridors, out of the Police building, and rose rapidly up through the eternal dusk of the Twilight Zone. The lights of Solar City receded beneath him. Driven by the push of his powerful impulse beams, he flew on until he was completely outside the atmosphere of Mercury and was hurtling through empty space.

Space meant nothing to the Brain. He did not breathe, nor could heat or cold affect him in his insulated case. He poised for a time in the void, his mind busy with intricate calculations. Unhesitatingly he flew outward in a direction away from the Sun and Mercury. The living Brain, one of the famous Futuremen, was on his way to play a part in the great battle of Captain Future against the thieves who were demoralizing an industry!

"This should be far enough," he thought at last. "I'm right on the line."

Simon had stopped at a point in space that was directly between Mercury and that distant position in space where Captain Future's Cruh-Cholo had been captured. The thieves, bringing the stolen ship back to Mercury, must pass along this line. The Brain waited. He remained quite motionless in space, checking his tendency to drift back toward Mercury by an occasional use of his traction-beams.

A man might have gone mad from the monotony of that vigil, as the hours of his wait mounted into scores. Nothing about him changed. No ship was to be seen, for this was off the ship-lanes between the planets. There was nothing but emptiness, and the cool, watching eyes of the eternal stars, but the Brain felt no boredom. His vast, icy intelligence was accustomed to physical inaction.

As the long hours passed, he occupied himself with the mental solution of a certain fifth-order mathematical problem which he had long meant to attack. His mind juggled incredibly complex equations. In that absorbing task he did not even notice the slow passing of time. But while his conscious mind was busy with the mathematical problem, his subconscious was on the watch. The lens-eyes of the Brain, protruding from his case on their flexible stalks, constantly kept watch and at last they glimpsed a small black mass against the stars. It was a space ship, running without lights.

"That must be it," thought the Brain. "No ordinary craft would run unlighted."

**H**E instantly forsook his mathematical musings and concentrated on the oncoming ship. It was approaching at high speed and would pass not far away. The Brain perceived that it was a Cruh-Cholo Thirty. He could clearly count the thirty projecting tail rocket-tubes. He glimpsed faint cowl-lights in the glassite-walled control room. The light was enough to show him two grotesque mechanical figures at the controls.

"Machine men!" he thought. "They are the ones who took that ship from Curtis and the other Rocketeer. And now they're going to their base."

Instantly the Brain followed the speeding ship as it headed straight toward Mercury. Like a shadow Simon Wright hung on its trail. The Cruh-Cholo darted down into the atmosphere over the Cold Side of Mercury. The Brain would have liked to call Ezra and Joan by his televisor, but he feared the call might be picked up by the mechanical creatures in the ship ahead.

The Cruh-Cholo was now scudding low over the desolate, dark wilderness of the Cold Side. It headed across the Twilight Zone, and on over the blazing, glaring furnace of the Hot Side. The Brain had to drop back out of sight. Until now he had been concealed from discovery by darkness, but he could easily be seen out in that terrific blaze of sunlight, if the machine men looked back.

He brought into action the super-sensitive electroscope he had attached to his case, which could trace the new trail of ionized rocket-discharge through the atmosphere before it dispersed. By that trail, he continued to pursue the stolen ship. Beneath him lay an appalling waste of rock, blackened by the fiery glare of the huge Sun. Here and there rose black, jagged hills. He glimpsed some squat gray "sun-dogs," using their sharp horns to dig out edible minerals from the rocks.

The rocket-trail led roughly northwestward over the Hot Side. Down to his left the Brain saw the gray, molten expanse of the Sea of Lead. Far out in it rose steep, little, rocky isles that

were mantled by flowing flames—the so-called Fire Islands. But the rocket-trail led northward into this forbidding wilderness. The heat of the monster Sun overhead was awful, yet the Brain's insulated case protected him. Steadily he followed the stolen ship.

"They can't be heading for Vapor Valley!" thought Simon. "There's no chance of their base being anywhere near that place."

But his surmise proved incorrect. The ionized rocket-trail led straight ahead toward a distant, gigantic gorge veiled in gray vapor. The Brain approached cautiously. The rocket-trail ended here. Puzzledly Simon Wright glided to and fro above Vapor Valley, peering down into its depths.

This place was a mystery of the System. Heavy clouds of vaporized mercury, made gaseous by the incredible heat, swirled ponderously in it, veiling its depths. It had never been explored, yet it seemed that the stolen ship must have disappeared into it.

The Brain coolly determined to follow. Without hesitation he glided down into the awesome, vapor-shrouded depths of the gigantic chasm.

## CHAPTER XIV

### *Time Accelerator*



WHILE the Brain had been lying in wait out in space, the *Comet* had approached Mercury from another quarter of space. Captain Future had driven the little ship at high speed all the way in from Kansu's *Comet*, for

he realized that scant time remained to effect the scheme he had formed. Down through the gray dusk, the ship sank into the landing field behind the Planet Police building of Solar City.

Curt Newton strode into the building hastily, followed by Grag, Otho and young Jan Walker. Joan Randall and Ezra came running to meet him.

"I knew that was the *Comet* I heard landin'!" beamed Ezra. "We been waitin' for you."

"You big space-struck idiot!" Joan stormed at Curt. "You had us all thinking something had happened to you!"

"When did Simon Wright disappear?" Curt Newton asked sharply.

"Just a little while ago," Joan answered. "He had been making a new instrument—a super-sensitive electroscope, he said. We went out to have a search made for you in space, just before you called. When we came back, the Brain was gone."

Captain Future felt a little relieved.

"Then Simon's gone on some quest of his own," he decided. "He should be able to take care of himself, and he'll surely call us if he needs help."

"Cap'n Future, what did you find out?" Ezra demanded eagerly. "The hijackers' secret beam was too strong for you, eh?"

"It isn't a beam those ship thieves are using to knock out pilots," Curt said. "It's something vastly more powerful, a secret invented years ago by Doctor Kelso. I've got to duplicate it in a hurry, if I'm to meet these hijackers on even terms next time."

"Next time?" Joan echoed. "Are you crazy enough to let them have another chance at you?"

Curt shrugged. "I've got to, if I'm to break up that ring. I'm going to pilot a ship in the Round-the-System Race. The hijackers will certainly try to capture those valuable racing ships, but Otho and I will be in one of them. This time we'll really be prepared for the attack!"

"You are space-struck, for sure!" Joan declared. "Why, the race itself is a grueling grind that kills pilots. Around the whole System, touching every planet, and then back to Mercury—and you're going into it hoping that those mechanical fiends will attack you. I give up!"

"What did you find out about the space ship magnates?" Captain Future interrupted. "You had them all shadowed?"

"Yes, and without results. None of them contacted any secret base."

"Yet one of them must have some

way to keep in communication with the machine men he's using as tools." Curt turned to Ezra. "Did you follow that Durl Cruh clue, as I asked? Did you try to find out where Cruh could have heard of Kelso's machine men?"

"I got a little information," the veteran drawled. "More'n a year ago, Christian Rissman had some idea of usin' intelligent machines instead of human laborers. That'd cut his productions costs so much he'd be able to undersell all the other manufacturers. He had the Interplanetary Library send out all the material it has on robots and their use in industry."

"That's when the *Star Streak* record was sent out to the Rissman plant," Curt muttered thoughtfully. "Go on, Ezra."

"AIN'T much more to tell," reported the old marshal. "Gray Garson, who was chief superintendent of Rissman's plant then, kicked about the idea of usin' mechanical workers. The other manufacturers, includin' Durl Cruh, heard about the idea and protested to the Government, which prohibited Rissman from usin' robot-workers. So he had to give it up. He was so mad at Garson that he fired him, and Garson set up a little space ship factory of his own."

"Durl Cruh must have known something more about the business," Curt said. "He was murdered to prevent his talking."

"Say, Chief!" Otho yelped. "It's clear as space that Rissman's the one who got Kelso's secret weapon and is using it to smash the other companies by these thefts!"

"Lan Tark is Rissman's biggest competitor," Grag dissented loudly. "I'm still betting that smooth Martian is behind this. The core of the whole thing is up there in his Space Palace."

"Mere suspicions won't get us anywhere," Captain Future stated. "Ezra, I want you to find out just how many ships have been produced by each company, and how many stolen."

"Rissman's never had any ships stolen," reminded Otho brashly. "It's as plain as a planet, Chief, if you'd only see it."

"I'm going ahead with my scheme of entering the race," Curt declared, ignoring the android. "The heart of this conspiracy is the secret main base where the machine men take the stolen ships. If I can duplicate their weapon, I can penetrate that place and smash the ring."

"But what in space is this mystery weapon you're talking about?" demanded Ezra Gurney. "You say it's not any kind of beam or ray."

"You said it was a speed-up," Grag boomed. "What kind of speed-up?"

"A kind that I've got to speed up to duplicate," Captain Future retorted. "The preliminary eliminations for the race start over at Suicide Station tomorrow morning. I've got to duplicate Kelso's weapon before then. I wish the Brain were here to help me, but since he's not—"

Curt did not finish the sentence. He was already hurrying back to the *Comet*.

The others followed, and in deep perplexity watched Captain Future as he began assembling instruments and materials for his task.

"The principle of this is clear enough," he mused as his hands worked deftly. "Simon and I did some research on it a couple of years ago, when we were investigating electronic structure. Thanks to that ground-work, I may be able to build a practical accelerator."

To Joan and Ezra, the spectacle of the greatest scientific wizard in the System at work was no new thing. But young Jan Walker, the Rocketeer, stared in amazement at the sight. Curt had unfolded a little metal table in the corner of the *Comet's* laboratory-cabin.

He set up the compact, powerful atomic drills, welders and cutters.

"A Number Three wave-trap and transformer-form, Otho. Grag, get a disk of sheet nickel and stamp it into a hemisphere, then lacquer it with liquid insulation. No, Otho, not a transformer—just a form, you idiot! I'll have to make my own windings for this."

The android and the big robot rushed around the laboratory, pulling out of the *Comet's* cabinets of scien-

tific equipment the materials and instruments for which Captain Future called. Curt's bronzed hands flew among the devices before him. Jan Walker, well grounded as he was in ordinary science, had no conception of what the red-headed planeteer was doing. He only perceived that Curt was constructing a skull-cap of insulated nickel, to which was attached thin cables that led to a small square case of complex transformers.

"I think this will do it," Captain Future muttered, two hours later. "If the researches made by Simon and me were valid, it should work. It will certainly cause acceleration of the electronic movement."

"Have a heart, Chief, tell us what it's all about!" Otho pleaded.

CURT looked at them gravely. "This nickel cap will drench my whole body with vibrations capable of stimulating the movement of each atom's electrons. You know that the electrons and other sub-atomic particles of each atom revolve around their nucleus at a certain unvarying speed. That speed of electronic revolution is the same for every atom in our Universe. But this force will make the electrons of my body revolve much faster."

"So they'll revolve faster," agreed Otho. "What of it?"

"According to our researches in electronic structure," Captain Future replied, "upon the speed of electronic revolution directly depends the so-called time-speed of any object. Every electron in my body will be revolving faster. According to the laws of relativity, that should result in the time of my body being faster than ordinary time."

He put the insulated nickel cap upon his head. He stuffed the small transformer case into his jacket, letting the thin wires trail up to connect with the cap. Then, a little hesitantly, he reached into the transformer case and touched a switch. A low droning issued from the case. Curt turned a pointer on the front to a certain position.

He felt a queer vertigo through every fiber of his body for an instant.

It changed quickly into a feeling of buoyant stimulation. Except for that sensation, he perceived no difference in himself. But when he looked at the others in the *Comet*, an excited exclamation burst from him.

"It works!"

The other five people in the cabin stood unmoving as statues. Otho's mouth was wide open to speak. Joan Randall's foot was poised in air to take a step forward. Young Walker's eyes were ludicrously wide as he stood motionless, his hands clenched. Then as Captain Future watched, he saw that they were moving so utterly slowly that his eyes could not perceive it. Otho's mouth was slowly closing. Joan's foot was descending with infinite slowness toward the floor.

Curt Newton realized that they were not really moving any more slowly than usual. It was he who was moving infinitely faster. The acceleration of electronic motion in his body had, by the laws of relativity, speeded up the time-passage of his body. He was living many times faster than anyone else in the System.

"I've got it!" Captain Future exclaimed. "But one more test—"

He picked up Otho's petrified body and carried it rapidly out of the ship into the twilight courtyard. Then Curt turned off the accelerating force. He experienced the same momentary vertigo till he was normal again. Now the others were no longer frozen, but moving naturally.

"What happened?" gasped Ezra Gurney, staring wildly at Curt. "You disappeared!"

"Is that what seemed to happen?" Curt questioned.

Joan nodded vigorously. "You just seemed to vanish. I could see only a vague blur of movement where you had been."

"That was because, in my faster time, I was moving so much more rapidly than you that you couldn't see me," Captain Future explained.

OTH came bursting into the ship.

"Chief, was that you who did that to me? I couldn't see you or anything else! Something grabbed me

and I woke up outside the ship. It was just the same as when the machine men overpowered me in the *Comet* before!"

"I only carried you out," Curt said. "But I was moving so rapidly, compared with you, that it all seemed instantaneous to you. This time accelerator is the device Kelso invented long ago—the mystery weapon the mechanical hijackers have been using."

"You mean the thing would work on machine men the same as on a human being?" Ezra queried incredulously.

"Of course it would," Curt Newton asserted. "Metal would respond as well as organic matter. Probably certain of the machine men have the accelerator built into their bodies by the man we're after. They also must have a few of their ships equipped with larger accelerators. A ship under the influence of the time-acceleration could move with immense relative velocity and overhaul the space ship they wanted to capture."

"A couple of the machine men, wearing accelerators, would force open its space-door, enter and grab its pilots and toss them out into space. And the pilots, living by slower time, wouldn't even be able to see their attackers. They'd experience only a blur of movement, and find themselves out in space."

"How're you goin' to use this business to fight back at the hijackers?" Ezra demanded.

"I'll make another of these accelerators. When Otho and I enter the race we will wear them under our space-suits. When the machine men jump us, we'll turn on our own accelerators. Then we'll be moving and living by as fast a time as they, and can meet them on even terms."

"Say, that sounds as if it's going to be fun!" cried Otho, rubbing his hands. "Wait till those metal devils try their trick on us. Will they get a surprise!"

"Otho, you disguise yourself as Jan Walker here," Captain Future ordered, "while I make the second accelerator. And make your disguise good."

"My disguises aren't just good. They're perfect!"

As Curt Newton labored to construct a replica of the time accelerator he had already built, Otho proceeded to make himself up. The android was the greatest master of disguise in the System. By means of a chemical oil, his synthetic flesh could be softened and remolded into desired features. Using pigment to stain his eyes the color of Walker's, fitting a wig onto his reshaped head, Otho made himself an exact duplicate of the dazed Rocketeer.

"Well, which one of us is the real Walker?" he demanded.

**S**TANDING beside the Rocketeer, he was like an identical twin. Walker seemed unable to believe his own eyes. Meanwhile Curt had finished building the second accelerator. It had been merely a matter of duplicating the parts of the first and assembling them.

"Good work, Otho," he approved. "You'll need Walker's clothes and Rocketeer badge. Walker, I'll want you to remain here in the Planet Police building, so that no one will suspect the imposture Otho is pulling."

"I'll—I'll be glad to do that," Jan Walker agreed shakily. "I've been through so much since I met you that I need some rest, anyway."

Curt glanced up at a clock.

"It's nearly morning now," he said. "The preliminary test races for the race will be starting at Suicide Station in a few hours. Otho and I had better be getting over there. We'll have to tell them that we were picked up in space by a liner, and brought back to Mercury." He went on to explain to Joan. "The pilots who win the preliminary races enter the race. They draw lots to see which maker's ship they pilot in the race. I don't have any doubt about our winning a place in the preliminaries, but I hope we don't draw the Rissman."

"Why, the Rissman will probably be the fastest ship!" Otho cried.

"Yes, but the hijackers never bother Rissman ships. We want them to try to capture ours before the race ends." He turned toward the door. "Ezra,

you and Joan check those production figures for me. Grag, wait here in case the Brain returns. Come along, Otho. We've got to hurry now if we're to be in that race."

## CHAPTER XV

### *Star Trail to Glory*



"THE Rocketeers are coming!"

The excited, pulse-stirring cry spread electrically across the dense crowd gathered around the edges of Solar City's spaceport. Every eye turned eagerly toward the men in

space-suits who had emerged from the pilot's building and were crossing the tarmac toward the row of waiting space ships. Each ship was a Twenty. The crowd surged forward against the Planet Police holding them back.

"Give her the gun when you get out there, Losor! I've bet a thousand at two to one that the Rissman will win!"

"Show them what a Martian pilot and a Martian ship can do, Yalu! All my money's on you and your Tark!"

A big television stand had been set up. Its view screens were transmitting the thrilling scene all over the Solar System. The television announcer was talking swiftly into his microphones.

"There they come, folks—the racing Rocketeers themselves! The pilots who have won the chance to compete in the terrific grind of the Round-the-System Race!"

He signaled his assistant to swivel the view screens.

"See their ships lined up waiting for them? That first slim craft is the Rissman entry. You can always tell a Rissman by its long streamlined hull. They say the race wouldn't be run this time if Christian Rissman hadn't insisted on it. The other manufacturers allegedly wanted to call off the race because of some space ship thefts that have apparently been going on. They

feared their ships in the race might be stolen, too. But when Rissman insisted, the others had to fall in or lose to him by default.

"The betting's on Rissman's entry, but that Tark beyond it doesn't look as though it's slow, either. And the Kalber and Cruh-Cholo ships will be right there in the running. It's whispered that the Cruh-Cholo can accelerate faster than anything in the race. Gray Garson has a fast-looking little ship that looks like a dark horse. Zamor's entry seems a little obsolete, but you never can tell. Remember, these are all stock model ships, folks! The manufacturer who wins gains tremendous prestige for his product.

"You all know the course of this race, ladies and gentlemen—around the whole Solar System, the most grueling course imaginable! From the start here at Mercury, the racers will plunge right into one of the most dangerous sections of the race, a loop close around the Sun. Then on to Venus and Earth, out to Jupiter and Saturn and Uranus, and then to distant Pluto. From Pluto they'll loop back in toward Neptune. And from Neptune it's a terrific sprint back to Mercury.

"They must swoop over the spaceport of the capital city of each planet, and drop a flare to testify that they reached it. But they're not allowed to stop for repairs or anything else. These ships are loaded with fuel-minerals for their cyclotrons, enough for the whole tremendous flight. Once they take off, it's round the System—or else!

"The pilots are entering their ships now and getting last-minute instructions from the owners. Some veteran Rocketeer racers are at the throttles today. Losor the Neptunian drew the Rissman, the favorite. Yalu, the old Martian veteran, drew the Tark. Immler, the noted Earthman racer, has the Kalber. Here's something interesting. Two young Earthmen Rocketeers who never flew in a race before will be in this one! They're Ray Barret and Jan Walker, two new Rocketeers who somehow managed to place in the preliminary elimination contests.

"Too bad they drew the Zamor ship to pilot. They won't have much chance to win in it, experts believe. Yet anything can happen in this greatest of all space-racing classics! There's never been a Round-the-System Race yet without accidents. A thousand perils are waiting for these audacious pilots. They know what they're heading into, but they're not afraid. They're ready to hit the star trail—to glory or to death!"

**W**HILE the announcer was giving his excited description, the pilots and co-pilots of the ships on the tarmac were calling to each other.

"Better keep out of my way when we blast off, Yalu!" called Losor, the Neptunian. "I'll run you down!"

"Oho!" shrilled the old Martian pilot. "Why, I'll be back here at Mercury taking bows when you're still out by Pluto."

Immler, the squat pilot who had the Kalber, shouted mirthfully to the two young Earthmen by the little Zamor at the end of the line.

"You, Barret and Walker! Any messages you want me to take ahead? It's going to be a long time before you fellows get back in that tub."

Otho, perfectly disguised as Jan Walker, muttered an oath.

"Why did we have to draw this slow old Zamor? We won't have a chance."

"We're not out to win this race," Captain Future reminded him. "All we want to do is keep up with the others, so that if the hijackers attack, they'll try to capture our ship, too."

"We'll have to push this tub to the limit even to keep in sight of the others," complained Otho.

"Shut up. Here comes Zamor with his instructions."

Zamor, the Mercurian space ship manufacturer, had a worried look on his swarthy face as he approached them.

"Now don't you two youngsters crash this ship taking crazy chances. This race is dangerous enough as it is. I still think we should have called it off, but Rissman insisted. He knows that his ship won't be stolen!"

"We'll do our best," Curt Newton promised. "You realize we don't have the power or speed of some of those other ships."

"I know, I know," replied Zamor nervously. "If you just finish the race safely, I'll be satisfied. But if you can win, it would just about save my company from bankruptcy. So do your best."

He left them as Otho began to warm up the cyclotrons. The throbbing of the powerful atomic power generators made the whole silvery torpedo hull of the Zamor shudder violently. Down the line, the other pilots and co-pilots were warming up their ships.

The thunder of cyclotrons was interrupted by sharp crashes as the pilots checked rocket-tubes. Captain Future touched one throttle after another, testing all the twenty tail-tubes, and then the keel-jets.

"They check on the orbit, Otho!" he called. "I'll ease off the cycs to idling speed."

[Turn page]



He and the android put on the time accelerator caps and strapped the transformer cases into their space-suits. The switch of the weird accelerators protruded through a special valve Curt had made in the chests of their suits. They put on their helmets over the nickel caps.

"All off the tarmac!" roared an amplified voice across the spaceport. "Two minutes to blast-off! Stand by for the signal, Rocketeers!"

"Clear space and good luck, boys!" called Losor as he and his co-pilot entered their Rissman.

"Clear space and luck!" called back the other pilots.

"Close her up, Otho," ordered Curt.

The android hastily spun shut the space-door and then scrambled into the chair beside Captain Future. The shaking thunder of the cyclotrons deafened them. The holding-blocks were being pulled away outside.

"One minute to blast-off!" warned the amplified voice.

Curt's fingers tensed over the bank of rocket-throttles. His foot on the cyc-pedal pressed inward, bringing the cyclotrons' roar to a high, screaming pitch.

"Blast off!" roared the starter's voice, and a signal flared.

CURT jerked open the throttles of all tail-tubes and keel-jets. A giant hand seemed to smash him, knocking the breath from his body. He heard the tortured shriek of the recoil springs over the roar of rockets. There was a screeching of air outside that swiftly stopped. They were already tearing out of the thin atmosphere of Mercury. It was none too soon, for the friction-heat alarm was already beginning to clang.

Captain Future glimpsed the vast vault of empty space ahead, a crazy field of stars with the colossal disk of the Sun bulking in monstrous splendor. He glimpsed a black blob ahead of him against the Sun, a stubby black object pluming tails of rocket-flame almost into his face.

"Kiri has jumped us all on the blast-off!" Otho was shouting. "That Cruh-Cholo must have a terrific pick-up!"

Leaping past their craft came two

other ships, and then a third. Curt recognized the Tark and Kalber, and the slim, streamlined Rissman.

"There go Losor, Yalu and Immler!" cried Otho. "What a chance we've got to keep up with them in this old boat!"

"We've got to keep up with them," Curt muttered. "We'll try to gain time when we loop around the Sun."

Losor's Rissman had forged ahead of the Tark and Kalber, but Kiri in his Cruh-Cholo was maintaining the slight lead his superior pick-up had given him. Now the Garson was running up abreast of their Zamor.

The Sun became colossal beyond belief, a sea of flame across the firmament. Its radiant heat was becoming smothering even inside the insulated ship. Curt and Otho hardly knew how much time had passed. Time became meaningless in the grind of a space race. Yet Captain Future's mind was alert every moment for a possible attack by the hijackers he hoped to trap.

"Cut over—Sugan's crossing us!" yelled Otho suddenly.

Sugan, the Saturnian pilot of Garson's entry, was driving his ship across their course to get an inner lane on the Sunward track.

"He won't cross us," Curt gritted, and pressed the cyc-pedal hard.

The Zamor bucked under them and flung obliquely ahead from a blast of its laterals. They raced on, the Garson still on their outer side. They were closer to the monstrous whirling mass of the Sun. Curt drove still closer, nearer than any of the other racing ships. The heat became terrific. He was bathed in sweat, his skin scorching, his head pounding. He was counting on making a closer loop around the Sun than any of the other ships, and thus gaining precious space.

No pilot but Captain Future would have dared run this close. Only he could have judged to such a hairline the closest approach he could make without buckling the plates of their hull. The air in the Zamor was scorching. His tongue was cleaving to his palate.

If a cyclotron gave way, it meant death in the fiery sea of the Sun, into

which they would inevitably fall. Yet he must stay in this race!

"We've looped it!" came Otho's hoarse cry finally. "Straighten her out for Venus, Chief!"

Curt's dazed eyes made out that they were well in the lead of all the other ships. None of the others had dared fly so close.

"It's given us a lead, though space knows we won't hold it long," he muttered.

**S**TREAKING through space toward the little white blob of Venus, the Zamor valiantly led the way. But the Cruh-Cholo and the Tark and Rissman were pulling up after it like hounds after prey. The Cruh-Cholo and Losor's Rissman flashed past them as they neared Venus. Old Yalu was abreast of them in the Tark. Bow-tubes flashed as all ships cut speed to dive into the cloudy Venusian atmosphere, yet the friction-heat alarms clamored again as they drove down into the pale daylight over Venusopolis.

Captain Future glimpsed the big crowd gathered on the spaceport, west of the beautiful white city that lay between the deep swamp and the sea. Down over that spaceport roared the racing ships.

"Flare, Otho!" Curt called.

The android hastily touched a stud. Down from their ship dropped a blazing flare, token that they had passed over the capital. Flares from the two ships ahead already were floating brilliantly downward.

Again they zoomed upward, all the ships clawing out of the thick Venusian atmosphere to win to clear space. Yalu had passed Curt in the fast Tark, and the Kalber and Garson were coming up rapidly. The steady song of the cyclotrons was a mighty monotone that dominated everything else as they roared toward Earth. But Curt detected a faint dissonance in that song.

"Check the cys!" he rapped to Otho. "Sounds like one of them's faltering."

"I'm not surprised," Otho said gloomily as he rose from his chair and went aft. "This ship can't stand

such a pace." He came back soon. "Number Three cyc's power output is dropping a little. I think it's the fuel jet."

"The jet may blow clear," Captain Future muttered. "Can't slow down now. Immmler just passed us."

The Kalber had flashed out in front of them, and Sukan in the Garson was drawing up abreast of them. When they dived into the atmosphere of Earth, the Cruh-Cholo and Rissman were still neck and neck, but Yalu's Tark was overhauling them. Otho had the controls now. The android recklessly drove their ship down after the others, into the shadow of the night side of Earth. The blazing pinnacles of New York rushed up through the darkness. They swooped, roaring over the big spaceport and Captain Future dropped their flare. Its brilliant light showed the dense, excited crowd below.

Up out of the Earth shadow they drove, Otho seeking recklessly to overtake the other racers. But instead they were falling farther behind. And as time dragged on and they droned on toward Mars, the dissonance of the cyclotrons' chorus became louder.

"That Number Three cyc is almost jammed!" Captain Future exclaimed. "We've got to cut it or it'll explode!"

## CHAPTER XVI

### *Through Solar Spaces*



**CURT NEWTON** realized the full precariousness of their situation. To cut out one of their six cyclotrons was to lose precious space in the race, to fall far behind the other ships. His whole object was to be near

those ships when and if the hijackers attempted to capture them. But there was greater peril in continuing as they were. The fuel-intake jet of Number Three cyc was partly jammed. If it suddenly expelled into the power chamber all the piled-up mineral in

the jet, the explosion would rip the cyclotron to shreds.

"Keep her going!" he called to Otho. "I'm going to try to clear that fuel-jet without cutting out the cyc."

"You're crazy, Chief!" protested Otho. "You'll burn to a crisp!"

But Curt Newton was already at work upon the perilous job of disassembling a cyclotron while it was operating. He hastily unbolted and removed the cylindrical metal shield around the cyc, exposing the cubical power chamber and the slender tube of the fuel-intake. Realizing that he was tampering with an unchained devil of force that might lash out and destroy him, Captain Future unscrewed the tubular fuel-jet. He did not remove it from position, for that would have permitted a back-blast of energy to blaze up from the open connection.

Holding the tube in place with fingers steady as steel, he inserted a thin metal rod into the end of the fuel-jet. Delicately he prodded, breaking loose the tiny lumps of mineral that were jamming the intake. They fell into the power chamber. The cyc roared from that sudden increment of power-laden fuel. Curt continued to prod gently, loosening the caked mineral flake by flake. At last the jet was clear.

He skilfully screwed the tube back into place and bolted on the heavy cover of the cyclotron.

"Whew!" he exclaimed with intense relief. "I wouldn't want to do that every day!"

Coming forward to take over the controls from Otho, he found that Mars was bulking ahead.

"We lost a lot of ground when that cyc was under par," Otho grumbled. "The leaders are out of sight."

Captain Future saw that, even through the telescopic window set in the front of the control room, only the Kalber and the Garson were still visible, already diving toward Mars. Grimly determined to keep up, Curt Newton pressed the cyc-pedal to the floor. The great cyclotrons thundered. But when they plunged down and dropped their flare on Syrtis spaceport, they were still far behind.

Zooming up from Mars, Curt streaked past flying little Deimos and plunged spaceward toward the asteroidal zone.

"Even the Kalber and the Garson are out of sight now!" Otho moaned. "We're nearly to the asteroid zone. Time to head up over it."

"We're not going over it," Curt gritted. "We're going through it!"

"Devils of space, we can't go through at this speed!" Otho swore. Then his eyes flashed. "But we'd get a big jump on the other racers if we did go through. They'll all go up over the zone."

"That's my idea." Curt grinned tautly. "We've got to keep up with them and this is the only chance we have of overtaking them."

**H**E flung the Zamor at suicidal speed toward the asteroid zone. For a ship traveling at such speeds that its meteorometer warnings were not quick enough, the zone was death! Yet no man in the System knew that labyrinth as well as Captain Future and no other pilot had the quickness of perception and reaction that he possessed.

He was gambling on those abilities to bring them through.

They plunged into the zone. The meteorometers started a frightening shrilling that was almost continuous. Captain Future did not depend on their warning entirely. His keen eyes probed the vault ahead, and his quick hands flicked throttles to send them lurching this way or that to avoid whirling swarms or booming, jagged planetoids. It was a nightmare.

"We're through!" Otho yelled finally. "Clear space ahead! Jupiter, here we come!"

At ever-mounting speed, they roared on toward the mighty monarch of the Solar System. It loomed huge ahead, jeweled with the sullen red ruby of the great Fire Sea. Around the big planet circled its eleven moons, dwarfed by the immensity of their parent world. Recklessly Captain Future slanted the Zamor between the marching moons. The interior of the ship became hot as they split the heavy air above the continent

of South Equatoria and roared down over the mighty fern jungles toward the metalloy structures of Jovopolis.

"There come the others—behind us!" exulted Otho as he dropped their flare. "I'll bet they wonder how in space we ever got ahead."

The Rissman and Tark, which had been leading the race, were diving over Jovopolis behind them. Then the whole group of ships was racing out in space again.

"They'll overhaul us before we reach Saturn," Curt muttered, glancing back. "If those hijackers are going to attack us, I wish they'd do it now. This craft can't keep up the grind forever."

"Probably the hijackers figure to knock off these ships on our way back to Mercury," Otho suggested. "The ships would be strung out in space, the pilots half-dead from the grind. It would be easier."

"Guess you're right," Curt admitted. "I hope we can keep in the race that long."

The Rissman and Tark and Cruh-Cholo passed them just before they reached Saturn. They streaked down past the colossal shining rings of the sixth planet, dropped their flare on the black metropolis Ops, and were up and away for Uranus without changing their relative position. The Cruh-Cholo's superior pick-up again put it into the lead on the pull-away from Saturn. Once they were in clear space, the Rissman forged once again to the forefront, with old Yalu's Tark hanging grimly on behind it.

*B-room! B-r-r-room!* Captain Future and Otho felt that thunderous sound now rather than heard it. It was imbedded in their brains.

"There's Yalu dropping out to change a tube," Otho called as they drew toward Uranus. "He's been pushing that ship to the limit."

The Tark was drifting at high speed toward Uranus, while Yalu and his co-pilot were clambering out in their space-suits to replace a rocket-tube. Such replacements were allowed, as long as no stop was made on any world. Curt muttered a prayer that their own tubes would hold out.

Down between the towering, sky-

storming mountain peaks of Uranus flashed the string of racers. They dropped their flares on the spaceport of the capital and were off into space again, heading toward the far dim spark of Pluto. Through the thunder of cyclotrons and roar of rocket-tubes came the racking crash that Curt had been dreading.

"Tail-tube burned out!" he yelled to Otho. "Sounds like two of them gone."

"Okay, we can change 'em," replied Otho.

**T**HE Zamor drifted on at high speed in a dead silence that was uncanny after the continuous drone of the cycs. Captain Future and Otho clambered out of the ship, still wearing their space-suits and carrying the two heavy tubes of hard alloy and the chain-wrenches. They scrambled back to the tail of the ship. Even the super-alloy of the tubes back there was white-hot. Two of the twenty tubes had burned out completely and were scattering the atomic power broadcast instead of shooting it back in straight jets.

Careful not to touch the white-hot tubes, Curt and Otho got their chain-wrenches onto the two stubs and unscrewed them. They inserted the new tubes, hastily tightening them. As they finished, there was a streak and flash. Suga's Garson and then the Tark flashed by.

Captain Future leaped back to the pilot chair. The android was spinning shut the door. *Broom! Boom!* The familiar cyclotron thunder began again and the Zamor leaped forward, again building up velocity.

Nearing Pluto, they found the Rissman had also dropped out to replace tubes. The long grind was beginning to wear down the ships. But the Rissman was off and away before they could pass it. They screamed down through Pluto's frigid atmosphere over endless ice-fields, sent their flare blazing down toward the spaceport of the domed city Tartarus, and flashed up again. Now the race was turning back a little from the edge of the System. They headed inward toward Neptune.

"The Rissman and Tark still fighting for the lead, with the Cruh-Cholo close behind!" called Otho. "Immler's coming up fast behind us with the Kalber. The Garson's just a little ahead of us."

"That Rissman will lose us all, once we leave Neptune and streak back on the home stretch," Curt predicted. "It'll be able to build up all its power on that long plunge."

The Kalber passed them before they reached Neptune. But they in turn passed the Garson. It had dropped out to replace tubes.

*Crash!* Another of their own rocket-tubes had given way. Again Curt and Otho cut the cyes and hastily scrambled out to replace the tube. But no sooner had they started than another tube gave out.

"That's all the spares we have!" Otho warned as they finished replacing the fourth tube and started again. "If another gives, we're out."

The planetary ocean of Neptune stretched below them soon as they darted down toward the little island that bore the capital city, Amphitrite. The last flare was dropped, and they rose again.

"Now build up all the speed you can!" Curt ordered. "This is the final stretch. They'll all be pushing their ships to the limit. We've got to stay with them on that sprint of more than two thousand million miles from Neptune to Mercury!"

Steadily the Rissman pulled away from the other racers. After it grimly sped old Yalu in his Tark, and the Cruh-Cholo and Kalber. And at the tail of the race, the little Zamor and the Garson raced almost abreast. Time had become meaningless to all these racing Rocketeers who fought to keep their shuddering ships in the van. They forced glazing eyes and stiffened muscles to function, driving for the fame and glory that came to the winner of the Round-the-System Race.

Captain Future mentally checked off the planet orbits as they flashed across them. Saturn, Jupiter—and then a crackling crash.

"Another tube gone!"

"We'll have to drive ahead, any-

way," Curt gritted. "No more spares!"

"The flame from that stub will eat away the other tubes," Otho argued. "And our speed's falling already."

"I'm cutting through the zone again!" Curt rapped out.

**H**E flung the Zamor on that perilous passage of the asteroidal zone, which no other pilot would have attempted. It gained for them once more. As they crossed the orbit of Mars, they were well up with the Cruh-Cholo and the Tark, but the Rissman was far ahead, out of sight.

"The Kalber's dropped back badly, must have blown a lot of tubes," Otho called. "Sugan is not far behind with that Garson."

Their Zamor blew still another tube as they cometed over the orbit of Earth. It seemed that no ship could stand more of the terrible grind, yet Curt could see the Tark and Cruh-Cholo still battling ahead for the lead. To his bleared eyes, they were mere flying specks against the Sun. Then Curt Newton became rigid with excitement. He had seen the Tark ahead suddenly veering away from the course of the race, off into space.

"What the devil!" he exclaimed.

The Cruh-Cholo was now also flying off after the Tark, apparently in senseless desertion of the race. Then Captain Future understood.

"Otho, it's what we've waited for!" he cried. "The hijackers are attacking—"

Before Curt finished there was a vague sound at his side and a powerful, invisible force seemed to grip him.

"Otho, your time accelerator!" he yelled.

He was being whirled out of the pilot chair with blurring speed. But Curt's hand frantically snapped the switch of his time accelerator. He felt a vertiginous shock as the force flooded through his body, plunging him into a faster time-frame.

He was gripped by a towering metal machine man who was dragging him toward the door of the ship. One had grabbed Otho also. They had boarded the ship from their own craft.

They and their ship had been invisible until Curt Newton had also entered that faster time.

He struck out to free himself from the grip of those mighty girder-arms. The machine man seemed momentarily amazed as Captain Future's unresisting, comparatively petrified figure suddenly came to life. But Curt could not free himself from the massive semi-intelligent mechanism. Desperation brought inspiration to him.

As the machine man dragged him toward the door of the ship, Curt plunged his free hand through the open metal skeleton of the creature.

Among the complex humming mechanisms that were the "internal organs" of his attacker, his hand found a slender cable. With all his strength he ripped it loose. The severing of that vital electrical connection had instant effect. The machine man froze motionless. His mechanical "life" had been shattered.

Otho was squirming desperately in the grip of the other mechanical monster. Curt leaped forward to the back of the machine man. By the same stratagem, he soon "killed" him.

"Imps of space!" gasped Otho, as his attacker fell clattering to the floor. "The things came out of nowhere."

"They both had time accelerators attached to their bodies," panted Curt, pointing to the square cases belted around the creatures. "They boarded us and the other racers from that ship out there."

**B**UT in space they could see a black ship dropping toward the Garson racer that was coming up. The black craft seemed to move quickly, while the Garson appeared frozen motionless in space, due to their faster time-sense. They saw two machine men drop from the black ship onto the Garson, open its space door and disappear inside.

"Quick, we can cut off our accelerators now!" Curt barked. "We've got to go with the rest of them, pretend this ship was captured. It's the chance we've worked for, to follow them to their base."

They turned off their time accelerators. Returning to normal, they looked out to see the Garson veering away after the captured Tark and Cruh-Cholo.

The black craft of the attackers had vanished.

"It's sped back to pick up the Kalber, too," Curt guessed. "Follow those other ships!"

Otho grabbed the throttles, trailed the three captured ships in space.

"They'll assume that this craft is now controlled by the two machine men they sent in here to capture it," Curt muttered. "We can follow them right to their main base."

"They're going to make a wide detour to Mercury, Chief," Otho said.

The captured ships ahead were not steering directly toward Mercury. They were curving far out in space to approach Mercury from the Hot Side.

"They're trying to keep off the race course, naturally," Captain Future explained.

Far around Mercury they followed the other captured craft, and then dropped toward the Hot Side. Beneath yawned the giant chasm of Vapor Valley. The captured ships began dropping into its depths. Curt and Otho were astonished, but they followed, sinking down into the vapor-shrouded depths of the mighty gorge, into deepening darkness.

## CHAPTER XVII

### *Mystery's End*



THE gigantic chasm seemed bottomless, and it was so choked with swirling clouds of vaporized mercury that they could not see its walls. They could barely distinguish the vague shape of the ships they were following

into these awesome depths.

"By all the space gods, their hidden base can't be down in this poisonous hole!" Otho swore in perplexity.

Curt Newton's eyes were gleaming.

He felt himself near the end of the trail that had led across the whole System and back.

"Look, they're going into that crack in the wall!" he exclaimed sharply.

The ships had ceased to descend and were entering one of the countless fissures which split the whole planetary mass of Mercury. Cautiously Otho edged their ship into it. They proceeded horizontally for a time, the sides of their ship almost scraping the walls of the chasm. There was no light, yet the ships ahead moved without hesitation.

"They know this way well enough," Captain Future muttered. "Now we're going to descend again."

The captured ships were dropping vertically into another dark fissure. Deeper and deeper they went into the bowels of the riven planet, feeling their way after their leaders. Suddenly they emerged into a great cavern that was blazing with light from many krypton bulbs. It was a scene of amazing activity.

"I'll be blasted!" Otho gasped. "This is main base of the hijackers—this cavern deep inside Mercury!"

"Apparently there was a city here long ago," Curt said.

Upon the floor of the cavern stood hundreds of deserted roofless stone buildings. The dust of ages lay over them.

Captain Future knew the legend of certain Mercurian races. Long ago they had descended into the interior of the planet, when its diurnal rotation had slowed down and it kept one face to the Sun.

"Look what they're doing to those ships!" Otho yelled.

At the edge of the dead city was a level space upon which were parked dozens of new space ships. Machine men were hard at work on them, replacing interior fittings, relacquering the hulls, changing rocket-tubes. The clangor of activity was deafening.

"My guess was right!" Captain Future exclaimed. "That is the motive for the stealing of all those ships!"

"Chief, those other ships are landing. Shall we land, too?"

The captured ships they had followed were being landed at the edge

of the crowded level field.

"Yes, but get as near the city as you can, so we can slip out without being seen," Curt ordered. "We've got to find out who's running this show here."

Otho brought their Zamor down after the other captured ships, but landed close to the edge of the dead city. They saw the machine men who had captured the other racers stalking toward a large roofless structure.

"Going to make a report," Curt guessed. "Come on, Otho. We'll see just whom they report to."

**H**E and Otho slipped out of the Zamor and darted into the shadowy shelter of the dead city without being observed by the machine men laboring over the ships. They had discarded the helmets of their space-suits, and Curt's proton pistol was cradled in his fist as they stole forward. He looked up at the walls and roof of the cavern. By the light of the krypton bulbs suspended over the city and landing-field, he could make out many big fissures branching away through the rock of the planet.

"That clinches it," he mused. "Behind all this can be only one man."

"I still don't understand, Chief," whispered Otho puzzledly. "What are those machine men out there doing to all those stolen ships?"

"They're refinishing them," Captain Future said. "The man behind all these thefts is one of the space ship magnates. He's had the machine men steal hundreds of new ships, re-finish them with new fittings, lacquers and name-plates, and then he's sold them as his own ships. Remember, new space ships are worth hundreds of thousands apiece. This super-hijacker has been making millions by his crafty scheme!"

"Fiends of Pluto!" gasped Otho. "But who—"

Captain Future made a warning signal. They were approaching the large structure in which the machine men had reported and gone to rejoin their mechanical companions in the work of disguising the stolen ships. Curt and Otho stole closer to the

building. There were no windows, but Otho gathered himself and leaped up to the top of the roofless building. He hauled Curt up after him and they crouched, looking down into the interior of the structure.

It was a single lighted room that fixed their gaze. In it towered a machine man, but one different from the others. His cubical head was immensely larger than that of the others. This grotesque creature was facing a table. Upon that table, fastened down by metal bands, rested the square case of the Brain.

"Simon—a prisoner!" gasped Otho. "He must have trailed the hijackers here and been caught—"

"Listen!" breathed Captain Future.

The machine man below was speaking. His humming voice came clearly up to them as he addressed the Brain.

"You underestimated my resourcefulness when you thought you could come down here and spy on us without being detected. You might have known I'd have artificial eyes planted in the fissures to tell me of any strange intruders."

"So that's how you knew I was here, and had me trapped," the Brain rasped calmly. "But it will do you little good. Those who will not be trapped so easily will come after me."

"You refer to your idolized Captain Future? He is powerless against me. I've balked him at every turn."

Otho was plucking at Curt's sleeve.

"Chief, you said one of the magnates was head of this ring! But that's a machine man—"

"Quiet!" Curt whispered.

The machine man was advancing threateningly toward the helpless Brain.

"Your confidence may mean that you've already got word to Future of the location of this base," he hummed. "Have you?"

The Brain remained silent, his lens-eyes contemptuously staring at the monstrous metal face of his captor.

"I can make you talk, Brain!" warned the creature.

"We've got to act!" Curt said to the android. "Your time accelerator, Otho. Turn it on!"

He turned on his own accelerator.

Again the vertiginous shock of being plunged into faster time-frames shook him. Everything in the cavern seemed frozen. The Machine man below appeared petrified in the act of threatening the Brain with an uplifted girder-arm.

CURT leaped down into the room, Otho following. Captain Future darted toward the towering machine man. His hand darted into the mechanical body and tore out the wire he knew to be a vital electric nerve. Only then did Curt and Otho turn off their time-accelerators. As they returned to normality, a glance showed them the machine man was "dead."

The Brain stared at them, not recognizing them in their Rocketeer disguises. Hastily Captain Future and his comrade announced their identity.

"Curtis, Otho!" rasped the Brain in amazement. "Where in space did you come from?"

Curt explained rapidly as he unfastened the metal bands that had held Simon fastened to the table.

"You're right, lad," the Brain agreed. "The stolen space ships have been refinished and disguised here, and sold as new ships. But if one of the manufacturers has been the head of this ring, why did this machine man talk as though he were the head?"

"I think this machine man is somewhat different from the others," Curt replied.

Captain Future swiftly removed the square metal case that covered the enormous cubical head of the creature. He scanned the intricate mass of electrical nerve connections that were the creature's "brain."

"As I thought," he declared, replacing the cover. "This isn't like the other machine men at all. They're semi-intelligent, have a certain life of their own. This thing is just an automaton that moves and speaks by remote control exerted through televisor waves."

"By the Sun, I get it now!" Otho cried excitedly. "The space ship magnate who's the real head of the ring used this automaton as a remote-

controlled proxy."

"That's it," Curt responded. "And that's why, though the magnates were all shadowed, none of them made any contact with this hidden base."

"What'll we do now?" Otho demanded eagerly. "Call in the Planet Police and have 'em blast all those machine men out there to fragments?"

"No, that would be a crime," Curt asserted. "Those semi-intelligent, simple-minded creatures are not really guilty of anything. They simply obeyed the orders of the man who came out to their comet-world and told them he was the heir of the man who made them—Kelso."

"But we have to get out of here, and those things will try to stop us," Otho objected.

"Naturally," Curt grinned. "But I have an idea. Maybe it'll work."

He went to the big television in the room, by which the automaton-proxy had communicated with his followers in space. Curt took it down. From its microphone and certain coils and tubes, he constructed a small remote control box of standard design.

"I think that I can control the automaton-proxy with this," he said. "I'm so much closer to it that my control will overpower that of the criminal who's been using this thing as a tool."

He repaired the nerve connection in the body of the mechanical proxy. As he touched the buttons of his control case, the huge-headed mechanical figure strode stiffly toward the door of the room.

"It works, all right," Curt stated.

He sent the automaton striding out to the edge of the field, upon which the other machine men were patiently toiling to disguise ships.

"One speaking!" hummed the powerful voice of the creature, transmitting the words Curt spoke into the microphone of his control. "Attention, all!"

The machine men out on the field obediently gathered in front of the automaton. Curt spoke rapidly into the microphone, and the words issued in loud, humming speech from the mechanical proxy.

"Your work is now finished. The man who brought you here has no further need for you. You may take one of the ships and return to your comet-world."

The machine men hesitated.

"And will the man and other men come to our world some day to rule us?" one asked.

"Yes, men will come there some day," Curt promised through the proxy. "Until then, remain on your comet-world and live as you did before."

**I**N simple-minded obedience, the machine men trooped toward one of two vessels that had just arrived. It was the black raider-ship that they had used, by means of the time-accelerating force, to seize ships in space. They entered the black craft. A few moments later it rose and departed through the fissure in the roof that led up to Vapor Valley.

"That's done with," Curt breathed. "Those poor metal devils will be better off on their own world in the comet, and won't bother anyone again."

The automaton-proxy relapsed into lifeless metal as Curt cut off his control. Future again disconnected the mechanism's electric "nerve," to make sure it could not be used again.

"The plotter behind this business simply used one of the machine men as a model for this automaton," Curt declared. "But instead of putting a semi-intelligent metal brain into its head, he installed a receiver for his remote control."

"We've smashed his hijacking game, but we haven't got the man himself," hissed Otho. "What about him?"

Curt smiled grimly. "We're going after him now."

They reentered the Zamor and felt their way up through the fissures until they emerged from the gray depths of Vapor Valley into the terrific blaze of the Hot Side. The Zamor streaked for the Twilight Zone.

When they swooped down toward the spaceport of Solar City, they found immense crowds still there. Emerging from the ship, Otho carry-

ing the Brain as though he were merely a scientific instrument, the two pseudo-Rocketeers heard a roar of voices. An official rushed up to them.

"You've won second place in the race! The Rissman came in long ago, but none of the other ships have arrived."

"There comes the Garson now!" someone shouted. "It's third, then!"

"None of the other ships will come in," Curt told the official as he and Otho pushed through the dense, excited crowd toward the Planet Police building.

"So the Rissman wasn't bothered, as usual, and won the race," Otho snarled. "And the Garson also escaped the hijackers and finally limped in."

When they entered the Police building, Grag, Joan and Ezra came hastening to meet them.

"Chief, I was afraid you were lost!" boomed the robot joyfully. "I thought that crazy android got you into real trouble this time."

"Ezra, call the space ship manufacturers in here," Captain Future said. "They're all at the spaceport out there to see the finish of the race. And give me those space ship production figures before you go."

In a few minutes, the magnates appeared. Christian Rissman was first, his aggressive face flushed with triumph.

"A Rissman wins the race for the third time!" he exulted. "They can't beat my ships in space."

"Not when you have most of the other ships stolen by your hijackers!" flared Lan Tark.

"Bah, the same old charges without proof!" Rissman scoffed. "Your ships just won't take it."

"Well, I'm glad my entry at least came in third," Gray Garson muttered. "I was beginning to be afraid it was lost."

Zamor, the Mercurian magnate, rushed toward Curt and Otho.

"Barret, you and Walker did a magnificent job, making second place!"

For answer, Captain Future calmly removed his disguise. As his own features reappeared, the magnates

goggled in amazement.

"This is the end of a very neat conspiracy, gentlemen," Curt said calmly. "It has yielded millions, but it's over now. I think the one of you who is guilty knows it's over!"

## CHAPTER XVIII

### *Weird Victory*



**CAPTAIN FUTURE'S** whiplash voice struck the magnates to silence. They stared as he held up the sheet of figures in his hand.

"This is the final proof of what I've suspected. These are the figures on

the number of space ships produced by each company in the last year. They point right at the man here who has been disguising stolen ships and selling them as his own."

"You mean that that is what has happened to all those stolen ships?" Lan Tark gasped.

"I guessed it some time ago," Curt replied somberly. "The first essential clue was the fact that no Rissman ship had been stolen by the hijackers."

"I knew it!" Tark flared. "Rissman's the man!"

Curt shook his head. "You're wrong. If Rissman were behind these hijackings, he wouldn't have spared his own ships entirely. That would inevitably direct suspicion at him. It seemed to me that there must be some other explanation. Rissman ships are different in design from all others. That's why the hijacker didn't steal any Rissmans."

"It would be impossible to disguise them and pass them off as his own ships."

"Yet a strong clue pointed to Rissman. He had consulted the stereo-record on the *Star Streak*, which had been sent out to his plant. I knew it was the man who consulted that record, and figured out how to get Kelso's lost weapon from the comet-

world, who was behind the hijacking ring. Yet it couldn't be Rissman, so it must be someone else at the Rissman plant who had access there to that record. You were employed as superintendent of that plant at that time, Garson!"

Gray Garson stared at Curt. "You surely don't think that I have been the head of this hijacking ring?" he protested.

"I don't think it," Captain Future replied softly. "I know it. Garson, you were smart. You saw in that stereo-record a clue that could lead you to Kelso's mystery weapon and his machine men. So you broke with Rissman, got yourself discharged, and secretly made a daring expedition to the comet-world. You got Kelso's time accelerator there, and brought back a force of machine men who would use it and follow your orders implicitly. Your scheme was simple. You set up a small dummy factory of your own in an isolated location, near some of the big fissures.

"I saw those fissures beside your plant, but didn't suspect them. You had the machine men use the time accelerator weapon to snatch away new ships in space and bring them to the underground main base. There, under the orders of the automaton-proxy you could control from a distance, the machine men refinished the stolen ships, disguised them as new Garson ships. Then they brought them through the maze of fissures right up to your little dummy factory. Naturally you had a few of your own ships stolen to avoid suspicion. These figures show you've produced exactly as many ships as have been stolen!"

Captain Future had watched Gray Garson narrowly as he spoke. He saw the Earthman's rugged countenance hardening, his eyes narrowing. Curt would have been prepared for it if Garson had drawn an atom pistol. But Garson's hand made a slight movement inside his jacket. The criminal Earthman suddenly vanished!

"He had a time accelerator on, with the plate under his cap!" Otho yelled.

**B**UT Captain Future had already snapped the switch of the time

accelerator he was still wearing. As he was plunged into faster time-frames, everyone else in the office seemed to have been turned into motionless statues. He darted out between them, into the street. The dense throngs still crowded the brightly lighted avenue. Their mouths were frozen open in the act of cheering, feet raised in air in mid-step, hands seemingly petrified as they waved. But through this weirdly motionless throng, one man was running. It was Garson, making for the ships out on the spaceport.

"No, you don't!" Curt muttered fiercely.

He ran between the motionless people who, in their slower time, could not even see him. Ahead Gray Garson was frenziedly sprinting. Curt called on all his speed. The spurt brought him to Garson's heels. A flying tackle sent him at the Earthman's legs like a projectile. He and Garson rolled over and over, the criminal seeking to tear himself away from Curt Newton. As they battled furiously, all around them the petrified, motionless crowds remained frozen.

Then Captain Future got his hand on the thin cable of Garson's time accelerator. Garson's hand was clawing for his eyes. Unheeding the danger, Curt tore at the cable. It broke from the accelerator case. Instantly Gray Garson became a statue. He had been plunged back into slower time.

Curt dragged the unresisting prisoner back into the Planet Police building. Grog and Ezra and Joan stood exactly as before. All this had taken but a second in their time. Otho's hand was just beginning to reach toward his own time accelerator. Captain Future clicked metal magnet-chains around Garson's wrists and ankles. Turning off his own time accelerator, he was plunged back into normal time.

"Howlin' space-demons!" yelled Ezra Gurney. "What happened? First Garson's gone, then you're gone. Then you're here again with him a prisoner, before I can bat an eye!"

"The main thing is that he is a prisoner," Curt Newton answered grimly.

"Take good care of him, Ezra. He's got a long voyage to make—all the way out to Pluto's prison moon."

**O**VER on the dark Cold Side, much later, the metal barracks and hangars of Suicide Station gleamed beneath the stars. In front of the barracks, a group of veteran Rocketeers appreciatively watched Ka Kardak inspecting a line of new young pilots.

"Of all the miserable, weak-kneed excuses for would-be Rocketeers, you're the worst yet!" bellowed the brawny Jovian chief Rocketeer. "I thought they couldn't come any worse, but you've proved they can!"

"What fool is that landing on his nose?" yelled Ka Kardak. "Whoever he is, I'll make an example of him, by—"

"Say, it looks like Captain Future's Comet!"

The ship had come to rest on the tarmac with a flare of spuming fire from its bow-tubes. Its door opened. Out of it came young Jan Walker, the Earthman Rocketeer. Behind him strode a tall, gray-eyed, red-haired man. At sight of him a gasp of respect went up from veterans and novices alike.

"That's Future himself!"

"Hello, Kardak!" greeted Curt Newton. "I'm bringing you back one

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"But we haven't done anything wrong, sir," a young Martian said timidly. "We'll do our best. We all hope to be crack racing pilots and test pilots some day."

"You want to win the Round-the-System Race, eh? You think because all that space ship hijacking's been stopped, there won't be any more danger to it. You're wrong. By the nine planets, you'll wish you'd never heard of the Rocketeers before I get through with you. I'll—"

A small, oddly teardrop-shaped vessel was diving down toward the tarmac.

The suicidal rush brought cries of apprehension from the watching veteran pilots.

of your pilots, Jan Walker. He's a good pilot, too."

Walker flushed with pleasure at the praise. But Ka Kardak stared at Curt.

"You know me, Captain Future?" he rumbled surprisedly.

Curt grinned. "Sure I know you. I was Ray Barret, one of your amateurs, remember? I'll always be grateful for the lessons in spaceman-ship you pounded into me."

From the gathered Rocketeers went up a chorus of shouts of laughter that split the darkness. Ka Kardak smacked his head with his hand.

"Good Gods of Jupiter!" he gasped. "I was giving lessons to Captain Future!"

"See you Rocketeers again on the

spaceways," chuckled Curt. "Clear space and good luck to you all!"

"Clear space and good luck, Captain Future!" went up the spacemen's shout to the famous planeteer.

**T**HE *Comet* swooped upward at a dizzy angle and tore off into the star-gemmed vault with a speed that took it out of sight almost at once.

"He's going back to that home of his on Earth's Moon, he and the Futuremen," said one of the Rocketeers in a voice tinged with awe. "He'll

be there till the President calls him again with that North Pole signal. Then he'll be burning up the spaceways again."

"Yes, and God help those he goes after," said another Rocketeer.

Ka Kardak still looked stunned by his discovery that he had been lecturing Captain Future. His new pilots were grinning at him.

"Wipe that smirk off your faces!" roared the Jovian. "There's none of you who's a Captain Future in disguise!"

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NEXT ISSUE

THE FURTHER EXPLOITS OF CURT NEWTON  
AND THE FUTUREMEN

IN

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# THE WORLD'S OF TOMORROW

## MERCURY, WORLD OF CONTRASTS

**M**ERCURY, the inmost and smallest of the nine planets, presents more differences and contradictions than any other world. It is the hottest planet in the Solar System—and also one of the coldest. It is almost the most barren of the worlds, and yet it is also one of the richest.

Mercury is in fact three different worlds, each of them greatly different from the others. The three are the Hot Side, the Cold Side, and the Twilight Zone. The division of the planet into these three regions rises from the fact that one side of Mercury is always turned toward the Sun, the planet's day being as long as its year.

The side turned toward the Sun is the Hot Side. And it is well named, for it is the hottest place on the nine worlds. It is so close to the Sun, and so constantly exposed to it, that its temperature is well above the melting point of lead. This fact, as we shall see, is the cause of some of the Hot Side's most fantastic natural wonders.

### Life on Hot Side

The Hot Side is essentially a waste of barren, sun-blackened rock. No organic life can exist there without protection from the appalling heat of the Sun. Daring interplanetary explorers and miners who have entered this awful waste must wear protective "haloes," shields of heat-repelling force

radiated from a small portable mechanism.

But while no life of the kind ordinarily called "organic" can exist on the Hot Side, it does possess life of a strange type.

It is a kind of life with a silicon base instead of a carbon base. Most of the forms it takes are rather small, but there are some of considerable size. The so-called "solar eagles" are winged creatures of siliceous type, subsisting on certain minerals their strange anatomies are able to ingest. And then there are the famous "sun dogs," ground beasts of exceptional ferocity, equipped with horns with which they are able to dig from the rocky wastes the minerals that keep them alive.

These creatures all draw much of their energy by photosynthesis from the flood of solar radiation, and die at once if taken away from the Hot Side.

The natural wonders of the Hot Side are far-famed, though few interplanetary travelers are intrepid enough to succeed in viewing them. Best known of these wonders is the Sea of Lead. It has been noted that the temperature of the Hot Side is above the melting point of lead. Because of this, all the native lead in the rocks of the Hot Side long ago drained in molten condition into a big southern depression. Since Mercury is rich in lead as in other metals, there was enough of the molten metal to form the large sea of molten lead which is talked of whenever Mercury is mentioned. There are islands in this sea—the so-called Fire Islands—which have not yet been explored.

### Vapor Valley

Another fantastic wonder of nature on the Hot Side is Vapor Valley. This is a great gorge in the north, which is perpetually filled with heavy, gray mists. These mists are not steam. They are the vaporized element mercury. For the vaporization point of the element mercury, being little above the melting point of lead, is a little under the constant temperature of the Hot Side. So all mercury on the Hot Side, instead of being liquid, is gaseous. The poisonous metallic mists of the Vapor Valley have prevented all exploration of its depths until now.

The Cold Side is just the opposite of the Hot Side. It is a frozen realm of eternal night, always turned away from the Sun. It is bitterly cold, and is even more rugged and mountainous than the Hot Side. It would be even colder were it not for the ceaseless currents of warm air that rush around the planet from the other side, causing the rough gales and wind-storms that



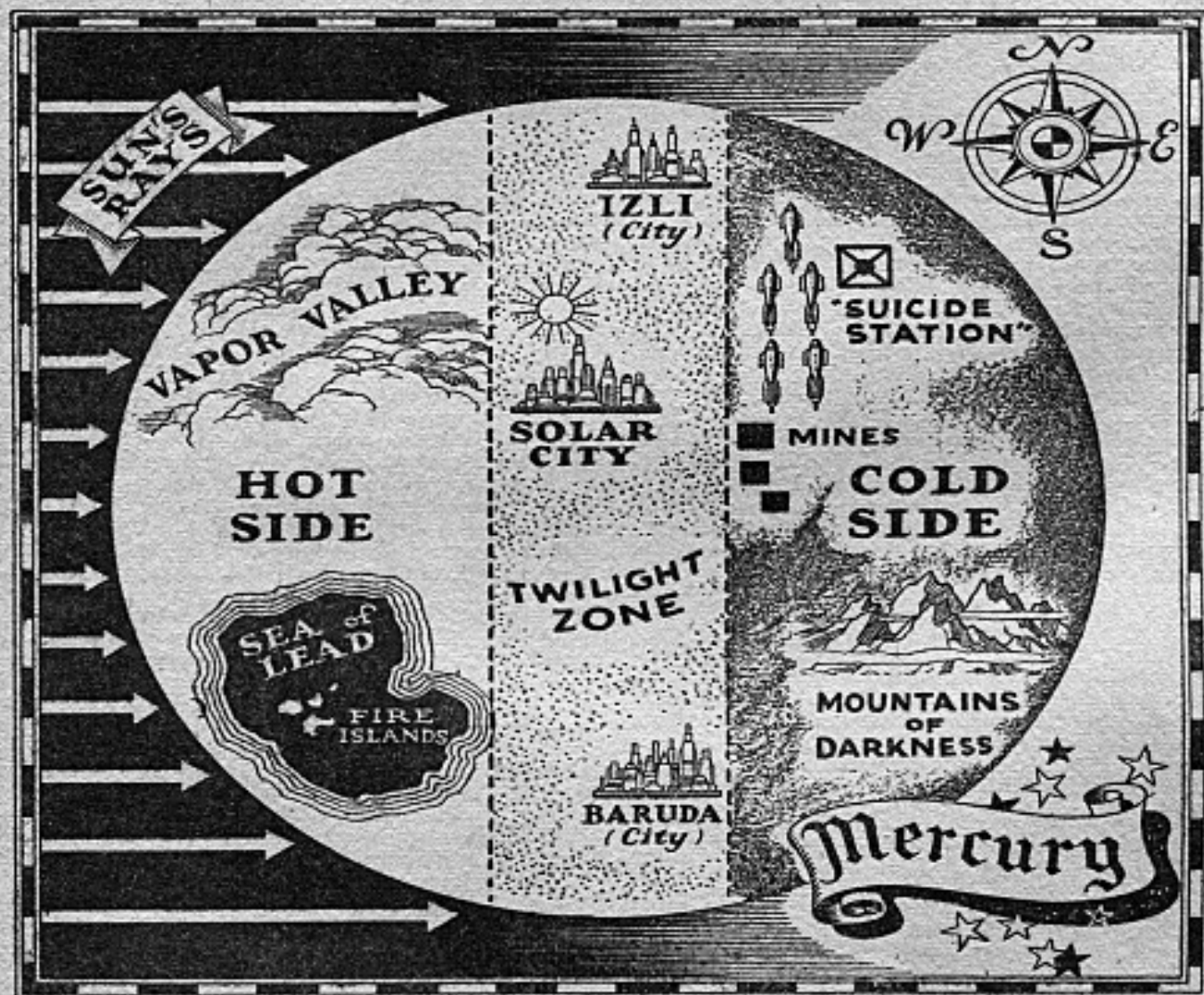
are a characteristic feature of the little world.

### The Dwellers of Cold Side

There is more variety of indigenous life on the Cold Side, and it is a more familiar type of life. Most of the animals found there are furred beasts able to withstand the low temperatures, such as the fierce "cliff-cats," six-legged Mercurian bears, and others. The fauna and the scanty flora are very similar

noted that one side of Mercury always faces the Sun. Therefore one would think that one side would be hot and one cold, and that there could be no intermediate zone.

But this overlooks another fact about Mercury—its orbit. The orbit of Mercury is the most elliptical of any planet. And this eccentricity of orbit, causing the distance of Mercury to the Sun to vary greatly during its brief year, is responsible for a libration of its surface which gives partial sunlight to a



to those of remote, icy Pluto. A characteristic of all Cold Side animal-life is the enormous eyes. Being creatures of eternal, moonless night, the Cold Side animals have developed eyes capable of seeing well even in the faint starlight that is the only illumination here.

Beside its mountains and rocky hills, the Cold Side is split by many chasms and fissures of unfathomable depth. These fissures exist also in the Twilight Zone and Hot Side. They are, in fact, cracks in the planet—caused by the enormous difference in temperature between its two sides.

The only inhabited part of Mercury is the Twilight Zone. This is a band of territory which encircles the whole planet, lying between the Hot and Cold Sides. It has been

band between the two sides.

That band is the Twilight Zone. Seen from it, the Sun never rises more than a little above the horizon. So the full scorching heat of the solar orb never falls upon the Twilight Zone. Yet there is warmth enough to prevent it from becoming as frozen and glacial as the Cold Side.

### Mercurian Inhabitants

For this reason, the Twilight Zone has always been the home of Mercurian life. It is a fairly fertile region, and while there are no bodies of water of any size, there are periodic rains. Here, long ago, the Mercurians built their first cities.

The Mercurians had attained a certain civilization before ever the first Earthmen

opened the spaceways and visited the planet, in 1980. They did not have the mighty past of the Martians, but they had achieved progress commensurate with their numbers. For the Mercurians, due to the smallness of their world and the small part of it which is habitable, are the least numerous planetary race in the System.

They are a small-statured, swarthy-skinned people, with eyes of a peculiar tawny shade. They are a fighting people, and are without doubt the hottest-tempered race in the nine worlds. "As touchy as a Mercurian" has become a proverb.

The Mercurians warmly welcomed the first Earth explorers to their cities of Izli, Baruda and others. Gorham Johnson, head of that first expedition—the greatest space-pioneer of all—noted in his log that Mercury appeared to be very rich in valuable metals. Later explorers corroborated this fact. It was discovered that immense deposits of beryllium, titanium, tungsten, cadmium and many other rare and valuable metals existed in the Cold Side.

### Heart of the Space-Ship Industry

The mushroom growth of the space-ship manufacturing industry, in the decades following the opening of the spaceways brought a great demand for Mercurian metals. The very metals most needed for space-ship construction were found in profusion on Mercury. At first, space-freighters brought shipments of the metals to the space-ship factories on the different worlds. But it was found more practicable finally to

center the whole space-ship industry on Mercury itself, near the source of supply.

Thus great space-ship factories arose in the Twilight Zone, established by Martians, Earthmen, Jovians and others. The System Government, however, strictly supervised this transfer. It was declared that no step might be taken without the permission of the Mercurians, and that there must be no friction between the natives of the planet and this inrush of strangers from other worlds.

### Eternal Night and Day

On the whole, the System Government's wise restrictions have worked well. There has been no recurrence on Mercury of the resentment which early interplanetary colonizing projects often aroused among the inhabitants. The Mercurians have prospered from the sale of mining concessions. Their impressive villas in Solar City, their capital, attest to the wealth of many.

Also, the Mercurians have become great interplanetary travelers. You are likely to find a few of them on almost any world in the System, bent upon satisfying their curiosity. It is true that in this respect they do not match the Earthmen, famous as the greatest race of wanderers in the System. But they do love to travel for pleasure.

The Mercurians always come back to their native planet, however. And they always declare that their strange little world of violent contrasts, of terrible heat and killing cold, of arid rock and hidden wealth, of eternal day and eternal night, is the most beautiful in the System.



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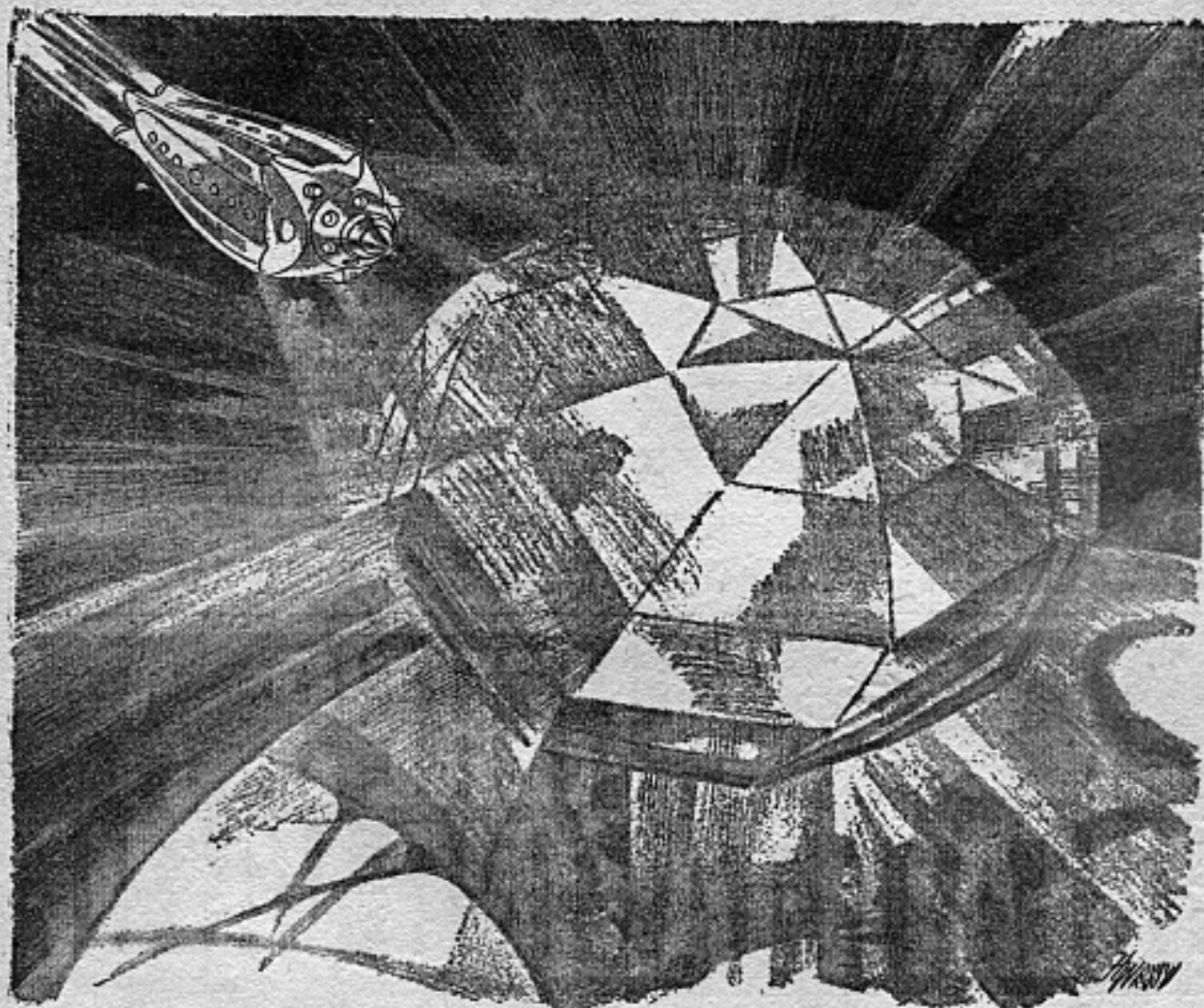
## DON'T OFFEND...USE SEN-SEN



# Ice, F.O.B., Mars

By EANDO BINDER

Author of "The Secret of Anton York," "The Time-Cheaters," etc.



It sparkled like a giant diamond in the sunlight of space

## It Isn't Easy to Liquidate Twenty Million Dollars' Worth of Frozen Assets—on a Waterless World!

**W**HEN you step off a space-liner at the edge of Canal City, you are immediately struck by the green beauty of Mars. The slope of the plateau leads your eye down to the wide sweep of *Thyle II*, an area as large as Europe. A sparkling lake lies in the center. Surrounding are trim groves of leafy

trees, and great lush pastures in which Earth-transported cows and deerlike Martian *zedas* graze.

Yes, *Thyle II*, and indeed most of Mars, is pastorally beautiful. Thousands of lakes are hemmed by thousands of such idyllic settings. The tall Martians take great pride in their landscaping and farms. They are a

happy, industrious people.

Earth people are flocking regularly, and in greater numbers, to that world, some to leave again with regretful sighs, others to stay permanently. Fully five million Earth people now inhabit that scenic serene planet.

We on Earth have almost forgotten that two centuries ago Mars was a vast barren desert. It once gleamed red in terrestrial telescopes, where now it shines a wholesome green. We take present-day, thriving Mars for granted. But in Canal City, they don't.

In Canal City, Mars' greatest metropolis, you see two statues of shining white stone. At every hour of the day you find Martians kneeling before the two stone figures, heads bowed. Once a year, a solemn procession winds from the city, groups about the pedestal, and sings the *Song of Praise*. It is an ancient song, older than man's history on Earth, and, poured from a million throats, it is like a throbbing psalm to the stars. It grips you and stirs your soul to the core.

Do you know why those two statues stand there? Two Earthmen gazing eternally over a world other than their own. Yes, you've heard the story. But history tells a casual tale. It drones on page after page for thirty years of detailed incidents, but touches only lightly upon the first incident. The one that encompasses the whole saga.

Here is the story of these two statues. Go back two centuries in time, to the year 2070. Live again an episode of the past, when Mars was a red, waterless world, its people doomed. . . .

**I**T was a strange object that was being towed, or rather pushed, toward Mars.

Roughly a hundred yards in diameter, it was a jagged sphere of crystalline matter that sparkled like a giant diamond in the sunlight of space. But it was infinitely more precious than diamond to the planet for which it was destined.

It was ice—frozen water. Water for the dry canals of Mars! Water from the overflowing seas of Earth, for the red dust hollows and arid plains of a parched planet forty-five

million miles away!

The transparent, scintillant mass was held in the invisible, viselike grip of a tractor-beam. The powerful beam was being radiated from the hose of a space tug, formerly used to tow in stranded freighters. From the tug's rear spouted the fierce tongues of atomic-power blasts, propelling the combined assemblage through the airless void. Earth had long since faded to the proportions of a star, and ahead the red spark of Mars brightened hourly.

On board the tug, inside the captain's cabin, two men were congratulating one another. Together they had developed the amazing project—water for arid Mars. One man was Dr. Ronald Baird, old and silvery-haired, who had originally conceived the idea and calculated orbital data. The other, Keith Drummond, forty and blustery, was captain and chief navigator of the tug.

Drummond heaved a sigh of relief, rubbed his unshaven chin. Some of the strain and worry in his leathery face faded away. The past two months, involving the ship and its queer external cargo, had been a ceaseless grind for him.

"So far so good," he grunted, lighting a Venusian cigar. "We broke away from Earth cleanly, without splitting our little ice-cube. Now all we have to worry about is the maneuver at Mars."

Dr. Baird nodded absently, his eyes shining as he stared off at nothing. He had been silent for most of the time since leaving Earth.

"I hope we've plotted that right," pursued Drummond. "Because if we didn't, thirty million tons of ice, Martian weight, are going to land in the wrong place. And we'll miss our contract."

He frowned slightly at the scientist's continued silence.

"We wouldn't want to miss that contract," he went on in a practical tone. "Just think, Baird, what this means. Once we've landed this first shipment of ice, all the big financial groups in the System will break their necks to buy out our contract. We stand to make millions!"

"Yes, millions!" echoed the scientist, breaking his silence. But he was still thoughtful. "Millions will be benefited. Millions of Martians."

"Martians?" rumbled Drummond. "I was talking about money."

Dr. Baird faced the spaceman.

"And I'm talking about Martians, Captain," he spoke softly. "I haven't said much about it before, but this has been my dream—my goal! I lived on Mars, years ago, at a canal station. I saw the misery of the Martians. It's a dry, dusty, hot world. They have to grub for bare existence. And all because they lack water!"

Drummond stared. It was the first time the scientist had spoken of their project as anything other than a great engineering and commercial venture.

"Well, of course," conceded Drummond, half grumpily, "it has its altruistic angle—"

"Water is the chief necessity of life," Baird was murmuring. "Blessed with its abundance on Earth, we take it for granted. On Mars, where its supply is limited, life is a cruel burden. The Martians slave at their canals from birth to death, tapping the trickling streams from their poles. And they are a patient, uncomplaining people, unenvious of more fortunate Earth and Venus. They need the water more than we need their money."

**D**RUMMOND knew all that himself, of course. It was just that he hadn't looked at it in that light, as one, on Earth, didn't often brood about the underprivileged. The scientist's words only vaguely stirred him.

"That's neither here nor there," he growled, knocking cigar ashes into a tray. "This is strictly a commercial venture, Baird. You know that. We have to figure profits and losses, like in anything else. Even Columbus expected cash returns on his trip, spices and jewels from the East. Why did the first rocket ship go to the Moon if not to pick up diamonds that the Palomar telescope saw sparkling along the rims of craters?"

Drummond waved his cigar.

"Now this thing of ours. The Martians can't carry it through, without a

space marine. The Earth Government is too busy to bother with it. The quickest and best angle is the commercial one. We buy and sell. Things'll hum and the Martians will get their water. *That's* the only way to look at it!"

Drummond was annoyed to feel that, somehow, his words were sounding empty. Had he been trying to convince himself, rather than the scientist? He went on quickly.

"Now you leave everything in my hands, Baird. You've done your part, figuring this whole thing out, in your mind, years ago. I'm going to see that you get your reward, in cold hard cash. And at the same time the Martians will be benefited, just as you want. Satisfactory?"

The scientist smiled and sighed.

"Okay," he said. "I couldn't have done a thing without your practical, steady hand in the first place, Drummond. It would have remained a dream, and an insane one at that, in my mind. You're the doctor, Captain, from now on."

He turned away, to stare thoughtfully out of the port at Mars.

**G**RUMBLING to himself, Drummond turned back to his built-in desk and began tapping at the comptometer bolted thereon. Losing himself in a mass of calculations, he soon forgot the scientist's veiled stab at his cold business outlook.

Hours later, he had summed up the total approximate cost of the shipment of ice, F. O. B. Mars. Professional accountants could be hired later for the exact figures. He had considered every item—fuel for the tug, food and tanked air, crew's wages, tractor-beam power, depreciation. And it didn't add up to such a high figure, at that. Their whole expense for the water was less than a cent a gallon.

Two things made the delivered product an economic possibility. One was the cheapness of atomic-power fuel. As a matter of fact, as Drummond had read in the *Astronaut Journal*, it had cost more in obsolete gasoline fuel, in the 20th century, to run an airplane from New York to Los Angeles, than it did now to blast a

rocket ship to Mars. Cheaper now, in 2070, to go 45 million miles, than 3,000 miles in 1940!

"As for the cargo," Drummond chuckled to himself, "water is the cheapest thing on Earth!"

He turned. Dr. Baird was still standing at the port, staring out at the diamond-hung curtain of space.

"Look here, Baird," the captain called, displaying his sheet of computations. "This'll make the financiers fight like wolves. Charging the Martians a dollar a gallon, they can net a million per Earth-Mars opposition, with only *one* tug in operation. With each added tug, double the net and more. They'll outbid each other sky-high trying to buy out our contract."

The scientist smiled bitterly.

"And for ten years," he whispered, "I tramped the rounds of their offices, trying to get backing. They all laughed and sneered. I was a crackpot." His bitterness, foreign to his nature, vanished quickly. "Thank God I met you, Drummond, two years ago. You were the only one that listened. You've made my dream come true!"

Drummond reddened a little in embarrassment, and coughed.

"Glad I did listen," he said gruffly. "Those fool financiers forgot that a tractor-beam, made large enough, could move a mountain." He arose and began pacing excitedly. "We'll make them pay!" he promised grimly. "You put half your life into this, and a personal fortune of ten thousand dollars. I've put in my tug and five thousand. We're in debt, aside from that, to the tune of twenty-five thousand, developing the tractor-beam for our purpose. But we'll sell out for ten million, and royalties! I've been waiting for this day. And I guess you have, too, more than me!"

The scientist showed no elation.

"I was just thinking," he said softly. "Those Martians—"

"What?" asked Drummond absently, visioning a financier fawning on him while he flicked ashes on the expensive Venusian rug of his office and sneered at the first offers.

Dr. Baird shook his head and left his thought unfinished.

**T**HREE days later, Mars ballooned among the stars and Captain Keith Drummond sat tensely before his instrument panel. He kept in constant touch with the pilot room, and the engine crew below. The great chunk of ice must be landed at a precise spot. This involved not only approaching the orbit of Mars at the correct angle, but reaching its surface at exactly the right hour. Rotation waited for no man.

Still, this had not been so difficult. Velocity in space could be set at perfect precision. Everything was clocked for a bull's-eye delivery in the central plains of *Thyle II*.

Dr. Baird looked around. He had just shot their position with a space octant.

"You might tangent one degree toward Aldebaran," he suggested, "just to make sure we don't hit north of the hollow."

Drummond nodded and called the pilot room, which set its sights for angry-red Aldebaran one degree, and blasted out with the appropriate rockets. They could feel the top-heavy swing of their unique little binary system. The ship moved ten degrees for the ice-cargo's one. Drummond had worked out the mechanics of it more than six months before. He was certain of his maneuvers.

Yet what if he had made a mistake? He could not help shivering slightly, thinking of the tremendous mass falling like a bomb on a Martian village. He shrugged. Well, he and Baird had to take their chances. They would soon know whether they were to be heroes or criminals.

A while later, Dr. Baird nodded, after another reading from the octant.

"I think we'd better cast off and decelerate about now. We've aimed the best we can." He betrayed nervousness only by a slight quiver of his lips.

"Casting off! Stand by!" Captain Drummond bawled through the speaking tubes to the pilots and crew. He swung the lever of the tractor-beam himself, controlled in his cabin, and the heavy snarl of the beam-generator droned to nothingness.

Outside, there was no visible effect. The ice-mass and ship kept their rela-

tive distances, both hurtling Marsward. But now the ice-chunk was a free-falling body. Rotating slightly, its innumerable crystal facets spanned out brilliantly.

It was a strange, beautiful sight, even the unpoetic Captain Drummond realized. But had he been able to see within the scientist's mind, he would have been a little puzzled. To him the ice was not just ice, or water. It was a flaming, precious jewel from Earth's treasure-chest. A gift to Mars from a richer world.

**D**RUMMOND bellowed further orders and the nose rockets hissed gently, so that the flames would not touch the ice-mass ahead. Slowly the mountain of ice drew away as the ship decelerated. The rockets broke out in thunder as the tug took full braking.

The great lump of ice seemed to leap ahead, plunging on for its destination. It dwindled, became a flashing ball, then vanished. It had passed out of their hands. Its final fate lay in the intricate calculations of Dr. Ronald Baird.

"It'll land in five hours," he breathed.

They were five hours of nerve strain. Drummond lit, chewed and tossed away a dozen cigars. Dr. Baird set the small telescope, whose tube projected beyond the hull, for a view of the burning expanse of *Thyle II*. They both watched in the enlarged periscopic view-plate.

The chronometer ticked to the zero moment and they held their breaths. Suddenly it appeared, a streak of lightning, flaming down in the Martian sky. It was the sphere of ice, striking with meteoric impact. But it didn't bury itself. Instead, great columns of blue shot into the air for miles and settled back as steamy spray.

"Just as you predicted, Baird," Drummond said, finding his voice hoarse. "It changed to water before landing, from the heat of friction through the atmosphere. And we hit the hollow spang in the middle!"

They watched as silvery threads spread a network through the arid, dusty hollow, as more than a billion

cubic feet of water sought its level. Water for the thirsty, barren plains of *Thyle II*! It was just a drop in the bucket as yet, but again and again this water from the sky would be rained down. Eventually, the hollow would be filled and *Thyle II* would be irrigated.

Keith Drummond, about to clap the scientist heartily on the back and roar out a song of success, stayed both hand and tongue. The old man had turned away with blinking eyes. With rare understanding, Drummond sneaked out and went below, to pass out a round of drinks to the crew, in celebration. Let Dr. Baird have his moment of triumph in his own way.

**C**APTAIN KEITH DRUMMOND landed his tug a few hundred feet from the edge of the small lake that lay now where no lake had existed for untold centuries.

Accompanied by the scientist, he stepped out into the dry, warm Martian climate. The Sun's rays beat down through a perpetually cloudless sky and thin atmosphere. All around lay bronze desert sand. It was desolate, save for hardy cacti that grew where Earth cacti would have wilted.

But water would change this to habitable land. Underneath the sand lay soil, from a previous age when vegetation had grown here, before precious water vapor had seeped into space. Thirstily, now, the sands drank. The surface water evaporated steamily into the parched air. Half the newly formed lake was gone already and in a few more hours would leave no trace.

Again and again this would happen. It would be like trying to fill a bottomless well. But eventually, there would come balance. Imported in sufficient quantity, through years, the water would add up. The immense desert plains of *Thyle II* would know rain, draining to the central hollow.

"*Thyle II* will be an irrigated agricultural region within a few years!" predicted Dr. Baird, eyes shining from within his soul. "But I can picture the day—we may live to see it—when *all* Mars has rain and crops and abundance, instead of just the canal-watered

strips. It's simply a matter of bringing more and more water from Earth!"

"Depending on how much the Martians can pay for," grunted Drummond. "They have only radium to attract a busy water-trade, and they may run out of radium, you know."

"Dollars and cents!" sighed the scientist. "That's all you seem able to reduce it to!"

They looked up as a low drumming quivered in the air.

Three small Earth-made rocket planes, with wide wings for Martian air, landed in quick succession. Not far behind came a larger craft, a space yacht, landing with a thunderous bel-low. Two reporters and a newsreel cameraman ran up, clamoring for an interview. They had flown from Canal City. It was only six hours after the fall of the ice-mass, but already the news of the Earthmen's achievement had circled the planet.

"Hello, boys," Drummond greeted the reporters genially. "Here's something you can smear over your front page, men. I can deliver water from Earth, to Mars, for less than a cent a gallon, and in quantity!"

Dr. Baird looked as if he wanted to say something, but didn't.

"Give us some details," begged the newsmen.

Drummond pondered how much to reveal.

"I use an oversize tractor-beam and—"

"Captain Drummond! Dr. Baird!"

The interrupting voice was owned by a thick-set, heavy-jowled man instantly recognizable as Adolph Stone, foremost tycoon of interplanetary commerce. His ships and trading posts spanned the Solar System. He had a monopoly of the Venusian grain-trade, for one thing, that the rather weak-willed Interworld Trade Commission couldn't break. Or wouldn't. Some said he secretly controlled the ITC.

Drummond's eyes narrowed, first in anger, then in a more pleasant emotion. Adolph Stone had been the last financier they had sought out for backing. He had been the most unreasonable magnate they had approached, insulting in his contempt for their "wild, hare-brained" scheme for filling the

age-dried wells of Mars.

**J**OYFUL triumph in Drummond's heart almost made him giddy. He licked his lips in anticipation of the revenge he intended to exact from the magnate.

"Don't say any more about your project to these men!" puffed the opulent Adolph Stone. "I happened to be in Canal City on a business deal when your—uh—man-made cloud burst occurred. A most remarkable achievement. I hurried here to extend my congratulations." He smiled unctuously. "Let's have a talk—privately. A little business talk, eh, Captain Drummond?"

Drummond stared at the portly business man speculatively.

"Did I ever tell you, Mr. Stone, that I think you're a fat, slobbering pig?" he said evenly.

The reporters gasped.

Adolph Stone's heavy features darkened, but he forced a twisted smile, and a hollow chuckle meant to indicate mirth. "We're old friends," he chortled aside to the reporters. "You must have your little joke, eh, Captain? But come, you are my guests, aboard my private yacht. I—"

"And that you're about the poorest excuse for a human being I've ever met?" added Drummond very distinctly.

The financier swallowed that insult also, and weakly pressed his invitation.

Drummond toyed mentally with a third barb, but thought better of it. He had had his revenge. Stone could be useful—later.

He grinned and let his cigar ashes fly in the financier's face. "Okay, Stone. See you tonight, in Canal City. Right now Dr. Baird and I will pick up our contract, for which you're going to pay a steep price—if you get it. You had your chance once!"

Stone chuckled sickly, retreated toward his luxurious space-yacht as he watched the two men depart.

Feeling vastly pleased, Drummond strode toward his tug. Dr. Baird glanced at him worriedly.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said reproachfully.

"Why not?" chortled Drummond

blithely. "He deserved every bit of it."

"I didn't mean that," murmured the scientist. "I mean you shouldn't have promised to deal with him—"

Drummond turned to face the scientist.

"Baird," he said fiercely, "this is strictly a business proposition! We'll sell our contract to Stone. He has a hundred tugs he can put into operation tomorrow. It has to be done that way—big. After all, Mars is a big world—and plenty dry."

"But you don't understand!" cried the scientist. "Stone is a ruthless business giant. Once he gains control of the ice-trade, he'll skyrocket prices and the poor Martians—"

"That's no concern of ours," Drummond said coldly. "We can't worry for the Martians. This is strictly a business matter!"

The scientist met his glare with pained resignation.

"Strictly a business matter!" he repeated bitterly.

**T**HE two men had nearly reached their ship when suddenly they stopped and stared ahead, their attention caught by a cloud of dust in the heat-hazed distance. The dust resolved itself into a group of figures.

A horde of Martians swept up, men, women, and children—apparently the whole population from the inhabited canal-strip to the north. Their voices came in chorus over the thin, dry air. They were singing!

"They've come to see the miracle!" murmured Dr. Baird, with a catch in his voice. "They must have started early this morning and tramped across miles and miles of desert!"

The Martians neared. At their head was the old patriarch of Canal City, Jolar-Ty—the uncrowned elected king of all the Martians. This ancient race had a singular government, entirely unwritten, that was intensely democratic. It had existed, without war or revolution, since the Neolithic times of Earth!

Halting at the edge of the rapidly dwindling lake, the Martians formed a huge semi-circle. Their singing died. They stared at the water, sparkling in the sun. Water that had been brought

to their arid, needy world from another far off in space. Water that meant a new world to them. Suddenly they began singing again—a paean of gratitude.

Jolar-Ty hobbled up and stopped before the two Earthmen, raising a thin arm in greeting. Back of him, his thousands fell silent. He was a typical Martian, seven feet tall, willowy, spindly legs and broomstick arms, horny moisture-holding skin.

Drummond inclined his head in a nod of respect. He had known Martians from his trading days, but had never met the patriarch. Dr. Baird had made all negotiations, a month before, in preparation for the project.

Dr. Baird gave a Martian greeting, then went on in the Earth tongue.

"We have brought you the first shipment of water from Earth, as we promised, Jolar-Ty," he said. "We offer you this gift, from the plentiful seas of Earth to the parched lands of Mars!"

Very poetic, thought Drummond a little cynically. He hastened to add, practically: "Water can be supplied now in any amounts, depending on how much you want to . . . buy."

The Martian patriarch lifted his face, as though inwardly thanking a higher being.

"You have done the Martian people a great good, Dr. Baird and Captain Drummond!" he spoke, in a slight lilting accent. "You will go down in our history! You have earned the blessings of our race! Our scribes and poets will honor your names in the ages to come! Your deed will live forever!"

Emotion quivered in the Martian's voice.

Drummond felt embarrassed. He mumbled a thanks, and then, to get on surer ground, asked: "Now, about the contract—" He broke off, annoyed at his own abruptness. "You see, this is a business matter and—well—" His voice trailed away, for the Martian, apparently unhearing, went on.

"My people this day, all over our world, will give a prayer of thanks to the god that rules the Universe! Water! Blessed water! It will come down to us like—like rain from a heaven! This poor world hasn't known rain for thousands of years. It is a

legend to us—of a happier time for our race."

The old Martian's eyes were somber.

"You don't know what it is, Earthmen, to lack water. Look at my people! Their skins are cracked, dry. Their bodies are bent with toil. From sunrise to sunset we labor at our canals, leading precious trickles of water to bordering fields to grow our food. Most of our land has become uninhabitable, away from the canals, like these desert stretches of Thyle II. Like a cloak around us has been the despair of—a dying race!"

**D**RUMMOND winced. He felt like a hypocrite.

"But no more!" Jolar-Ty's voice lifted, rang out. "This day we know we are saved! You are our saviors! You have shown us the way to replenish our lost seas, our sand-covered soil, our very life! My people—"

The Martian's lilting voice broke, and he could only wave his arm, then, toward his people, in a signal. Instantly the vast assemblage, augmented by thousands who had been straggling up constantly, kneeled, facing the Earthmen. Their heads rose and again they sang.

"Their *Song of Praise!*" choked Dr. Baird, incredulously. "They have sung it only to their temple deities, in the past twenty thousand years! Captain Drummond! They have placed us among their—saints!"

He glanced at the pensive captain.

"Just a business matter?"

The queer cadence rolled over the empty desert, centuries old and sacred and hallowed, swelled by voices bursting with gratitude. Drummond was confused, partially stunned, for long minutes.

Then he heard himself saying, like a robot who had been taught only one speech.

"Now about the contract, Jolar-Ty."

Jolar-Ty smiled, and nodded quickly.

"I understand," he said without reproach. "It is queer, to us, this binding of contract on paper. Among ourselves, all our dealings are by personal word and honor. However, knowing your Earthly methods, here is the contract."

He handed over a reed-fiber paper that read, simply, in his own script:

I, Jolar-Ty, representing all the Martians, agree to pay, in radium, for water brought from Earth, at whatever rate set by the Interworld Trade Commission.

"We will, of course, hope for the lowest price possible," spoke the Martian softly, almost shyly. "Mars is a poor world. Its metal and jewel treasures have long been depleted. But our radium mines are still productive. We hope, before these run out, to buy enough water to reclaim most of the desert areas."

**I**T was at that moment that Keith Drummond noticed the other Earth people back of him, the reporters, scribbling furiously, and Adolph Stone. They had come to see the Martians pay tribute to the two Earthmen.

The financier was staring at the singing Martians with cynical indifference. But his eyes had gleamed at the word "radium." He came forward now, eagerly.

"Why can't we settle things right now, Captain Drummond?" he said oilily. "These poor Martians need the water badly. Turn the contract over to me, with any binding note you wish for my signature, give me all the data on the tractor-beam and orbits, and I'll have my tremendous organization start delivering ice immediately!"

Drummond eyed the man as though he had never seen him before. At last he spoke, but still in the voice of a robot.

"I want twenty million for the contract, Stone, and a cent a gallon royalties over and above the cent a gallon operation cost!"

Dr. Baird gasped. Even Jolar-Ty looked at the captain searchingly, wonderingly. Adolph Stone turned his eyes to the ground thoughtfully, obviously going through rapid mental calculations. He looked up.

"Good enough, Captain!"

Drummond's face slowly darkened, until it was a ruddy as the sands of Mars around him. He felt the giddiness of a deep and terrible anger that whipped through his body like a violent poison. He took two steps toward the

financier, fingers working. Then he stopped and spoke, in a deadly tone.

"You agree to those terms? You rat! You would have to boost the selling price one thousand percent to pay me off! The ITC, also bought off, would sanction any price you set. Monopolizing the field, you'd see that you got a piratical profit. These Martians need water badly, yes, and would barter their souls for it, let alone radium. In five years, you'd have robbed them of every gram!"

Stone opened his mouth, then blanched as Drummond advanced.

"Get out of my sight!" Drummond roared. "Get out of my sight or I'll—" His hands indicated what he would do, with a neck between them.

The financier scurried back like a frightened rabbit. But he turned, screeching. "I'll get the ice-trade!" he threatened. "It's the biggest thing in the history of interplanetary trade, and I'll get it, one way or another!"

With that he loped over the red sands of Mars, toward his luxurious space-yacht, like a wolf on the trail.

Drummond stared after him, and something stood out starkly clear in his mind. So clear and bright that it seemed to burn his brain. This was the biggest thing in interplanetary trade. All other trades in ores, jewels, exotic drugs and food-products paled into utter insignificance. The moment it slipped into the wrong hands, the water-trade between two worlds would become a pool of iniquity.

**T**HE code of trade was ruthless. Drummond flushed, thinking of some black blots in the history of interplanetary commerce, which were comparable, in degree if not manner, with the freebooting days of piracy on the high-seas of Earth—the slave trade, barter with worthless trinkets, exploitation of the New World, and the gold-seeking of the Spanish Conquistadores. These were the raw, semi-lawless days of interplanetary expansion, as those had been the raw days of world expansion.

Drummond swung around.

"Jolar-Ty, do you trust me?"

The Martian nodded quickly.

"We Martians read character at a

glance. Dr. Baird I already know as a humanitarian. And I trust you, Captain Drummond!"

Drummond almost panted. "Then promise me that I am to have the sole right of selling water on Mars!"

Without hesitation, Jolar-Ty took the contract from his hands, drew an Earth-made fountain pen from the folds of his robe, and scratched the words indelibly on the paper.

"What do you mean to do?" whispered Dr. Baird.

Drummond's eyes shot fire.

"Build up the water-trade ourselves! With whatever capital Jolar-Ty can supply, in radium. We'll buy a fleet of space-tugs. We'll deliver water to Mars at a cost plus one per cent. One per cent will pay off our debts in a year. After that, delivery without profit. In other words, Baird, we'll be working for the Martians!"

He stared off at the tiny lake of Earth water, now almost gone into the greedy sands and sucking air.

"It's the only way," he said, firmly. "It'll be a gigantic project. It will take years and years. But we can deliver it as fast as Stone or any one else could. And the Martians won't be skinned in the process, and left high and dry—literally—when their radium runs out. This, Dr. Baird, is going to be our life-work!"

"I knew you would come around to this," the scientist said quietly. "I knew I hadn't misjudged you." He smiled, through tears. The joy was upon him of a man whose dream had come true.

Jolar-Ty waved again to his people, and their voices lifted once more in their haunting Song of Praise.

Captain Keith Drummond brushed at his eyes, grumbling that there was a lot of free dust in the Martian air.

"Just a business matter!" Dr. Baird hummed softly to himself.

The two statues of shining white stone still stand in Canal City. There is talk now of taking them away, replacing them with two new statues, this time of imperishable metal. For the smiles on the faces of both Earthmen represented by the two statues have vanished. You see, the Martian rains have eroded them!

# Memory Blocks

By WILL GARTH

Author of "Hands Across the Void," "Fulfillment," etc.



**A**FTER a term at Interplanetary Prison on Cerberus, the hardest criminal became softened. Psychiatrists had chosen Cerberus deliberately, knowing that its complete isolation made criminals malleable

enough to be remolded into good citizens. But Tom Geris had been sentenced to a double term in Cerberus—the first to receive that penalty!

"The Science Board certainly agreed on my case," Geris muttered.

He smiled tauntingly at the visiscreen high in the wall. A panel that perfectly matched the green-painted rock wall, it was invisible to the sharpest eye, yet Geris knew it was there, installed by the prison officials. Tom Geris, the Solar System's greatest scientist, had invented the screen that betrayed every act in each prison cell. Now Tom Geris—the Scorpion, scourge of nine worlds, hunted for years by the Planet Police—grinned defiantly as he was watched by his invention. The irony amused him.

As he had done for so many years that he had lost count since his imprisonment, he bent over the metal table and continued writing. With nothing but pencil and paper and a mind that isolation and lack of distraction merely sharpened, he worked out scientific principles that would have startled his law-abiding colleagues. But Tom Geris no longer thought in terms of pure science. Everything that passed through his shrewd brain was dedicated to the day when he would be returned to Earth.

At first he had felt the lack of his secret laboratory. Even now his sensitive hands still ached to hold the

devices with which to test his theories. But they weren't really necessary. On paper he worked out each step, then proved the result with mathematics.

"Increasing the velocity of molecules to a certain point will make matter vibrate at a speed invisible to the eye," he muttered, crouching over the paper on the shaky table and writing furiously. "Diffusing the molecules, simultaneously vibrating them at the point of invisibility, will make them invisible—and able to go through other matter! Space ships can be robbed by invisible men who won't have to employ the tedious and dangerous process of holding them up. The hijackers can push themselves through the hull into the cargo hold, push the cargo through the walls, pick it up in space and propel it to their own invisible ship, then reassemble the molecules of themselves and the cargo. No lost motion, no danger!"

Cautiously he wrote down everything but the formula for reassembling molecules. That he kept in his mind.

"Psychiatrists are altogether too efficient these days," he mused, lying on his hard bunk and staring up at the whitewashed rock ceiling. "They have all sorts of probing devices for digging secrets out of reluctant minds. I'll have to find a better hiding place than my memory."

His sharp eyes searched the little cell. Carved out of the rock by atom disruptors that blanketed the electrical charge of matter and made the atoms collapse, it had not a single seam or crevice.

"I can't hide it here," he decided. "I can't hide it in my consciousness, either. That leaves only one place—

Tom Geris hesitated, for he never took chances. The hiding place he meant to use had caused his downfall. He had trained a new man named Cromwell in scientific crime. Guard-

*Tom Geris Forgets That Mind Can Matter!*

ing against the chance of the young corsair's being captured, he had erased all memory of his name from Cromwell's mind. But the memory block he had created had been too efficient. Cromwell had studied three years at a space college, specializing in Geris' inventions, which had done more for astrogation than any other man's. Yet he had not remembered how to operate a Geris air-lock, for the memory block had erased every memory related to Geris. When the police took Cromwell out of the lock, they realized the significance of a first-class spaceman who had never heard of the System's greatest scientist, shadowed Geris and caught him communicating with a pirate ship.

"But this is different," Geris gritted. "Now I'll be relying on myself. I can control my own memory blocks."

By self-hypnosis, he deliberately buried the secret deep in his subconscious to prevent his talking at any time about the reassembling formula, without which the invisibility-permutation device was valueless.

**E**VENTUALLY even a double term had to end. Release came to Tom Geris as a surprise. He made the guards wait two hours while he finished an intricate calculation. Then he allowed himself to be escorted to the psychiatrists, who probed his mind unsuccessfully for secrets. Then a ship brought him back to Earth.

In a small rocket-flier garage he had rented and used for laboratory and living quarters, Geris perfected his permutator. With the aid of his notes and the remnants of the old ring of scientific criminals he had created long ago, he was soon out in space, getting ready to raid the lanes.

"Here she comes," he said, peering through the visi-scope. "The *Orion*, bound for Mars with a cargo of radite. Stand by the air-lock for the entire load. There won't be a single hitch. The cargo will be gone without their knowing it, and they'll never discover how it could be hijacked without the ship's being stopped."

"Let me test it, Chief," suggested a corsair. "You're too valuable to lose."

"It's my idea," snapped Geris testily. "I want the thrill of being first."

Invisible in the blackness of space, the crime ship rode parallel with the *Orion*. Geris turned the switch of his invisibility-permutator and effortlessly pushed himself through the hull of his own craft. It seemed like going through a dense mist. Now he was out in space, propelling himself toward the victim ship. Larger and larger it loomed, till it was a giant silvery torpedo. He guided himself along it, found the loading air-lock. Before forcing his way into the hold, he looked back uneasily at his ship. Something vague tugged at his mind, but he could not recall it.

Defiantly he pressed the trigger of the hand-rocket over his shoulder. The force of reaction sent him arrowing through the shining hull as wind blows through fog. He saw the radite cargo—and clear space again.

"This isn't right," he mumbled.

He forced his way back into the ship, fumbled with the radite without being able to grasp a single bar. Terrified, he pushed through the hull of the *Orion* and across the empty gulf of space to his own ship. When he was in the control room, he stopped with a braking blast of the portable rocket, but he didn't stand on the floor.

"Help me!" his inaudible voice shrieked. "I've forgotten something!"

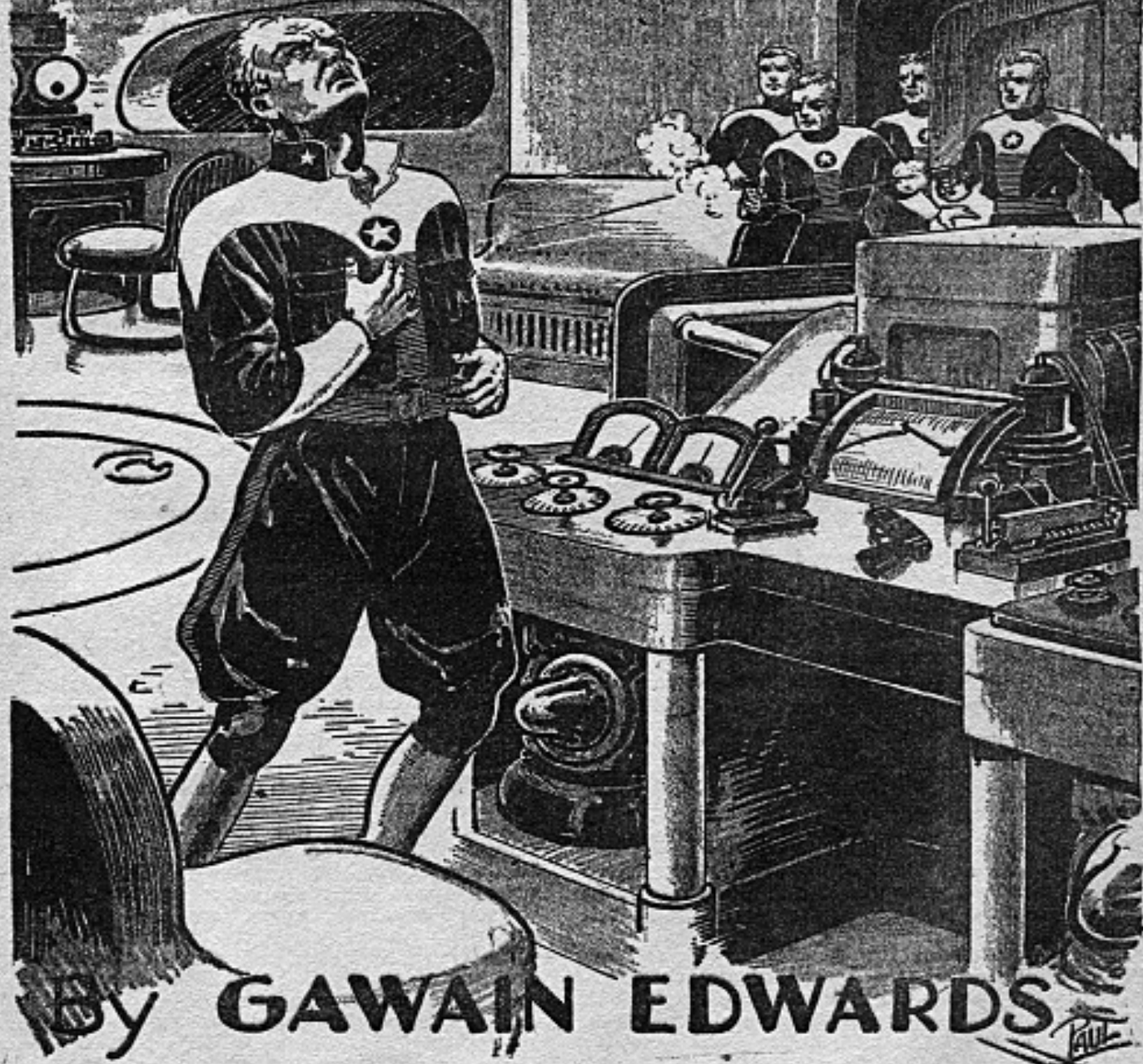
He never knew what he had forgotten. The memory block he had created to keep his secret from the prison psychiatrists had again been too perfect. He had forgotten the reassembling formula. If he had remembered it was necessary, he would have been able to have constructed the machine to reassemble his diffused molecules.

It was only a matter of days before the molecules of his body spread too far apart for mutual attraction to keep him together. A cloud of invisible motes, he floated in the control room until the air-renewal system swept him into the purifying chamber, separated him from the precious air and discharged his disembodied molecules into space through the refuse exhaust.

Tom Geris had made two mistakes in his life. In each case he had created his own stumbling-block. . . .

# MUTINY in SPACE

CONCLUDING A GREAT  
SCIENTIFICTION NOVEL



By **GAWAIN EDWARDS**

• A HALL OF FAME SCIENTIFICTION SERIAL •



Elbert Calderayne

## WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR

THE rocket ship *Silver Star* was the third of her line to try the hazardous voyage to Venus.

When she took off for the cloud-veiled planet, under the helm of Captain Walter Ledyard, she weighed eighty thousand pounds loaded, and gave room, though hardly palatial quarters, however, for eight men, including the captain.

The crew of the *Silver Star* included Robert Spence, the physicist; Elbert Calderayne, engineer; Lemoyne, French physicist; Brunkhorst, naturalist. The three others were space-craft experts.

To Captain Ledyard, an experienced space-farer, the trials and tribulations of space-traveling are an old story. But to the others, the terrific heat of the sun, the loneliness of the void, the spinning of the ship all contribute to make the crew—space mad.

The problem of food, too, becomes a menace. The heat has made the concentrates dry, almost impossible to swallow. The men begin to eye the special vitamin foods with distrust. They start to snap under the strain . . . and yearn to return to Earth.

Then Gurdel, one of the space-craft experts, becomes seriously ill. His violent screams keep the nervous men from getting any sleep.

They vote together, insist to Ledyard that the man be pitched out of the ship.

## NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

### CHAPTER V

#### *A Mathematician Confesses*

**L**EDYARD stared at the physicist for a full moment, uncomprehending. The shocking brutality of Spence's proposal was unbelievable, coming from a man he had known almost all his life.

"Pitch him out? Are you insane?"

Spence was momentarily confused, but he soon recovered himself.

"Maybe I am," he snapped. "Maybe all of us are—or soon will be. When men are out in space, they've got to do the best they can to protect themselves, from their own fears. That's why we want you to pitch him out."

The commander unconsciously closed his hand upon one of the heavy, detachable levers in the bank beside the controls. A wrench unlocked the releasing mechanism. He turned back to his subordinate, white with rage, holding the murderous, blunt weapon in his hand.

"Spence," he said grimly, "I would rather pitch you out. By God, I'm going to do it

# The Silver Star Was a Cosmic Coffin That Housed Seven Rebel Souls and an Eighth Whose Spirit Would Not Be Vanquished!

if you don't leave this cabin at once! You have made the most brutal and offensive proposal I have ever heard on land or in space. Get out of here!"

As Ledyard advanced around the table, Spence saw a look in his eye that gave him little encouragement. He retreated hastily, without a word, to the galley entrance. Climbing through it awkwardly, he went into the sleeping quarters. Captain Ledyard followed him to the hole and went through after him. The commander was still shaking with rage.

"Here, you men!" he shouted. "Get that sick man up here into the control room, hammock and all. Step lively!"

The two mechanics, both of whom were out of their own berths, were first to respond. Gingerly they lifted their suffering comrade. Calderayne also took a hand, though he was not needed, since the man had no weight in the ship.

The chief trouble was to control the invalid. His carriers, not yet masters of their own equilibrium in the revolving ship, lurched uncontrollably toward the place where Captain Ledyard was standing. Gurdel was still sufficiently conscious to realize the danger that overhung him.

"No!" he cried out in terror. "Don't—don't—"

The commander took his fevered hand sympathetically.

"That's all right, old man. We're not going to abandon you. We're only moving you where you'll be more comfortable. You're going to get well now, Gurdel."

**T**HE poor wretch seemed to take some heart at this, though he understood less the words than the tone of the captain's voice. He immediately became quiet. The lurching brought only an occasional low moan from him as they transported him through the narrow passage and fumblingly hung his hammock in the control cabin.

Ledyard had stopped all but the two mechanics as they tried to follow the hammock and its burden into the room. Standing in the entrance, he intended to try cheering them up. But he saw before him such a collection of vicious glowers that he immediately thought better of it.

"Gurdel will be quieter now," he said simply. "I wish you men would get some rest."

For a moment they had appeared to him like a hungry pack of wolves. He shook his head to dispel the illusion. The mechanics, who had finished their work, were standing beside Gurdel. With an abrupt order, Ledyard sent them back with the others while he returned to his calculations.

Lord, did they think he was made of iron? Did they expect him to bear the whole burden?

It was the twenty-sixth day. Lemoyne was knocking on the control room door.

Captain Ledyard was glad that for once his patient had become quiet. The former pilot was now in a state of coma. His groaning had stopped, but his breathing showed that he was still alive. Ledyard pulled the cover over the man's face, taking care that there was air to breathe, before he admitted the mathematician.

"Good morning," Professor Lemoyne," he said cheerfully. "You are around rather early. Your watch isn't due for three hours yet."

The professor shook his head.

"No. That wasn't what I came—to talk about, Commander Ledyard."

Mutely he eyed the hammock and the still, covered form in it from his place at the door. Ledyard saw his glance and reassured him.

"Gurdel's alive. He's much better, in fact. Getting rest for the first time in days. He may pull through."

"Oh, yes. Yes, that is good."

The mathematician's feverish eyes were sweeping the room. They had forsaken the mechanic almost at once. They paused upon the bank of dials, rested an instant upon the astrogating instruments at the table, touched the littered pile of yellow sheets on which Ledyard had been making calculations.

"I came to talk to you," he began hesitantly, "about—about our course. Do you think you are progressing all right?"

Ledyard laughed a little uneasily.

"Absolutely. We were ficked a little out of the way early in the voyage by a couple of meteors, but I have now compensated that. We are making good time, but not too fast. There is no reason to worry, Professor."

"You are an experienced astrogator?" Lemoyne asked anxiously. "You know when you are on the right track?"

"Of course, Professor. You knew my experience before we left."

"True, but you had traveled only to the Moon. Now we are in a new section of space. Nobody has ever successfully traveled here before."

"You knew that also before you came with us, Professor. All of us realized there was considerable risk. But I assure you there is no need to worry about it. Our speed, our location in space—everything that can be determined about our progress—check with the curves and calculations. There is no cause to feel that we shall fail."

Before the steady gaze of the commander, Lemoyne dropped his eyes wearily.

"I—I guess I was unduly worried," he said. "It is a terrible strain, this long jour-



Captain Walter Ledyard

ney. We do not seem to be moving, yet I know we are rushing forward with incredible, frightful speed. We are hurtling toward the Sun. If the planet we are aiming for does not keep her tryst with us, we shall plunge into the Sun as surely as I stand here. The thought unnerves me. I cannot stand it."

Comfortingly Ledyard put his hand on the professor's shoulder.

"Perhaps you had better not go on your watch today. Things have been pretty unsettled here. I'll take your trick, and you try to get some sleep. That's what your nerves need."

"I suppose so." The mathematician moved off slowly toward the door. "But look here," he blurted, turning suddenly and trying a new tack, "are you sure your figures are accurate?"

Ledyard purposely misunderstood him.

"My figures?"

"The calculations for your course." Lemoyne's lips trembled as he spoke. "Do you know what depends on those figures? Our lives! My life depends on those figures—"

Captain Ledyard saw hysteria mounting in the professor's eyes. It was obviously not space-sickness nor its aftermath that was affecting Lemoyne now. He was madened by cold, stark terror. Terror had been growing in him for weeks, ever since he had seen the green planet that meant his life-long safety slip from beneath the rocket, to melt away into space. He had been frightened by the terrific, crushing force of the takeoff, then the horrible weightlessness.

Now it was unbearably hot. He was crazed by the exasperating, dizzy rotation of the rocket ship. The heat they felt was only a warning, it seemed to him, of the tremendous, frightful heat to come. If they should miss Venus, the great ship would be drawn irresistibly into the blue-white, fiery

orb beyond, to be consumed in a single flash of yellow flame.

"There is no use to worry, Professor Lemoyne," the commander said soothingly. "The calculations are all right. I did not make them all myself." He smiled. "I had your own splendid equations to guide me. We are following, in fact, the very curves that you plotted and displayed before the French Astrogation Society only last year. At that time you were certain that a ship following them could not fail to land on Venus. Remember?"

"Yes, yes," the mathematician murmured nervously. He paused a moment, then muttered again. "Yes, yes."

"Then, Professor, since you are assured that everything is as it should be, why don't you go and get some sleep?"

"Because I cannot, Captain Ledyard, and I will not." The words came unwillingly, as if Lemoyne had tried with all his might to hold them back, but could contain them no longer. "Did it ever occur to you that I might have been wrong? Every man can make mistakes. What if I had been mistaken this time?"

"What! Professor Lemoyne wrong?"

**L**EDYARD laughed shortly, a little desperately. With both his feet planted firmly and safely on the solid Earth, Professor Lemoyne had more than once—and with right on his side—shouted insults at lesser men who dared to suggest that there might be inaccuracies in his work.

Now, for the first time, Professor Lemoyne was reviewing his mathematical calculations from the point of view of a man whose existence depended on them. For nearly four weeks he had engaged in it, knowing all the time that the *Silver Star* was following the course, that he had plotted out months before he had known he would be on the trip.

"Yes—Professor Lemoyne wrong—the famous Professor Lemoyne making an error in his famous curves—"

The mathematician's voice was filled with bitterness and irony that did not lessen one iota the chattering terror that had seized hold of him.

"Captain Ledyard, for twenty-five days—for six hundred hours—I have been thinking just that. What if I have been wrong all these years? What if mathematics itself is a false science, leading us to destruction? The other ships that went toward Venus also had my charts. Where did they land?"

"But your curves have proved themselves. How about your courses to the Moon? No astrogator ever went wrong as long as he followed them."

"Ah, the Moon courses." Lemoyne made a venomous gesture. "That was something we could understand. The Moon is in our home territory. It responds to the same laws that guide Earth. But out here, Ledyard, we are in alien space. How do we know whether our pitiful terrestrial mathematics applies beyond the orbit of the satellite? This is a yawning gulf, perhaps a veritable chaos."

The mathematician's eyes glazed with horror, and he was silent for a moment.

"This endless, frightful darkness may be a void of innumerable conflicting dimensions. Perhaps even now, following my silly three-dimensional curves, we are actually traveling in the fourth, the fifth, the *n*th dimension, to a fate beyond the borders of imagination! Think of my daily horror, Captain Ledyard, knowing as I do the flimsy premises upon which we mathematicians build.

"We live in realms of mind, not matter. We calculate what ought to be, not what is. At first, when I began thinking of it, I felt only uneasiness. Later it became fear—Fear of the unknown. What are we plunging into, Captain Ledyard? Is this reality, this horrible existence we are leading? Are we dead men, flying through illimitable space? Let your mind dwell upon these things, as mine has.

"Fear creeps up around you like a fog. It fills the hollows of your mind, obscures the distances and the sane perspectives. It makes ogres of familiar things, brings doubt and uncertainty. Fear chills you through and through like long, unceasing exposure to cold. I am impregnated with terror at this instant.

"It is all I can do to keep from screaming out that we are doomed! We have depended on mathematics, and we are off our course. We are doomed, and the Sun will roast us in this metal oven like suckling pigs!"

Lemoyne had given way completely before the terror of his own imaginings. He was suddenly down on his knees, tears streaming from his eyes. He grasped Ledyard's hand and held it in a fierce grip.

"That's why I came here," he pleaded. "I am asking you to turn back. Turn back before it is too late! Go back to Earth, Captain Ledyard, and save your ship!"

Ledyard reached down and gently drew the mathematician to his feet.

"I shall save my ship, Professor Lemoyne, and we will land on Venus, too. Your curves and equations are correct. I intend to follow them. Your mathematics are greater and surer than their author. I am ashamed to hear you talk like this. A scientist who forsakes his science is like a priest who deserts his god.

"Now go to your hammock, Professor. Try to sleep. No one shall ever know what has passed between us, as far as I am concerned. Some day you will thank me from the bottom of your heart for refusing your hysterical request."

As he spoke, the commander was propelling the protesting and unwilling man toward the entrance. Once there, he shoved Lemoyne through with little ceremony, and closed the door after him.

## CHAPTER VI

### *The First to Go*

**L**EDYARD'S nerves were on edge. He paced the revolving cabin, his thoughts whirling as fast as the space ship.

"The old fool," he muttered, "cracking up like this on the very eve of victory! Men

are such creatures of weakness, even scientists."

He took out his handkerchief and wiped his perspiring face. It was unquestionably hot in the ship, but it was bearable. And he meant to make them bear it, every one of them, until they reached the planet that was their goal!

A queer, twisted thought struck him suddenly. For over a week, that thought had been somewhere in his subconscious, trying to rise through his iron resistance to his conscious mind. What if the old man had been right after all?

For the thousandth time he stared out of the quartz window. Gazing into the still, pitiless darkness, he confessed to himself that to all human senses they were not moving. Only instruments and calculations could tell.

Where was Venus, the planet that alone could stop them from their headlong course into the blazing Sun? In his reason he knew where she was. Venus was hiding behind the Sun, would come out in time to meet them in her course. But what if she did not?

He stopped the perspiration from his face with his wet handkerchief. It was terrifically hot! The Sun's rays were like gimlets boring into the space ship's hull. They must roll all the way to keep from burning up, fighting the crazy motion of the interior with all their might. They must not, like Lemoyne, lose faith in the intricate science that sustained and guided them. The course was right. The calculations were correct. They had to be!

With a start, he realized that Gurdell, who had made no sound for several hours, was speaking to him. The injured man was lying on his back, looking steadfastly toward the ceiling of the control room. Though almost too weak to move, he was perfectly conscious and coherent now.

"I am dying, Captain," he whispered feebly. "I am not afraid to die. It was my fault. I was drunk when I came aboard the ship, against all orders and my better sense. I was the first to mutiny against you, but not the last. I only—I only want to say—you are a great man—Captain Ledyard—and you will—succeed."

A moment later, as if he had forgotten what he had already said, he began to repeat.

"I am dying, Commander—"

Ledyard reaches his side, was bending over him, but he did not seem aware of it.

"Gurdell, wait a minute, old man," the captain urged despairingly.

"I am not afraid to die. Captain—"

**THEY** had sewn Gurdell into a tarpaulin, making him into a long, gray package, heavily roped with twine. The whole crew was assembled at the lower trap, the very bottom of the rocket, to launch him into space—the burial of a sailor of the void.

The two mechanics were holding the body ready. Spence stood by to throw the revolving air-lock open at the proper moment and close it again before they should lose too much of their precious air. Captain Led-

yard had an open prayer-book in his hand, silently reading over the service to avoid errors.

"When you cast him out," he ordered suddenly, stepping close to the two mechanics, "give him a good shove."

They nodded comprehendingly. The commander began to intone the opening prayer. Lemoyne, standing on the opposite side of the compartment, sobbed quietly. Calderayne, looking like the ghost of his old self, was motionless beside Brunkhorst, for whom he had developed a tremendous antagonism. The faces of both men were lined and drawn. Their eyes had a peculiar gleam. The naturalist's hand remained in the pocket where he had boasted he kept his knife.

"Man, that is born of woman, hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery," Ledyard read. "He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower. He fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. In the midst of life, we are in death. Of whom may we seek for succor?"

He turned a page, continued. "Most merciful, who has been pleased to take the soul of this thy servant, grant to us who are still in our pilgrimage. . . ."

Even Lemoyne was quiet for a full minute. The mechanics stood like impassive stone statues. Calderayne and Brunkhorst made no move. Ledyard turned still another page to the ritual for the burial of the dead in space. His voice was solemn, fraught with foreboding, interwoven with the majesty and inevitability of death.

"We therefore commit his body to the depths of the firmament, looking for the general resurrection in the last day and the life of the world to come through our Lord, whose second coming in glorious majesty, may judge the world. The sea, the Earth, the moons and planets in their wheeling, and the endless depths shall give up their dead. The bodies of those who sleep in Him shall be changed according to the mighty working. Amen."

The reading was done. Ledyard gave a signal. Spence, with a quick movement of the lever, opened the air-lock door. The mechanics shoved their burden forward, aimed it into the opening. For a moment it jammed in the narrow space. The air whistled by it, wailing, tearing.

The mechanics threw themselves at the bundle, worrying it into place. Abruptly it righted. The pressure of the air in the rocket hurled it out. Spence slammed the door shut, and the mechanics turned the heavy screws that secured it firmly.

The ceremony had taken less than five minutes, but it had left them all changed men. As he made his way back up the ladders and stairs to the control cabin, Captain Ledyard heard the other following him. He had the feeling that he was hanging suspended over a volcano that was about to erupt.

All the way up he kept his nerves and muscles tense, ready for any outburst. None came. He reached the sanctuary of his room with relief, hastily closed the door and bolted it.

Spence was pounding on the door.

"Ledyard, you've got to let us in!" he shouted. "You've got to let us in! If you don't, we'll ram this door down. We're coming in if we have to tear this whole ship to pieces. You've got to let us in!"

It was the thirty-first day out. The captain aroused himself from the map on which he had fallen from sheer weariness. He glanced almost guiltily out of the windows. The same deep darkness still surrounded them. The Sun was where it had been for days. No changes had taken place in their positions, except the normal one, unnoticeable without instruments, due to their terrific and increasing speed through nothingness toward the Sun.

"What do you want?" Ledyard called out. "Let us in and we'll tell you."

There was a rasping, menacing quality to Spence's voice. Unwillingly Captain Ledyard reached into the drawer of his table and took out his automatic. Shaking his head, he made certain the gun was loaded. He slipped it into his pocket and partly opened the door.

Brunkhorst, Spence, Lemoyne and Calderayne stood outside. Spence was in the lead. His face was as white as if it had been dusted with chalk. His lips were trembling.

"The ship is lost," he said grimly. "All of us are lost, and you know it. You have lost the way."

The four men filed in. They refused the chairs Ledyard pointed out to them.

"What makes you think that?" he asked quietly, looking at Lemoyne, who said nothing.

"A blind man could see it," Spence retorted. "You shut yourself up in here so nobody can check up on your work or what you are doing. You keep us all in ignorance of our position. You tell us nothing, but we know what has happened. We are lost!"

"Nobody has expressed the slightest interest in checking up on my work or learning about our position," Ledyard contradicted softly. "Now that you are here, if you wish, you may examine everything. You may check over the whole data and take new readings. I want you to convince yourself that we are not lost."

**I**MPATIENTLY Spence waved the offer aside with an abrupt gesture.

"No. We have made up our minds. We came here to demand that you turn the ship around and go back to Earth. You have been asked once to turn back. Now we demand it!"

"You demand it?" Ledyard put sarcastic emphasis on the word. "Demand the Sun to cool off, Spence. Demand the Earth to come here to us. We can't turn back now. We must go on!"

Signs of temper rushed involuntarily to his face. He saw that these four men really meant their idiotic demand. Turn back, now? He would not, even if he could.

"What fine scientists you turned out to be," he snapped at them scornfully. "You want to quit just when victory—the greatest exploit of the human race—is just in sight. One of you is afraid we are going too far

and too fast. What theory do the rest of you hold?"

Spence replied in a high-pitched, excited voice.

"Only one. We are lost unless we turn back now. And we're determined to turn back!"

"This is what I think," put in Calderayne, clearing his throat ponderously. "We are not moving at all, or much too slowly. We'll never reach Venus or anywhere. We'll only starve to death out here in space. Our oxygen's boiling away. Our food is low. It will be either suffocation or starvation, or both."

And how do you know we are not moving?" Ledyard asked ironically.

"For weeks I've been watching through the lower telescopes. Things never change. The stars remain where they were. The planets show only their normal movement in the sky. We have lost all velocity out here somehow. The *Silver Star* is just a free body, helpless in space. Sooner or later, we'll fall into the Sun or become a comet. But we'll never get where we are aiming for. The only chance is to turn back now, use up the remainder of our fuel and oxygen in an effort to build up the speed we'll need to carry us to Earth. We're willing to leave the rest to chance or Providence."

"And you, Brunkhorst," Ledyard pursued doggedly. "What do you think?"

## CHAPTER VII

### *Mutiny!*

**T**HE naturalist only shook his head sullenly, refusing to open his mouth.

"Then I'll say something," the commander stated. "I'm steering this ship by mathematics, not guesswork or hysterics. We are on the course. We will arrive in time. You have only to be patient ten more days and I will land you safe and sound on the planet Venus."

"How is it, if we are so close," Calderayne persisted, "that we can't even see Venus in the telescope? Where is this planet you think you're aiming at?"

"We can't see her now, I admit. From our present position, she is too close to the Sun. My present figures show that she is less than five degrees away. At this angle, the Sun is too bright for her to be visible. You will be able to see her, however, in about twenty-four hours. At exactly twenty minutes past fourteen o'clock tomorrow, she will emerge from the Sun's corona. After that we shall be able to watch our target and control our speed accordingly."

Ledyard wished heartily as he spoke, that he could believe these words as firmly as he said them. A moment of silence followed. It was broken by Spence, who spot viciously:

"We have no faith in your mathematics."

"Four men of science who have lost faith in mathematics," said the captain coldly.

"We have lost faith in everything except getting back," replied Calderayne, mopping the perspiration from his florid face.

Lemoyne was staring straight past the captain at the bank of control levers

in their places. He gazed at the shining panels of dials which brought instant word of the condition of the rocket ship's many parts. He looked at the heavy projecting telescope which was trained on the left quarter, throwing its enlarged images on the screen. An endless pattern of stars moved in weird orbits as the rocket turned.

While the commander listened to the others, he observed closely the mathematician's interest in the controls. The lever at the right would set in motion the huge gyroscopic rotor that turned the ship along its lateral axis. The one farther toward the left was the master lever opening the tanks of the rocket fuels. A pull on that would send the fire roaring out behind them.

If the ship were turned around first, the rocket would check their progress toward Venus. The blast would stop the space ship in its flight, would drive it in a hopeless attempt to get back to Earth. Didn't the fools know they were already in the grip of the Sun and any attempt to turn back would be suicidal?

He saw the little mathematician crouch, saw him leave the chair into which he had settled during the argument. Ledyard didn't move when the professor abruptly started running toward the panels.

"Lemoynel!" he rapped out.

The mathematician stopped as suddenly as if he had been shot. The others paused in what they were doing and saying. In Ledyard's hand was a wicked blue-black automatic. His face was set in determined lines, for he had seen the futility of relying on logic alone.

In one step he reached Lemoynel, seized him roughly by the arm and sent him whirling back from the controls. The automatic covered all four of them. Its menace was something tangible, beyond mistake. Mechanically they began to move back toward the galley door.

"All right, if you refuse—you'll get what's coming to you!" panted Spence. "There are guns elsewhere in this ship, and we know where they are. If you want to fight, look out. We can also play that game."

"Fine. You are welcome to your idiocy. Only let me warn you that I'm the only man aboard who can navigate this ship the rest of the way to Venus. If anything happens to me, you are helpless. Remember that!"

At the door, Spence bared his clenched teeth in a tight smile that had no mirth in it.

"We're not going to Venus," he gritted. "We're turning back to Earth!"

**I**N the same instant that he was gone, Ledyard heard the four conspirators clatter down into the room below. He lost no time closing and bolting the cabin door. Methodically he piled all the available furniture of the room against it. Then he went to the table at the center, his accustomed place, and sat down. He laid his automatic on the polished surface before him and a lump of wax at either side to hold it there.

Rapidly he made a mental calculation. Ten days of the journey remained. Could he hold out so long in the cabin?

There was a water tap fastened to the wall. He found a pail that would not leak. Fortunately the men below had not yet thought of shutting off his supply. He drew a pail of water and judged that it would do. It would have to. He had been taking his meals in the cabin for several days. In his desk were several dozen biscuits he had not felt like eating earlier. Biscuits and water—They were little enough, but we had nothing else.

From the corner of his eye, he suddenly caught sight of a bright object in the darkness outside the port window. It was about six feet long, and the Sun was shining brilliantly on one side of it. At first Captain Ledyard stared at the object without comprehension. Then a wave of horror swept over him, for he knew what it was.

When the mechanics had sent poor Gurdell out into space, their mishap had prevented them from giving the hard shove Ledyard had asked for. The body had swept away from the rocket for only a short distance. Obeying the laws of attraction, it had inevitably been drawn back toward it again. Now it was describing a greatly elongated, elliptical orbit around the hurtling space ship. The rocket was now no longer a lonesome metal wanderer. It had a satellite.

In spite of himself, Ledyard was drawn by horrified fascination to the window for a closer look. The body was now only a few feet away, moving with the serene gravity of a ponderous log approaching a waterfall. As he stared, some inequality of the satellite's relation to the attraction of its planet caused it to turn up on one side quite suddenly.

Instantly Ledyard turned from the window. But he had not been quick enough to avoid seeing that his guess had been correct. Perhaps in passing the body through the air-lock, the canvas wrapping had been torn. Perhaps the wanderer had already been in collision with a glancing meteor. Something had ripped away a part of the covering from the grisly package, exposing the face. When it had turned close to the window, Ledyard had found himself staring into the open eyes of Gurdell!

Nervously the commander returned to the table. After a few minutes of reflection, he drew out a pad of paper, and began to write.

**T**HEY smashed the door down, a day later. They used an improvised battering ram, which splintered the flimsy metal lock and sagged the thin metal door on its hinges.

Ledyard was sitting grimly at his table when he heard them drag up the ram. Quickly he moved to the right, so he would be behind the door when it was broken open. The furniture piled against it tumbled down without resistance. He saw the metal bent and finally give with a tremendous ripping sound.

Ledyard had already made himself a second barricade out of charts, the central table, and a few of the chairs he had hastily rescued from his first line of defense. He waited, automatic in hand, for one of the conspirators to step through the door or fire a shot. Nothing of the sort happened. Instead, Spence spoke from a cautious distance.

"Come out of there, Ledyard. Let us have control of this ship, or we'll blow you to pieces."

The commander thought it prudent not to make any answer. In a few minutes he heard a cautious movement outside, in the darkened galley. Some careful hand had pulled the leaden, cosmic-ray-proof blinds over the windows in the sleeping quarters beyond. No light betrayed the movements of the men who were leading the attack on the control cabin.

Aside from the slow, irregular scraping noises that betrayed movement in the darkened area beyond, there was no sound in the whole craft. Even the generators and the air-renewal machines were working noiselessly, or had temporarily been shut off by the automatic controls which regulated them.

More than ever, the ship appeared to have motion, no orientation, no particular direction. Through the side windows, the stars still moved from sill to sill as the rocket revolved for cooling. Even the hum of the vertical rotor was distant, almost, indistinguishable.

Captain Ledyard somehow managed to review the crises of that epochal journey, now entering so ominously upon its thirty-third day. Weird had been the experiences of the trip, yet they appeared completely logical and natural.

The developments from the first light-hearted conference three hours out from Earth to this armed rebellion aboard, seemed to lead inexorably from one to another. Even in that moment when he crouched behind breastworks with a gun in his hand, ready to sell his life with nothing short of enormous profit, he felt that there was nothing strange about the affair.

**N**OTHING could ever seem strange to him any longer. Since the death of Gurdel, he had somehow been unable to connect his experiences with reality. He had performed his duties efficiently, punctually. He knew the ship was right, that the course was true. Yet it seemed to him as if he were a bodiless spirit observing the work his own body performed without volition. He was like an automaton that was moved by some driving mechanism greater than himself.

He knew it was the effect of the unnatural life the journey had entailed. As he reviewed the incidents of the voyage step by step, he realized it all now. The man crouching on the floor of the control cabin, fighting for his life and the control of his ship, was not the same Ledyard who had designed, built and launched it. That Ledyard would have been incapable of violence.

He no longer understood the Calderayne he had known as a boy in technical school. That Calderayne had won international prominence as a builder and an engineer. He was not the haggard, overwrought man who had accompanied Spence into the cabin a few days before, demanding that Ledyard give up the glorious adventure for pitiful safety's sake. For all the captain knew, the desperate wretch who still called himself

Calderayne might be hiding in the galley with a gun in his hand, waiting to kill the man who had been his friend for so many years.

It was the same with Spence, Brunkhorst, Lemoyne. The men who now inhabited the *Silver Star* were not the same men who had started with her. An unseen, malignant force had gained control of them. It had twisted and warped them beyond recognition, making them maniacs who would destroy themselves, just when triumph was in sight.

Something abruptly jerked Captain Ledyard out of his reverie. His keen eyes, accustomed to searching for objects in the gloom, perceived a hand that had crept into sight. A pistol was gripped in it as it turned waveringly toward the spot where he lay hidden. Following the hand, he traced the outline of the arm dimly in the darkness of the galley. At the end of the arm there must be shoulders and a head. Whose would they be?

Slowly the dim outline came clearer. The captain could make it out. He had sighted one of them!

## CHAPTER VIII

### *The Second and Last*

**C**OOLLY he found his hand was certain. His brain suddenly cleared of the vapors of doubt and indecision. He raised his own pistol and took careful aim on the shadowed form in the opening. Perhaps they would get him eventually—the weight of numbers was on their side—but he would surely account for one of them. He smiled grimly, drawing in his breath.

But for some reason, his finger refused to obey his mind's command to pull the trigger. This man might be Spence. It might be Calderayne. Good Lord, could he shoot in cold blood one of his proud, hand-picked crew of scientists and technicians?

Inside him, a voice suddenly cried out against the murder. They were not beasts. They were men, and scientific men at that! Shoot one of them? Perhaps they were not mad, but he was. Maybe they were trying to save him from his own insanity.

Seven sane, reasoning men alone on a ship in space had no business gunning for each other in the dark. It was all a misunderstanding, a kind of savage hypnotic spell that had been thrown on them by the demon guardian of these mysterious regions.

Slowly he lowered his gun and crouched against the floor. Here was a battle to be fought, but it was a battle with himself, not with these others. He had made a great discovery, lying in ambush behind his barricade. Words had brought the quarrel about. Why shouldn't words right it again?

Then still another thought struck him. Was this why the other ships had failed? Had the predecessors of the *Silver Star* slipped by their goal and plunged into the Sun because their crews, on the thirty-third day of each trip, became mad and sent their ships wilfully to their doom?

There was only one way to prevent the  
(Continued on page 122)



## No. 5—JOAN RANDALL OF THE PLANET POLICE

**J**OAN RANDALL, like Marshal Ezra Gurney, is not strictly one of the Futuremen. For the Futuremen, Captain Future's trio of unhuman friends, are composed of the Brain, Grag the robot, and Otho the android. Yet Joan has been involved in many of Captain Future's cases, as an agent of the Planet Police, and has come to be identified with the Futuremen throughout the System.

Perhaps there should be inserted here a prefatory word of explanation concerning the Planet Police. Everyone knows, of course, that the jurisdiction of the Planet Police extends to every planet, asteroid, moon and other celestial body in the Solar System. When the Solar System Government was first organized, provision was made in its Constitution for such a police organization to enforce its laws.

Headquarters of the Planet Police are on Earth. It has main planetary offices on every world, and besides these nine main offices, it maintains a post in every city, town or village of any importance in the whole System.

### THE FRONTIER POLICE

There are four chief divisions, or Sections as they are called, of the Planet Police. Section One is the one covering all police activities and posts in ordinary civilized regions of the nine planets. The Planet Police officers you see striding along the streets of New York, or Venusopolis, or Syrtis on Mars, or Tartarus on far Pluto, all belong to Section One. Their duties are essentially local law enforcement.

Section Two is known as the "Frontier Police." This takes in law-enforcement in

wild, uncivilized planetary regions where there is no structure of local government. Boom towns like Jungletown on Jupiter and Karies on Saturn are ruled by officers of Section Two of the Planet Police.

Such officers must be picked with great care, for they are legislature, judge, jury and police all in one. Their verdicts are final. And since all such boom towns and uncivilized regions swarm with hard-bitten characters, the job is no sinecure.

### THE SPACE PATROL

Section Three of the Police organization is by far the least known of all. It is the Secret Service of the Planet Police. The number of its men and women operatives is unknown. They embrace natives of every world, many of them people of importance, who serve in this most thankless and difficult branch of the service. Joan Randall is technically still a member of Section Three.

Section Four is far and away the most famous and glamorous branch of the Planet Police. It is the renowned Space Patrol whose armed cruisers keep the law of the SS Government from Pluto to Mercury. The men who staff those ships are some of the finest space-men in the System.

They have a great tradition of the glories of their service, of countless battles against pirates, rebels and bandits in space. To become an officer in this service requires a ten-year course in the famous Patrol Academy, a course in every branch of space-navigation, piloting and gunnery.

Technically, the correct name of Section Four is "The Space Patrol of the Planet Police." But popular usage has shortened this to "Planet Patrol."

There is an old rivalry between the officers of the Patrol and the Rocketeers. The Rocketeers, the ace civilian pilots of the System, are inclined to sniff scornfully at the Patrol men as a "lot of mechanical calculating-machines who couldn't fly a mile without a slide-rule and do everything in space by the book." The Patrol officers, in turn, generally refer to the Rocketeers as "that crazy bunch of space-struck racing and test pilots, who never heard of discipline."

As has been noted, Joan Randall technically belongs to Section Three of the Planet

[Turn page]

### MEET THE FUTUREMEN!

In this department, which is a regular feature of **CAPTAIN FUTURE**, we acquaint you further with the companions of **CAPTAIN FUTURE** whom you have met in our complete book-length novel. Here you are told the off-the-record stories of their lives and anecdotes plucked from their careers. Follow this department closely, for it contains many interesting and fascinating facts to supplement those you read in our featured novels.

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Police. Joan entered that dangerous secret service division as the result of family tradition. Her father had been a captain in the Patrol, and had been killed in an encounter with the famous Falcon, the greatest space-pirate of the old days.

Joan lived her childhood on nearly every world in the System, because of the constant shifts of her father's post in the service. Thus she learned an extraordinary number of the different planetary languages and gained a wide knowledge of planetary customs.

Steeped in the tradition of the Planet Police, and possessing excellent capabilities, it was natural for Joan to enter the service. The one branch of it open to a woman was, of course, Section Three. So she went into the secret service and spent the next few years in dangerous assignments that took her from one end of the System to the other. On one case she would be impersonating a rich young woman of fashion, on another she would play the part of a dancing girl in a roaring Martian boom town. And so on.

## RANDALL JOINS THE FUTUREMEN

It was on Jupiter that Joan first met Captain Future. Posing there as a nurse, in an effort to help solve the hideous Space Emperor mystery which had unloosed an atavism blight on the hapless Jovians, Joan gave valuable help to Curt Newton and the Futuremen. Together, they defeated the menace.

Captain Future remembered the girl well, and soon met her again when Joan and Kansu Kane were kidnaped by Doctor Zarro's Legion of Doom. Her aid in the Futuremen's struggle on distant Pluto was again timely.

So Joan, with Ezra Gurney, was detached from her regular section for special service. She and Ezra had proved they could work so well with Captain Future that they were assigned to cooperate with the wizard of science and the Futuremen whenever required.

Curt Newton likes to chaff Joan by pretending that she is merely a thrill-hunter who is more trouble than help.

"You only joined the Police for excitement," he accuses her. "And you got put on special service with us Futuremen simply because you thought you'd be able to dabble in more trouble that way."

Joan has a standard retort for that.

"That's what I get for running after you all over space, and helping you," she complains. "If you weren't such an unromantic idiot, you wouldn't make a girl chase you all the way from Mercury to Pluto."

Beneath her jesting complaints, Joan's feelings toward the famous planeteer are very real. And she suspects that Curt Newton reciprocates, but can't get him to admit it, which sometimes exasperates her.

But she knows that Captain Future feels that he cannot let any other consideration interfere with his chosen career of championing the cause of law and order in the System. Until there's no further need for him to blast the spaceways, he'll have no time for romance. And until then, Joan Randall is glad to be one of the few co-workers of Curt and his famous Futuremen.

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## MUTINY IN SPACE

(Continued from page 118)

same fate from befalling the *Silver Star*. Ledyard smiled grimly. The men would surely listen, if he would talk to them. Now that he had seen the matter in its proper light, he must make them see it too. He must! There was no other way.

The automaton that had controlled him for so many days commended him to rise to his feet. He saw himself lay the pistol down beside the barricade. He knew his head had moved up beyond the protection, realized his back had become erect as his hands reached imploringly toward the door.

"Spence — Calderayne — Lemoyne!" he called out. "I have something to say that you ought to know—"

**OUT** of the darkness near the door blasted two simultaneous shots, followed by a tardy third. Ledyard dropped behind his barricade. Blood was oozing slowly from the corner of his mouth. His hands were limp, slow to respond. Nevertheless he tremblingly took from his pocket the stub of a soft pencil, and on the metal floor wrote a shaky message.

He had hardly completed it before his weakness overtook him completely. He collapsed, sprawling over what he had written. He seemed to be trying to protect it with his own body from the trampling feet of his assailants.

Spence turned him over gingerly, feeling for the heart.

"He's gone," he whispered.

Soberly they looked down at the motionless body. In silence, then, they glanced at each other. Calderayne stirred ponderously and spoke in a hesitant voice.

"We will have to bury him—after we have turned the rocket ship around."

Brunkhorst, more thorough than the others in observing details, discovered part of the message under the body. Gently he moved it aside until they could read it.

We have all lost our minds. The ship is on her course. Don't try to turn back now—not oxygen enough—it's certain death. Find full directions how to land in table drawer—I wrote them out for you. Good luck.

**LEDYARD.**

It was the smothered exclamation that had escaped Lemoyne that brought them out of the silence following the message from the dead. The mathematician had been adjusting the control cabin telescope toward the Sun, working out their bearings for the proposed return.

What he had seen had caused him first to exclaim, then to cry out:

"Venus—Venus! She's coming away from the Sun, as Ledyard said she would!"

The others hastened to see. Upon the projected field of the screen they beheld the shimmering image of the world they had come so far to visit. Already she appeared almost as large as a pea, emerging from the Sun's brilliant corona—and she was exactly

where Ledyard had expected her! She was on time to keep her tryst with the *Silver Star*. . . .

**"GET** the directions out of the table drawer," blurted Spence.

Calderayne responded with greater alacrity than he had shown for many days. The manuscript was in perfect order, written closely in Captain Ledyard's fine, legible hand.

From the time you first sight the planet, reverse the ship and begin using the rockets to slow the speed. When you arrive near the planet's atmosphere, your retardation should have been sufficient to allow immediate performance of the braking ellipses.

There followed page after page of tables and curves, the minutiae of navigation in new and dangerous space. They had all the necessary data, worked out by Captain Ledyard through weary hours of calculation.

"Lord," moaned Lemoyne, blindly staring up from the papers, "this man has saved our lives—and we have murdered him!"

Spence arranged the limbs of the captain, and reverently closed the staring eyes. Standing over the body, he raised his right hand.

"I was the one who killed him," he said bitterly. "Now I shall live for him. The *Silver Star* will land on Venus in Captain Ledyard's name. When civilization follows us to the new planet, everyone will know that Ledyard was a man while all the rest of us were cowards. I shall never forget to my last moment how he looked at us when he said: Men of science who have lost faith in mathematics!"

Calderayne shuffled over to stand beside the body of the captain.

"I shall build a city on Venus for him," he promised in a low, tense voice. "His dream was for a perfect world. If laying out that city will help realize the dream, it shall be done."

"I will codify and elaborate the curves and calculations of this flight in his name," Lemoyne said. "The great space ships of the future, going from Earth to Venus and back, will fly what will be known as the Ledyard Route."

"Humph!" grunted Brunkhorst brusquely. "All this depends upon whether Venus is habitable or not. I will do exactly what I came along to do—determine whether any of your fine schemes are possible. If they are, I shall write a book about the planet. It will be my contribution. It will attract the kind of people you will want to fly your ships and inhabit your city."

It was one of the mechanics who thought of draping a sheet over the form of the commander. The men of science were already dwelling on other things.

## EPILOGUE

Passengers to Venus in the luxurious modern space liners that ply between Earth, Venus and the Moon often exclaim in astonishment at an impressive monument. Stern yet kindly, it rises at the edge of

[Turn page]

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It is high, towering over the low hangars, firmly built in the general style of that blocky, inspiring architecture which characterizes the most modern structures. Made of black stone, it stands out vividly in the glitter of stainless steel and aluminum alloy of the field's equipment.

But it is not the material that makes it an object to be remembered. The strange and compelling quality in the treatment of the face surmounts the arresting size of the monument.

The face is that of a man, perhaps forty years of age, slightly uplifted. The chin is firm but sensitive. Somehow the eyes seem to bear a light that is not of Earth or Venus. They are staring steadfastly into some other world—perhaps into the future itself—into that day which all great men perceive. They see the Universe that will be won for humankind, when men will have so mastered even themselves that all life will be pleasant and peaceful.

A few of the hundreds of thousands who come and go at the field have paused to read the inscription that is carved deeply into the black stone at its base.

CAPTAIN WALTER LEDYARD  
Pilot of the *Silver Star*  
First Space Ship to Reach Venus  
This Monument Was Erected by His  
Comrades

Below it is a group of men in bas-relief, standing over a prostrate figure as if bowed down with uncontrollable grief. Then the further inscription:

May God and Posterity Forgive Us  
THE END

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

*Begin*

## THE MAN WHO AWOKE

A Hall of Fame Science  
Fiction Classic

By LAURENCE MANNING

AN UNFORGETTABLE MASTERPIECE

## UNDER OBSERVATION

(Continued from page 12)

In closing, my heartiest wishes for good luck and long life to your mag.—4633 Park Blvd., San Diego, California.

Get back on your orbit, pal, before a meteor swarm smacks you on the Heavyside. Skipper Stanley Kovan is entitled to raise a little racket if he doesn't like our rockets. A fine mag this would be if we took the cartridges out of all you space-rats' ray guns!

But bless your heart, lad, for entering the fray. The kind words are easy to take, and appreciation makes us forget how lonely some of these sunless days can be as we speed through the void. Only I don't want you birds scrapping like those twin tornadoes, Grag and Otho.

And here's Rocketeer Lopez entering the mêlée, a loaded atom-gun in each hand. Gyrating nebulae, but by the time you lads get through with Skipper Kovan that unfortunate will be as scorched as an omelet fried on Mercury's Hot Side!

## KISS THE BOY GOOD-BY

By Albert F. Lopez

I have just finished "Captain Future and the Seven Space Stones," and I think it is as well, as all the CAPTAIN FUTURE stories have been. I was just about to put the magazine in my files and gloomily look forward to another three months wait for the next issue, when I noticed some readers' letters that set me roaring.

First let me fix my atom gun on Stanley Kovan. Mr. Kovan states that CAPTAIN FUTURE is not true science fiction. Is Mr. Kovan trying to establish a set of rules by which every science fiction story must be unvaryingly written? I do not think that science fiction would last long under those conditions.

Science fiction is enjoyed because the author's imagination is the only limiting factor in the creation of the scenery, circumstances, and events. Readers enjoy stories where anything can and does happen.

While Mr. Kovan is recuperating from that blitzkrieg, let me take a few shots at Mr. James Miller. He claims that the Captain Future stories are old plots. Has Mr. Miller ever seen a series where the hero didn't go out and catch the criminal all the time? In a decade of reading, I have seen only one such series. The hero was a super-detective named Ivy Frost, created by Donald Wandrei. In the last story of the series, Ivy Frost set off an atomic blast which wiped him out as well as a nest of master crooks.

Mr. William Robb doesn't care to see so much slang in the mag. However, doesn't he think it would be odd for some asteroid tramp to come out with Oxford English? The language has to be in style with the character. So let's have plenty of slang whenever necessary.

Last but not least, I agree with Mr. Self-styled Captain Future. Joan should kiss the Captain good-by; I think it would add heaps of reality to CAPTAIN FUTURE characters. —24 Havre Street, East Boston, Mass.

Okay, Futureman Lopez. That was a mighty potent proton blast, charged with plenty of juice. If the recoil hasn't knocked you out of the System, stick around and see what Kovan has to say by way of rebuttal. That is, if he isn't space-struck by this time.

Glad you like the spatial slang that Cap Future and his star-roving trio bat around. Colliding comets and Red Spot of Jupiter, but that galaxy gab of the future sure puts the ball on English!

[Turn page]

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And speaking of the future, Pilot Calawaert has a present for us. He wants Future to visit the present. Tune in on this ethergram, Futuremen.

## TIME STUFF

By Eugene L. Calawaert

I write this letter, mainly, to thank you for admitting me into The Futuremen Club. You can be sure I'll always abide by all rules. Also I wish to give you a suggestion concerning an idea for a future novel, which I believe might prove interesting and enjoyable to all readers of your publication, **CAPTAIN FUTURE**.

But before I do this, let me tell you that I am also a reader of **THRILLING WONDER STORIES**, and find it very interesting. One criticism, however, more scientific inventions, please! And now my suggestion: Let's have Curt Newton travel back in time, due to the inventive genius of the Brain, to the present century. Possibly between the years of 1940 and 1950. Of course, have his associates, The Futuremen, go with him. It will be a chance to introduce some new characters other than Joan Randall and Marshal Ezra Gurney. These characters are perfectly all right with me, but I believe there should be more than one woman in the novels. In crimes such as the Futuremen crack there should be more than one woman involved.

By the way, taking it for granted that Captain Future does travel back in time, let's say that a certain person aids him in tracking down some criminals of the present day and age, and that Captain Future takes a liking to this person and brings him back into the future with him, thus adding another Futureman.

I have not found anything which I did not enjoy in either **CAPTAIN FUTURE** or **THRILLING WONDER STORIES**. They're both very excellent magazines—the best.

I would like to thank Mr. Edmond Hamilton for his fine new character, and thus also for a new type of scientifiction magazine.—3117 E. Larned, Detroit, Michigan.

Welcome to our band of cosmic come-teers, Eugene. You've passed your test-flight with flying colors, if pennants can wave in the airless ether. I wonder how Helmsman Hamilton will react to your capsule-plot. Maybe he'll use it and then again, maybe he'll dump it into the fuel-chamber.

More mates for the Futuremen? That's a moot problem, skipper. There's a crowd, even in space, and also in the pages of **CAPTAIN FUTURE**. Anyway, let's see what Rocketeer Raymond Brooke has to say on the subject of pluralizing the Futuremen.

## ONLY THREE FUTUREMEN

By Raymond Brooke

When I first saw **CAPTAIN FUTURE** on the newsstand I decided to buy it and see if it was any better than other space-story mags that I have read. I found your publication to be the best of all.

It contains all the things needed to make a fine magazine. There is only one thing wrong, and that is the serial story. If you intend to publish continued stories, **CAPTAIN FUTURE** should come out as a bi-monthly.

People are asking you to change the characters of the only perfect space story mag. Please leave the Futuremen trio alone! I like Simon, Otho, and Grag just as they are and I believe that changing them would spoil the story. Do not add any more Futuremen, but give Otho a pet.—609 Woodcrest Ave., Ardmore, Pa.

Ice-fields of Pluto, Pilot Brooke, but Captain Future's trio is here to stay as is! So settle back in your hammock and keep puffing that Martian xernon weed.

And speaking of smoke, take a whiff of Don Griffin's blast at the last issue. His let-

ter is fuming like one of Callisto's volcanoes. It's far from a pipe-dream, the fumigating this lad has in mind for your skipper.

## WHAT PRICE IMAGINATION

By Don Griffin

I have been studying your "Under Observation" department for a hint as to how a letter to you should be written and what form it should follow. I have come to the conclusion that it is the custom of your devotees to begin knocking your magazine first. So who am I to go against tradition? Now, of course I know that it is part of the character of a science fiction magazine to be a trifle difficult to believe, but please do not permit Captain Future to get too fantastic. That is, stay within the realms of semi-reality.

I love your idea of the worlds of the future with their own particular peculiarities, exports, climates, races, natural phenomena, and governments; but when it comes to shrinking into a grain of sand and battling among dead suns drifting around you like so many basketballs—well, imagination is swell—but that is preposterous! I think the various characters use the art of disguise too much and stretch its powers more than necessary. Leave disguise art with Otho and limit its use to spying and detective work.

The freak disguises of the Futuramen, and the Martian disguise of Captain Future in the Winter, 1941 issue were okay, but changing identities with that Chameleon Man when he was captured by Ul Quorn, so that even his best friends could not recognize him, was going a little too far. Also, if marsh tigers are really as ferocious as they are made up to be, even Captain Future could not have escaped them without being slightly injured.

But don't get me wrong—your magazine is swell. Your descriptions of the worlds of tomorrow are perfect, although I wish you would go into more detail and explain the exports, cities, and racial characteristics of the planets and their inhabitants. Also, your map-maker makes his cities and natural features too big in proportion to the planet and only shows one hemisphere. In the Mars part you omitted the diameter and other statistics and also omitted the Moons. Don't let anybody tell you differently; your covers are wonderful. Feature Otho and Marshal Gurney occasionally.

Well, Pilot Griffin, I thought your space-gram was too hot to handle, but your last paragraph shows that you like our orbit. That's a good suggestion you have about featuring Marshal Gurney on the cover, and herewith we are dispatching a memo to Artist Bergey relaying your idea.

The mail-compartment's getting as empty as a hijacked space ship. But here's an etherflash from the bottom of the sack that claims our mag's tops.

## FROM THE ANTIPODES

By Val Molesworth

I have read the first four issues of CAPTAIN FUTURE—faithful correspondent Forrest J. Ackerman posting me copies.

I consider "Doom Over Venus" which appeared as a novelet in THRILLING WONDER STORIES the first of the great CAPTAIN [Turn Page]

# NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL THE MAGICIAN OF MARS FEATURING CAPTAIN FUTURE

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**FUTURE** series. I'll wager Hamilton wrote it as a "feeler," didn't he? I enjoyed No. 1 best, mainly because all through it are recollections of previous adventures. Thus we got about thirty stories in one. Why not have Edmond Hamilton write these incidents up into 6 or 8 page stories and feature them instead of the shorts?

For example, a short yarn about the Lords of the Moon would be better than a non-rhythmic story like "Black Absolute." Why not keep CAPTAIN FUTURE clear of all except Hamilton's work?

For Newton's sake kill off Oog—I only want Eek! Here's an idea—why not get Otho disguised as a crook, and then have someone hit him over the head with a proton gun? Otho loses his memory, and on finding himself in gangster rigout, and on reading the gangster's diary, believes he is the crook! And when Curt Newton arrives Otho fights him, believing him to be the crook!

Another thing—if Captain Future travels in time—keep him well away from Atlantis and Lemuria. I'd like him to go back in time on, say, Saturn, and meet the prehistoric monsters of that world. But not on Earth!

Please let Curt go back to the Octopus-men and also find in the Sargasso Sea of Space a wrecked gravity-ship from another star with a 20th century Earthman stuck in a cage—dead, of course. The Octopus-men had taken him as a "specimen."

Of course, Hamilton has billions of ideas of his own, but I think it's a great idea letting us readers have a suggestion occasionally. Anyway, keep Hamilton hard at work—especially on a short CAPTAIN FUTURE yarn. And until Otho and Grag kiss each other good night and Eek attacks a charging space dog, I will read your mags.—Del Monte, Kangaroo Point Red, Sylvania, NSW, Australia.

Shooting stars, mate, but have you been in telepathic contact with Ed Hamilton? You'll find that the Futuremen return to that hell-spot of the System, the Sargasso Sea of Space, in the feature novel for this issue. That's hitting on all cyclotrons, pal.

As for the "first" of the CAPTAIN FUTURE novels, Skipper Hamilton made a test-flight some time ago in STARTLING STORIES with a story, "The Three Planeteers." You may not remember it, but this old space-dog does. You waddies liked that novel—and from there sprang Captain Future, proton gun and all.

And now it's journey's end, space-rangers. Earth City is in sight. It's been fun tearing through the stratosphere with your junior pilots and you're all welcome to come aboard again any time you want to kick a meteor around. Or you may want to kick the old space-dog around! So don't forget to send me your rocket-blasts and ethergrams before next perihelion.

—SERGEANT SATURN, the old space-dog.

**THE FUTUREMEN,**  
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I wish to apply for membership in THE FUTUREMEN. I pledge myself to abide by all rules and regulations.

Name ..... (Print Legibly)

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I am enclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope and the name-strip from the cover of this magazine (tear off name-strip so that the name CAPTAIN FUTURE and the date can be seen). You will send me my membership certificate and a list of rules promptly.  
4-41

# THE FUTURE OF CAPTAIN FUTURE



**CEREBERUS**—Prison moon of Pluto! Home of the Interplanetary Prison, which harbors the most hardened and dangerous criminals of the Solar System. Renegades of the nine worlds, outlaws of the space-lanes. And among them lives Captain Future's greatest enemy—Ul Quorn, the Magician of Mars!

Then abruptly, miraculously, there's a crushout from Cereberus. Ul Quorn, master scientist, has engineered the impossible—an escape from Interplanetary Prison. Together with a band of the cleverest criminals in all the worlds, he strikes out for the greatest treasure in the history of the System—and vengeance against Captain Future.

The cunning hand of Ul Quorn reaches across millions of miles of space in the feature novel for next issue, **THE MAGICIAN OF MARS**. Leading his henchmen of death, Ul Quorn speeds through the System into the fifth dimension! Into a universe of vast spaces and scattered suns and solar systems—a universe of things unknown.

And then, with the speed of light, Ul Quorn's quest leads him down into the bowels of Uranus, where dwell the People of Darkness. Armed with infra-red searchlights and spectacles, Curt Newton, the man of tomorrow, and the Futuremen, descend into a pit of blackness in a stirring manhunt for Ul Quorn's desperadoes.

A galaxy of thrills awaits you in **THE MAGICIAN OF MARS** as you join the Futuremen in a cosmic quest that will hurl you through space with the speed of a racing comet. You'll witness Captain Future pitting his scientific wizardry against the superforces of civilizations hitherto unknown to Earthmen. And you'll be startled by an exciting climax that marks Captain Future's greatest peril—a weird battle between himself and Ul Quorn, with both of them invisible to each other!

**THE MAGICIAN OF MARS** sees the return of fantasy's most glamorous villain—a match for the greatest planeteer.

In addition to **THE MAGICIAN OF MARS**, the next issue of **CAPTAIN FUTURE** brings you the first part of Laurence Manning's memorable classic, **THE MAN WHO AWOKE**.

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—THE EDITOR.

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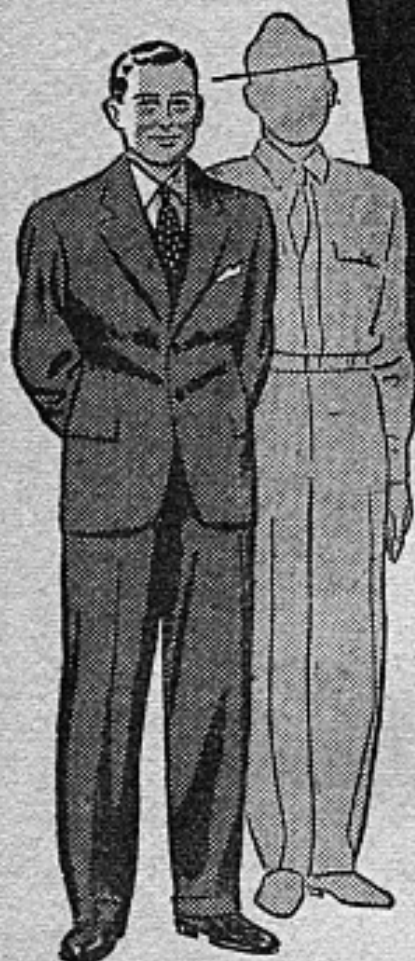
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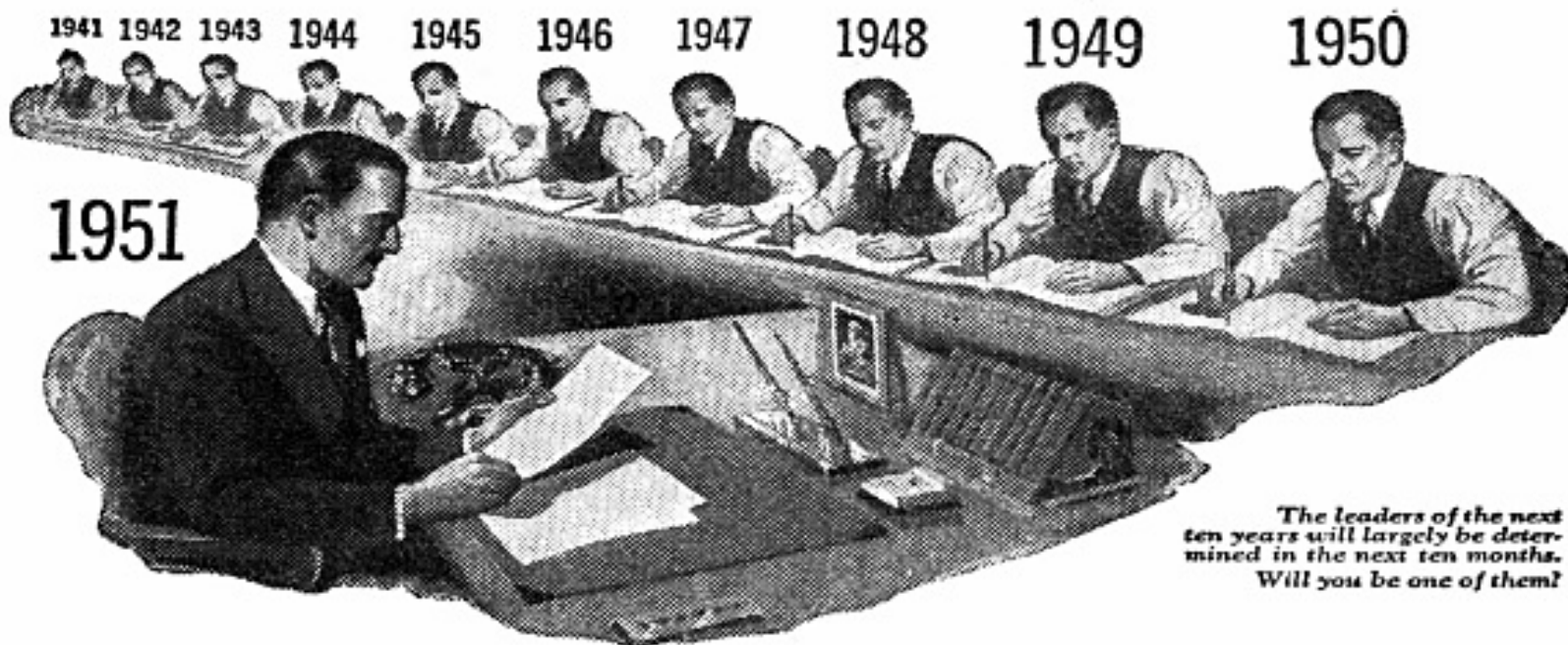
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