

VARIOUS

ASTOUNDING STORIES
OF SUPER-SCIENCE,
MARCH 1930

Various
Astounding Stories of
Super-Science, March 1930

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=25568647
Astounding Stories of Super-Science, March 1930:*

Содержание

Cold Light	4
Brigands of the Moon	30
CHAPTER I	33
CHAPTER II	47
CHAPTER III	55
CHAPTER IV	65
CHAPTER V	73
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	78

Various Astounding Stories of Super-Science, March 1930

Cold Light

“Confound it, Carnes, I am on my vacation!”

“I know it, Doctor, and I hate to disturb you, but I felt that I simply had to. I have one of the weirdest cases on my hands that I have ever been mixed up in and I think that you’ll forgive me for calling you when I tell you about it.”

How could a human body be found actually splintered—broken into sharp fragments like a shattered glass! Once again Dr. Bird probes deep into an amazing mystery.

Dr. Bird groaned into the telephone transmitter.

“I took a vacation last summer, or tried to, and you hauled me away from the best fishing I have found in years to help you on a case. This year I traveled all the way from Washington to San Francisco to get away from you and the very day that I get here you are after me. I won’t have anything to do with it. Where are you, anyway?”

“I am at Fallon, Nevada, Doctor. I’m sorry that you won’t help me out because the case promises to be unusually interesting. Let

me at least tell you about it.”

Dr. Bird groaned louder than ever into the telephone transmitter.

“All right, go ahead and tell me about it if it will relieve your mind, but I have given you my final answer. I am not a bit interested in it.”

“That is quite all right, Doctor, I don’t expect you to touch it. I hope, however, that you will be able to give me an idea of where to start. Did you ever see a man’s body broken in pieces?”

“Do you mean badly smashed up?”

“No indeed, I mean just what I said, broken in pieces. Legs snapped off as though the entire flesh had become brittle.”

“No, I didn’t, and neither did anyone else.”

“I have seen it, Doctor.”

“Hooey! What had you been drinking?”

Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service chuckled softly to himself. The voice of the famous scientist of the Bureau of Standards plainly showed an interest which was quite at variance with his words.

“I was quite sober, Doctor, and so was Hughes, and we both saw it.”

“Who is Hughes?”

“He is an air mail pilot, one of the crack fliers of the Transcontinental Airmail Corporation. Let me tell you the whole thing in order.”

“All right. I have a few minutes to spare, but I’ll warn you

again that I don't intend to touch the case."

"Suit yourself, Doctor. I have no authority to requisition your services. As you know, the T. A. C. has been handling a great deal of the transcontinental air mail with a pretty clean record on accidents. The day before yesterday, a special plane left Washington to carry two packages from there to San Francisco. One of them was a shipment of jewels valued at a quarter of a million, consigned to a San Francisco firm and the other was a sealed packet from the War Department. No one was supposed to know the contents of that packet except the Chief of Staff who delivered it to the plane personally, but rumors got out, as usual, and it was popularly supposed to contain certain essential features of the Army's war plans. This much is certain: The plane carried not only the regular T. A. C. pilot and courier, but also an army courier, and it was guarded during the trip by an army plane armed with small bombs and a machine-gun. I rode in it. My orders were simply to guard the ship until it landed at Mills Field and then to guard the courier from there to the Presidio of San Francisco until his packet was delivered personally into the hands of the Commanding General of the Ninth Corps Area.

"The trip was quiet and monotonous until after we left Salt Lake City at dawn this morning. Nothing happened until we were about a hundred miles east of Reno. We had taken elevation to cross the Stillwater Mountains and were skimming low over them, my plane trailing the T. A. C. plane by about half a mile. I was not paying any particular attention to the other ship when

I suddenly felt our plane leap ahead. It was a fast Douglas and the pilot gave it the gun and made it move, I can tell you. I yelled into the speaking tube and asked what was the reason. My pilot yelled back that the plane ahead was in trouble.

“As soon as it was called to my attention I could see myself that it wasn’t acting normally. It was losing elevation and was pursuing a very erratic course. Before we could reach it it lost flying speed and fell into a spinning nose dive and headed for the ground. I watched, expecting every minute to see the crew make parachute jumps, but they didn’t and the plane hit the ground with a terrific crash.”

“It caught fire, of course?”

“No, Doctor, that is one of the funny things about the accident. It didn’t. It hit the ground in an open place free from brush and literally burst into pieces, but it didn’t flame up. We headed directly for the scene of the crash and we encountered another funny thing. We almost froze to death.”

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I say. Of course, it’s pretty cold at that altitude all the time, but this cold was like nothing I had ever encountered. It seemed to freeze the blood in our veins and it congealed frost on the windshields and made the motor miss for a moment. It was only momentary and it only existed directly over the wrecked plane. We went past it and swung around in a circle and came back over the wreck, but we didn’t feel the cold again.

“The next thing we tried to do was to find a landing place.

That country is pretty rugged and rough and there wasn't a flat place for miles that was large enough to land a ship on. Hughes and I talked it over and there didn't seem to be much of anything that we could do except to go on until we found a landing place. I had had no experience in parachute jumping and I couldn't pilot the plane if Hughes jumped. We swooped down over the wreck as close as we dared and that was when we saw the condition of the bodies. The whole plane was cracked up pretty badly, but the weird part of it was the fact that the bodies of the crew had broken into pieces, as though they had been made of glass. Arms and legs were detached from the torsos and lying at a distance. There was no sign of blood on the ground. We saw all this with our naked eyes from close at hand and verified it by observations through binoculars from a greater height.

“When we had made our observations and marked the location of the wreck as closely as we could, we headed east until we found a landing place near Fallon. Hughes dropped me here and went on to Reno, or to San Francisco if necessary, to report the accident and get more planes to aid in the search. I was wholly at sea, but it seemed to be in your line and as I knew that you were at the St. Francis, I called you up.”

“What are your plans?”

“I made none until I talked with you. The country where the wreck occurred is unbelievably wild and we can't get near it with any transportation other than burros. The only thing that I can see to do is to gather together what transportation I can and head

for the wreck on foot to rescue the packets and to bring out the bodies. Can you suggest anything better?"

"When do you expect to start?"

"As soon as I can get my pack train together. Possibly in three or four hours."

"Carnes, are you sure that those bodies were broken into bits? An arm or a leg might easily be torn off in a complete crash."

"They were smashed into bits as nearly as I could tell, Doctor. Hughes is an old flier and he has seen plenty of crashes but he never saw anything like this. It beats anything that I ever saw."

"If your observations were accurate, there could be only one cause and that one is a patent impossibility. I haven't a bit of equipment here, but I expect that I can get most of the stuff I want from the University of California across the bay at Berkeley. I can get a plane at Crissy Field. I'll tell you what to do, Carnes. Get your burro train together and start as soon as you can, but leave me half a dozen burros and a guide at Fallon. I'll get up there as soon as I can and I'll try to overtake you before you get to the wreck. If I don't, don't disturb anything any more than you can help until my arrival. Do you understand?"

"I thought that you were on your vacation, Doctor."

"Oh shut up! Like most of my vacations, this one will have to be postponed. I'll move as swiftly as I can and I ought to be at Fallon to-night if I'm lucky and don't run into any obstacles. Burros are fairly slow, but I'll make the best time possible."

"I rather expected you would, Doctor. I can't get my pack train

together until evening, so I'll wait for you right here. I'm mighty glad that you are going to get in on it."

Silently Carnes and Dr. Bird surveyed the wreck of the T. A. C. plane. The observations of the secret service operative had been correct. The bodies of the unfortunate crew had been broken into fragments. Their limbs had not been twisted off as a freak of the fall but had been cleanly broken off, as though the bodies had suddenly become brittle and had shattered on their impact with the ground. Not only the bodies, but the ship itself had been broken up. Even the clothing of the men was in pieces or had long splits in the fabric whose edges were as clean as though they had been cut with a knife.

Dr. Bird picked up an arm which had belonged to the pilot and examined it. The brittleness, if it had ever existed, was gone and the arm was limp.

"No *rigor mortis*," commented the Doctor. "How long ago was the wreck?"

"About seventy-two hours ago."

"Hm-m! What about those packets that were on the plane?"

Carnes stepped forward and gingerly inspected first the body of the army courier and then that of the courier of the T. A. C.

"Both gone, Doctor," he reported, straightening up.

Dr. Bird's face fell into grim lines.

"There is more to this case than appears on the surface, Carnes," he said. "This was no ordinary wreck. Bring up that third burro; I want to examine these fragments a little. Bill," he

went on to one of the two guides who had accompanied them from Fallon, “you and Walter scout around the ground and see what you can find out. I especially wish to know whether anyone has visited the scene of the wreck.”

The guides consulted a moment and started out. Carnes drove up the burro the Doctor had indicated and Dr. Bird unpacked it. He opened a mahogany case and took from it a high powered microscope. Setting the instrument up on a convenient rock, he subjected portions of the wreck, including several fragments of flesh, to a careful scrutiny. When he had completed his observations he fell into a brown study, from which he was aroused by Carnes.

“What did you find out about the cause of the wreck, Doctor?”

“I don’t know what to think. The immediate cause was that everything was frozen. The plane ran into a belt of cold which froze up the motor and which probably killed the crew instantly. It was undoubtedly the aftermath of that cold which you felt when you swooped down over the wreck.”

“It seems impossible that it could have suddenly got cold enough to freeze everything up like that.”

“It does, and yet I am confident that that is what happened. It was no ordinary cold, Carnes; it was cold of the type that infests interstellar space; cold beyond any conception you have of cold, cold near the range of the absolute zero of temperature, nearly four hundred and fifty degrees below zero on the Fahrenheit scale. At such temperatures, things which are ordinarily quite

flexible and elastic, such as rubber, or flesh, become as brittle as glass and would break in the manner which these bodies have broken. An examination of the tissues of the flesh shows that it has been submitted to some temperature that is very low in the scale, probably below that of liquid air. Such a temperature would produce instant death and the other phenomena which we can observe.”

“What could cause such a low temperature, Doctor?”

“I don’t know yet, although I hope to find out before we are finished. Cold is a funny thing, Carnes. Ordinarily it is considered as simply the absence of heat; and yet I have always held it to be a definite negative quantity. All through nature we observe that every force has its opposite or negative force to oppose it. We have positive and negative electrical charges, positive and negative, or north and south, magnetic poles. We have gravity and its opposite apery, and I believe cold is really negative heat.”

“I never heard of anything like that, Doctor. I always thought that things were cold because heat was taken from them—not because cold was added. It sounds preposterous.”

“Such is the common idea, and yet I cannot accept it, for it does not explain all the recorded phenomena. You are familiar with a searchlight, are you not?”

“In a general way, yes.”

“A searchlight is merely a source of light, and of course, of heat, which is placed at the focus of a parabolic reflector so

that all of the rays emanating from the source travel in parallel lines. A searchlight, of course, gives off heat. If we place a lens of the same size as the searchlight aperture in the path of the beam and concentrate all the light, and heat, at one spot, the focal point of the lens, the temperature at that point is the same as the temperature of the source of the light, less what has been lost by radiation. You understand that, do you not?"

"Certainly."

"Suppose that we place at the center of the aperture of the searchlight a small opaque disc which is permeable neither to heat nor light, in such a manner as to interrupt the central portion of the beam. As a result, the beam will go out in the form of a hollow rod, or pipe, of heat and light with a dark, cold core. This core will have the temperature of the surrounding air plus the small amount which has radiated into it from the surrounding pipe. If we now pass this beam of light through a lens in order to concentrate the beam, both the pipe of heat and the cold core will focus. If we place a temperature measuring device near the focus of the dark core, we will find that the temperature is lower than the surrounding air. This means that we have focused or concentrated cold."

"That sounds impossible. But I can offer no other criticism."

"Nevertheless, it is experimentally true. It is one of the facts which lead me to consider cold as negative heat. However, this is true of cold, as it is of the other negative forces; they exist and manifest themselves only in the presence of the positive forces.

No one has yet concentrated cold except in the presence of heat, as I have outlined. How this cold belt which the T. A. C. plane encountered came to be there is another question. The thing which we have to determine is whether it was caused by natural or artificial forces.”

“Both of the packets which the plane carried are gone, Doctor,” observed Carnes.

“Yes, and that seems to add weight to the possibility that the cause was artificial, but it is far from conclusive. The packets might not have been on the men when the plane fell, or someone may have passed later and taken them for safekeeping.”

The doctor’s remarks were interrupted by the guides.

“Someone has been here since the wreck, Doctor,” said Bill. “Walter and I found tracks where two men came up here and prowled around for some time and then left by the way they came. They went off toward the northwest, and we followed their trail for about forty rods and then lost it. We weren’t able to pick it up again.”

“Thanks, Bill,” replied the doctor. “Well, Carnes, that seems to add more weight to the theory that the spot of cold was made and didn’t just happen. If a prospecting party had just happened along they would either have left the wreck alone or would have made some attempt to inter the bodies. That cold belt must have been produced artificially by men who planned to rob this plane after bringing it down and who were near at hand to get their plunder. Is there any chance of following that trail?”

“I doubt it, Doc. Walter and I scouted around quite a little, but we couldn’t pick it up again.”

“Is there any power line passing within twenty miles of here?”

“None that Walter and I know of, Doc.”

“Funny! Such a device as must have been used would need power and lots of it for operation. Well, I’ll try my luck. Carnes, help me unpack and set up the rest of my apparatus.”

With the aid of the operative, Dr. Bird unpacked two of the burros and extracted from cases where they were carefully packed and padded some elaborate electrical and optical apparatus. The first was a short telescope of large diameter which he mounted on a base in such a manner that it could be elevated or depressed and rotated in any direction. At the focal point of the telescope was fastened a small knot of wire from which one lead ran to the main piece of apparatus, which he sat on a flat rock. The other lead from the wire knot ran into a sealed container surrounded by a water bath under which a spirit lamp burned. From the container another lead led to the main apparatus. This main piece consisted of a series of wire coils mounted on a frame and attached to the two leads. The doctor took from a padded case a tiny magnet suspended on a piece of wire of exceedingly small diameter which he fastened in place inside the coils. Cemented to the magnet was a tiny mirror.

“What is that apparatus?” asked Carnes as the doctor finished his set-up and surveyed it with satisfaction.

“Merely a thermocouple attached to a D’Arsonval

galvanometer,” replied the doctor. “This large, squat telescope catches and concentrates on the thermocouple and the galvanometer registers the temperature.”

“You’re out of my depth. What is a thermocouple?”

“A juncture of two wires made of dissimilar metals, in this case of platinum and of platinum-iridium alloy. There is another similar junction in this case, which is kept at a constant temperature by the water bath. When the temperatures of the two junctions are the same, the system is in equilibrium. When they are at different temperatures, an electrical potential is set up, which causes a current to flow from one to the other through the galvanometer. The galvanometer consists of a magnet set up inside coils through which the current I spoke of flows. This current causes the magnet to rotate and by watching the mirror, the rotation can be detected and measured.

“This device is one of the most sensitive ever made, and is used to measure the radiation from distant stars. Currents as small as .00000000000000000000000001 ampere have been detected and measured. This particular instrument is not that sensitive to begin with, and has its sensitivity further reduced by having a high resistance in one of the leads.”

“What are you going to use it for?”

“I am going to try to locate somewhere in these hills a patch of local cold. It may not work, but I have hopes. If you will manipulate the telescope so as to search the hills around here, I will watch the galvanometer.”

For several minutes Carnes swung the telescope around. Twice Dr. Bird stopped him and decreased the sensitiveness of his instrument by introducing more resistance in the lines in order to keep the magnet from twisting clear around, due to the fluctuations in the heats received on account of the varying conditions of reflection. As Carnes swung the telescope again the magnet swung around sharply, nearly to a right angle to its former position.

“Stop!” cried the doctor. “Read your azimuth.”

Carnes read the compass bearing on the protractor attached to the frame which supported the telescope. Dr. Bird took a pair of binoculars and looked long and earnestly in the indicated direction. With a sigh he laid down the glasses.

“I can’t see a thing, Carnesy,” he said. “We’ll have to move over to the next crest and make a new set-up. Plant a rod on the hill so that we can get an azimuth bearing and get the airline distance with a range finder.”

On the hilltop which Dr. Bird had pointed out the apparatus was again set up. For several minutes Carnes swept the hills before an exclamation from the doctor told him to pause. He read the new azimuth, and the doctor laid off the two readings on a sheet of paper with a protractor and made a few calculations.

“I don’t know,” he said reflectively when he had finished his computations. “This darned instrument is still so sensitive that you may have merely focused on a deep shadow or a cold spring or something of that sort, but the magnet kicked clear around

and it may mean that we have located what we are looking for. It should be about two miles away and almost due west of here.”

“There is no spring that I know of, Doc, and I think I know of every water hole in this country,” remarked Bill.

“There could hardly be a spring at this elevation, anyway,” replied the doctor. “Maybe it is what we are seeking. We’ll start out in that direction, anyway. Bill, you had better take the lead, for you know the country. Spread out a little so that we won’t be too bunched if anything happens.”

For three-quarters of an hour the little group of men made their way through the wilderness in the direction indicated by the doctor. Presently Bill, who was in the lead, held up his hand with a warning gesture. The other three closed up as rapidly as cautious progress would allow.

“What is it, Bill?” asked the doctor in an undertone.

“Slip up ahead and look over that crest.”

The doctor obeyed instructions. As he glanced over he gave vent to a low whistle of surprise and motioned for Carnes to join him. The operative crawled up and glanced over the crest. In a hollow before them was a crude one-storied house, and erected on an open space before it was a massive piece of apparatus. It consisted of a number of huge metallic cylinders, from which lines ran to a silvery concave mirror mounted on an elaborate frame which would allow it to be rotated so as to point in any direction.

“What is it?” whispered Carnes.

“Some kind of a projector,” muttered the doctor. “I never saw one quite like it, but it is meant to project something. I can’t make out the curve of that mirror. It isn’t a parabola and it isn’t an ellipse. It must be a high degree subcatenary or else built on a transcendental function.”

He raised himself to get a clearer view, and as he did so a puff of smoke came from the house, to be followed in a moment by a sharp crack as a bullet flattened itself a few inches from his head. The doctor tumbled back over the crest out of sight of the house. Bill and Walter hurried forward, their rifles held ready for action.

“Get out on the flanks, men,” directed the doctor. “The man we want is in a house in that hollow. He’s armed, and he means business.”

Bill and Walter crawled under the shelter of the rocks to a short distance away and then, rifles ready, advanced to the attack. A report came from the hollow and a bullet whined over Bill’s head. Almost instantly a crack came from Walter’s rifle and splinters flew from the building in the hollow a few inches from a loophole, through which projected the barrel of a rifle.

The rifle barrel swung rapidly in a circle and barked in Walter’s direction; but as it did so, Bill’s gun spoke and again splinters flew from the building.

“Good work!” ejaculated Dr. Bird as he watched the slow advance of the two guides. “If we just had rifles we could join in the party, but it’s a little far for effective pistol work. Let’s go ahead, and we may get close enough to do a little shooting.”

Pistols in hand, Carnes and the doctor crawled over the crest and joined the advance. Again and again the rifle spoke from the hollow and was answered by the vicious barks of the rifles in the hands of the guides, Carnes and the doctor resting their pistols on rocks and sending an occasional bullet toward the loophole. The conditions of light and the moving target were not conducive to good marksmanship on the part of the besieged man, and none of the attackers were hit. Presently Walter succeeded in sending a bullet through the loophole. The rifle barrel suddenly disappeared. With a shout the four men rose from their cover and advanced toward the building at a run.

As they did so an ominous whirring sound came from the apparatus in front of the house and a sudden chill filled the air.

“Back!” shouted Dr. Bird. “Back below the hill if you value your lives!”

He turned and raced at full speed toward the sheltering crest of the hill, the others following him closely. The whirring sound continued, and the concave reflector turned with a grating sound on its gears. As the path of its rays struck the ground the rocks became white with frost and one rock split with a sharp report, one fragment rolling down the slope, carrying others in its trail.

With panic-stricken faces the four men raced toward the sheltering crest, but remorselessly the reflector swung around in their direction. The intense cold numbed the racing men, cutting off their breath and impeding their efforts for speed.

“Stop!” cried the doctor suddenly. “Fire at that reflector! It’s

our only chance!”

He set the example by turning and emptying his pistol futilely at the turning mirror. Bill, Walter and Carnes followed his example. Nearer and nearer to them came the deadly ray. Bill was the nearest to its path, and he suddenly stiffened and fell forward, his useless gun still grasped in his hands. As his body struck the ground it rolled down hill for a few feet, the deadly ray following it. His head struck a rock, and Carnes gave a cry of horror as it broke into fragments.

Walter threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired again and again at the rotating disc. The cold had become intense and he could not control the actions of his muscles and his rifle wavered about. He threw himself flat on the ground, and, with an almost superhuman effort, steadied himself for a moment and fired. His aim was true, and with a terrific crash the reflector split into a thousand fragments. Dr. Bird staggered to his feet.

“It’s out of order for a moment!” he cried. “To the house while we can!”

As swiftly as his numbed feet would allow him, he stumbled toward the house. The muzzle of the rifle again projected from the loophole and with its crack the doctor staggered for a moment and then fell. Walter’s rifle spoke again and the rifle disappeared through the loophole with a spasmodic jerk. Carnes stumbled over the doctor.

“Are you hit badly?” he gasped through chattering teeth.

“I’m not hit at all,” muttered the doctor. “I stumbled and fell

just as he fired. Look out! He's going to shoot again!"

The rifle barrel came slowly into view through the loophole. Walter fired, but his bullet went wild. Carnes threw himself behind a rock for protection.

The rifle swung in Walter's direction and paused. As it did so, from the house came a strangled cry and a sound as of a blow. The rifle barrel disappeared, and the sounds of a struggle came from the building.

"Come on!" cried Carnes as he rose to his feet, and made his stumbling way forward, the others following at the best speed which their numbed limbs would allow.

As they reached the door they were aware of a struggle which was going on inside. With an oath the doctor threw his massive frame against the door. It creaked, but the solid oak of which it was composed was proof against the attack, and he drew back for another onslaught. From the house came a pistol shot, followed by a despairing cry and a guttural shout. Reinforced by Carnes, the doctor threw his weight against the door again. With a rending crash it gave, and they fell sprawling into the cabin. The doctor was the first one on his feet.

"Who are you?" asked a voice from one corner. The doctor whirled like a flash and covered the speaker with his pistol.

"Put them up!" he said tersely.

"I am unarmed," the voice replied. "Who are you?"

"We're from the United States Secret Service," replied Carnes who had gained his feet. "The game is up for you, and you'd

better realize it.”

“Secret Service! Thank God!” cried the voice. “Get Koskoff—he has the plans. He has gone out through the tunnel!”

“Where is it?” demanded Carnes.

“The entrance is that iron plate on the floor.”

Carnes and the doctor jumped at the plate and tried to lift it, without result. There was no handle or projection on which they could take hold.

“Not that way,” cried the voice. “That cover is fastened on the inside. Go outside the building; he’ll come out about two hundred yards north. Shoot him as he appears or he’ll get away.”

The three men nearly tumbled over each other to get through the doorway into the bitter cold outside. As they emerged from the cabin the gaze of the guide swept the surrounding hills.

“There he goes!” he cried.

“Get him!” said Carnes sharply.

Walter ran forward a few feet and dropped prone on the ground, cuddling the stock of his rifle to his cheek. Two hundred yards ahead a figure was scurrying over the rocks away from the cabin. Walter drew in his breath and his hand suddenly grew steady as his keen gray eyes peered through the sights. Carnes and the doctor held their breath in sympathy.

Suddenly the rifle spoke, and the fleeing man threw up his arms and fell forward on his face.

“Got him,” said Walter laconically.

“Go bring the body in, Carnes,” exclaimed the doctor. “I’ll

take care of the chap inside.”

“Did you get him?” asked the voice eagerly, as the doctor stepped inside.

“He’s dead all right,” replied the doctor grimly. “Who the devil are you, and what are you doing here?”

“There is a light switch on the left of the door as you come in,” was the reply.

Dr. Bird found the switch and snapped on a light. He turned toward the corner from whence the voice had come and recoiled in horror. Propped in the corner was the body of a middle-aged man, daubed and splashed with blood which ran from a wound in the side of his head.

“Good Lord!” he ejaculated. “Let me help you.”

“There’s not much use,” replied the man rather faintly. “I am about done in. This face wound doesn’t amount to much, but I am shot through the body and am bleeding internally. If you try to move me, it may easily kill me. Leave me alone until your partners come.”

The doctor drew a flask of brandy from his pocket and advanced toward the corner.

“Take a few drops of this,” he advised.

With an effort the man lifted the flask to his lips and gulped down a little of the fiery spirit. A sound of tramping feet came from the outside and then a thud as though a body had been dropped. Carnes and Walter entered the cabin.

“He’s dead as a mackerel,” said Carnes in answer to the

doctor's look. "Walter got him through the neck and broke his spinal cord. He never knew what hit him."

"The plans?" came in a gasping voice from the man in the corner.

"We got them, too," replied Carnes. "He had both packets inside his coat. They have been opened, but I guess they are all here. Who the devil are you?"

"Since Koskoff is dead, and I am dying, there is no reason why I shouldn't tell you," was the answer. "Leave that brandy handy to keep up my strength. I have only a short time and I can't repeat.

"As to who I am or what I was, it doesn't really matter. Koskoff knew me as John Smith, and it will pass as well as any other name. Let my past stay buried. I am, or was, a scientist of some ability; but fortune frowned on me, and I was driven out of the world. Money would rehabilitate me—money will do anything nowadays—so I set out to get it. In the course of my experimental work, I had discovered that cold was negative heat and reacted to the laws which governed heat."

"I knew that," cried Dr. Bird; "but I never could prove it."

"Who are you?" demanded John Smith.

"Dr. Bird, of the Bureau of Standards."

"Oh, Bird. I've heard of you. You can understand me when I say that as heat, positive heat is a concomitant of ordinary light. I have found that cold, negative heat, is a concomitant of cold light. Is my apparatus in good shape outside?"

"The reflector is smashed."

“I’m sorry. You would have enjoyed studying it. I presume that you saw that it was a catenary curve?”

“I rather thought so.”

“It was, and it was also adjustable. I could vary the focal point from a few feet to several miles. With that apparatus I could throw a beam of negative heat with a focal point which I could adjust at will. Close to the apparatus, I could obtain a temperature almost down to absolute zero, but at the longer ranges it wasn’t so cold, due to leakage into the atmosphere. Even at two miles I could produce a local temperature of three hundred degrees below zero.”

“What was the source of your cold?”

“Liquid helium. Those cylinders contain, or rather did contain, for I expect that Koskoff has emptied them, helium in a liquid state.”

“Where is your compressor?”

“I didn’t have to use one. I developed a cold light under whose rays helium would liquefy and remain in a state of equilibrium until exposed to light rays. Those cylinders had merely enough pressure to force the liquid out to where the sun could hit it, and then it turned to a gas, dropping the temperature at the first focal point of the reflector to absolute zero. When I had this much done, Koskoff and I packed the whole apparatus here and were ready for work.

“We were on the path of the transcontinental air mail, and I bided my time until an especially valuable shipment was to

be made. My plans, which worked perfectly, were to freeze the plane in midair and then rob the wreck. I heard of the jewel shipment the T. A. C. was to carry and I planned to get it. When the plane came over, Koskoff and I brought it down. The unsuspected presence of another plane upset us a little, and I started to bring it down. But we had been all over this country and knew there was no place that a plane could land. I let it go on in safety.”

“Thank you,” replied Carnes with a grimace.

“We robbed the wreck and we found two packets, one the jewels I was after, and the other a sealed packet, which proved to contain certain War Department plans. That was when I learned who Koskoff was. I had hired him in San Francisco as a good mechanic who had no principles. He was to get one-fourth of the loot. When we found these plans, he told me who he was. He was really a Russian secret agent and he wanted to deliver the plans to Russia. I may be a thief and a murderer, but I am not yet ready to betray my country, and I told him so. He offered me almost any price for the plans; but I wouldn’t listen. We had a serious quarrel, and he overpowered me and bound me.

“We had a radio set here and he called San Francisco and sent some code message. I think he was waiting here for someone to come. Had we followed our original plans, we would have been miles from here before you arrived.

“He had me bound and helpless, as he thought, but I worked my bonds a little loose. I didn’t let him know it, for I knew that the

plane I had let get away would guide a party here and I thought I might be able to help out. When you came and attacked the house, I worked at my bonds until they were loose enough to throw off. I saw Koskoff start my cold apparatus to working and then he quit, because he ran out of helium. When he started shooting again, I worked out of my bonds and tackled him.

“He was a better man than I gave him credit for, or else he suspected me, for about the time I grabbed him he whirled and struck me over the head with his gun barrel and tore my face open. The blow stunned me, and when I came to, I was thrown into this corner. I meant to have another try at it, but I guess you rushed him too fast. He turned and ran for the tunnel, but as he did so, he shot me through the body. I guess I didn’t look dead enough to suit him. You gentlemen broke open the door and came in. That’s all.”

“Not by a long shot, it isn’t,” exclaimed Dr. Bird. “Where is that cold light apparatus of yours?”

“In the tunnel.”

“How do you get into it?”

“If you will open that cupboard on the wall, you’ll find an open knife switch on the wall. Close it.”

Dr. Bird found the switch and closed it. As he did so the cabin rocked on its foundations and both Carnes and Walter were thrown to the ground. The thud of a detonation deep in the earth came to their ears.

“What was that?” cried the doctor.

“That,” replied Smith with a wan smile, “was the detonation of two hundred pounds of T.N.T. When you dig down into the underground cave where we used the cold light apparatus, you will find it in fragments. It was my only child, and I’ll take it with me.”

As he finished his head slumped forward on his chest. With an exclamation of dismay Dr. Bird sprang forward and tried to lift the prostrate form.

In an agony of desire the Doctor tightened his grip on the dying man’s shoulder. But Smith collapsed into a heap. Dr. Bird bent forward and tore open his shirt and listened at his chest. Presently he straightened up.

“He is gone,” he said sadly, “and I guess the results of his genius have died with him. He doesn’t strike me as a man who left overmuch to chance. Carnes, is your case completed?”

“Very satisfactorily, Doctor. I have both of the lost packets.”

“All right, then, come back to the wreck and help me pack my burros. I can make my way back to Fallon without a guide.”

“Where are you going, Doctor?”

“That, Carnes, old dear, is none of your blankety blanked business. Permit me to remind you that I am on my vacation. I haven’t decided yet just where I am going, but I can tell you one thing. It’s going to be some place where you can’t call me on the telephone.”

Brigands of the Moon

(The Book of Gregg Haljan)

BEGINNING A FOUR-PART NOVEL

Foreword by Ray Cummings

I have been thinking that if, during one of those long winter evenings at Valley Forge, someone had placed in George Washington's hands one of our present day best sellers, the illustrious Father of our Country would have read it with considerable emotion. I do not mean what we call a story of science, or fantasy—just a novel of action, adventure and romance. The sort of thing you and I like to read, but do not find amazing in any way at all.

Black mutiny and brigandage stalk the Space-ship Planetara as she speeds to the Moon to pick up a fabulously rich cache of radium-ore.

But I fancy that George Washington would have found it amazing. Don't you? It might picture, for instance, a factory girl

at a sewing machine. George Washington would be amazed at a sewing machine. And the girl, journeying in the subway to and from her work! Stealing an opportunity to telephone her lover at the noon hour; going to the movies in the evening, or listening to a radio. And there might be a climax, perhaps, with the girl and the villain in a transcontinental railway Pullman, and the hero sending frantic telegrams, or telephoning the train, and then chasing it in his airplane.

George Washington would have found it amazing!

And I am wondering how you and I would feel if someone were to give us now a book of ordinary adventure of the sort which will be published a hundred and fifty years hence. I have been trying to imagine such a book and the nature of its contents.

Let us imagine it together. Suppose we walk down Fifth Avenue, a pleasant spring morning of May, 2080. Fifth Avenue, no doubt, will be there. I don't know whether the New York Public Library will be there or not. We'll assume that it is, and that it has some sort of books, printed, or in whatever fashion you care to imagine.

The young man library attendant is surprised at our curiously antiquated aspect. We look as though we were dressed for some historical costume ball. We talk old-fashioned English, like actors in an historical play of the 1930 period.

But we get the book. The attendant assures us it is a good average story of action and adventure. Nothing remarkable, but he read it himself, and found it interesting.

We thank him and take the book. But we find that the language in which it is written is too strange for comfortable reading. And it names so many extraordinary things so casually! As though we knew all about them, which we certainly do not!

So we take it to the kind-hearted librarian in the language division. He modifies it to old-fashioned English of 1930, and he puts occasional footnotes to help explain some of the things we might not understand. Why he should bother to do this for us I don't know; but let us assume that he does.

And now we take the book home—in the pneumatic tube, or aerial moving sidewalk, or airship, or whatever it is we take to get home.

And now that we are home, let's read the book. It ought to be interesting.

CHAPTER I

Tells of the Grantline Moon Expedition and of the Mysterious Martian Who Followed Us in the City Corridor

One may write about oneself and still not be an egoist. Or so, at least, they tell me. My narrative went broadcast with a fair success. It was pantomimed and the public flashed me a reasonable approval. And so my disc publishers have suggested that I record it in more permanent form.

I introduce myself, begging grace that I intrude upon your busy minutes, with my only excuse that perhaps I may amuse you. For what the commercial sellers of my pictured version were pleased to blare as my handsome face, I ask your indulgence. My feminine audience of the pantomimes was undoubtedly graciously pleased at my personality and physical aspect. That I am “tall as a Viking of old”—and “handsome as a young Norse God”—is very pretty talk in the selling of my product. But I deplore its intrusion into the personality of this, my recorded narrative. And so now, for preface, to all my audience I do give earnest assurance that Gregg Haljan is no conceited zebra, handsomely striped by nature, and proud of it. Not so. I am, I

do beg you to believe, a very humble fellow, striving for your approval, hoping only to entertain you.

My introduction: My name, Gregg Haljan. My age, twenty-five years. I was, at the time my narrative begins, Third Officer on the Space-Ship Planetara. Our line was newly established; in 2070, to be exact, following the modern improvements of the Martel Magnetic Levitation.¹

Our ship, whose home port was Great-New York, carried mail and passenger traffic to and from both Venus and Mars. Of astronomical necessity, our flights were irregular. This spring, with the two other planets both close to the earth, we were making two complete round trips. We had just arrived in Great-New York, this May evening, from Grebhar, Venus Free State. With only five hours in port here, we were departing the same night at the zero hour for Ferrok-Shahn, capital of the Martian Union.

We were no sooner at the landing stage than I found a code-flash summoning Dan Dean and me to Divisional Detective Headquarters. Dan “Snap” Dean was one of my closest friends. He was radio-helio operator of the Planetara. A small, wiry, red-headed chap, with a quick, ready laugh and a wit that made everyone like him.

The summons to Detective-Colonel Halsey’s office surprised

¹ As early as 1910 it was discovered that an object magnetized under certain conditions was subject to a loss of weight, its gravity partially nullified. The Martel discovery undoubtedly followed that method.

us. Snap eyed me.

“You haven’t been opening any treasury vaults, have you, Gregg?”

“He wants you, also,” I retorted.

He laughed. “Well, he can roar at me like a traffic switchman and my private life will remain my own.”

We could not think why we should be wanted. It was the darkness of mid-evening when we left the Planetara for Halsey’s office. It was not a long trip. We went direct in the upper monorail, descending into the subterranean city at Park-Circle 30.

We had never been to Halsey’s office before. We found it to be a gloomy, vaultlike place in one of the deepest corridors. The door lifted.

“Gregg Haljan and Daniel Dean.”

The guard stood aside. “Come in.”

I own that my heart was unduly thumping as we entered. The door dropped behind us. It was a small blue-lit apartment—a steel-lined room like a vault.

Colonel Halsey sat at his desk. And the big, heavy-set, florid Captain Carter—our commander of the Planetara—was here. That surprised us: we had not seen him leave the ship.

Halsey smiled at us gravely. Captain Carter said, “Sit down, lads.”

We took the seats. There was an alarming solemnity about this. If I had been guilty of anything that I could think of, it would

have been frightening. But Halsey's first words reassured me.

"It's about the Grantline Moon Expedition. In spite of our secrecy, the news has gotten out. We want to know how. Can you tell us?"

Captain Carter's huge bulk—he was about as tall as I am—towered over us as we sat before Halsey's desk. "If you lads have told anyone—said anything—let slip the slightest hint about it—"

Snap smiled with relief; but he turned solemn at once. "I haven't. Not a word!"

"Nor have I," I declared.

The Grantline Moon Expedition! We had not thought of that as a reason for this summons. Johnny Grantline was a close friend to us both. He had organized an exploring expedition to the Moon. Uninhabited, with its bleak, forbidding, airless, waterless surface, the Moon—even though so close to the Earth—was seldom visited. No regular ship ever stopped there. A few exploring parties of recent years had come to grief.

But there was a persistent rumor that upon the Moon, mineral riches of fabulous wealth were awaiting discovery. The thing had already caused some interplanetary complications. The aggressive Martians would be only too glad to explore the Moon. But the U.S.W.² definitely warned them away. The Moon was World Territory, we announced, and we would protect it as such.

The threatened conflict between the Earth and Mars had come

² "United States of the World," which came into being in 2057 upon the centenary of the Yellow War.

to nothing. There was, this year of 2079, a thorough amity between all three of the inhabited planets. It still holds, and I pray that it may always hold.

There was, nevertheless, a realization by our government, that whatever riches might be upon the Moon should be seized at once and held by some reputable Earth Company. And when Johnny Grantline applied, with his father's wealth and his own scientific record of attainment, the government was only too glad to grant him its writ.

The Grantline Expedition had started six months ago. The Martian government had acquiesced in our ultimatum, yet brigands have been known to be financed under cover of a governmental disavowal. And so the expedition was kept secret.

My words need give no offense to any Martian who comes upon them. I refer to the history of our earth only. The Grantline Expedition was on the Moon now. No word had come from it. One could not flash helios even in code without letting all the universe know that explorers were on the Moon. And why they were there, anyone could easily guess.

And now Colonel Halsey was telling us that the news was abroad! Captain Carter eyed us closely; his flashing eyes under the white bushy brows would pry a secret from anyone.

"You're sure? A girl of Venus, perhaps, with her cursed, seductive lure! A chance word, with you lads befuddled by alcolite?"

We assured him we had been careful. By the heavens, I know

that I had been. Not a whisper, even to Snap, of the name Grantline in six months or more.

Captain Carter added abruptly, "We're insulated here, Halsey?"

"Yes, talk as freely as you like. An eavesdropping ray will never get into these walls."

They questioned us. They were satisfied at last that, though the secret had escaped, we had not done it. Hearing it discussed, it occurred to me to wonder why Carter was concerned. I was not aware that he knew of Grantline's venture. I learned now the reason why the Planetara, upon each of her voyages, had managed to pass fairly close to the Moon. It had been arranged with Grantline that if he wanted help or had any important message, he was to flash it locally to our passing ship. And this Snap knew, and had never mentioned it, even to me.

Halsey was saying, "Well, we can't blame you, but the secret is out."

Snap and I regarded each other. What could anyone do? What would anyone dare do?

Captain Carter said abruptly, "Look here, lads, this is my chance now to talk plainly to you. Outside, anywhere outside these walls, an eavesdropping ray may be upon us. You know that? One may never even dare whisper since that accursed ray was developed."

Snap opened his mouth to speak but decided against it. My heart was pounding.

Captain Carter went on, "I know I can trust you two more than anyone else under me on the Planetara—"

"What do you mean by that?" I demanded. "What—"

He interrupted me. "Nothing at all but what I say."

Halsey smiled grimly. "What he means, Haljan, is that things are not always what they seem these days. One cannot always tell a friend from an enemy. The Planetara is a public vessel. You have—how many is it, Carter?—thirty or forty passengers this trip to-night?"

"Thirty-eight," said Carter.

"There are thirty-eight people listed for the flight to Ferrok-Shahn to-night," Halsey said slowly. "And some may not be what they seem." He raised his thin dark hand. "We have information—" He paused. "I confess, we know almost nothing—hardly more than enough to alarm us."

Captain Carter interjected, "I want you and Dean to be on your guard. Once on the Planetara it is difficult for us to talk openly, but be watchful. I will arrange for us to be doubly armed."

Vague, perturbing words! Halsey said, "They tell me George Prince is listed for the voyage. I am suggesting, Haljan, that you keep your eye especially upon him. Your duties on the Planetara leave you comparatively free, don't they?"

"Yes," I agreed. With the first and second officers on duty, and the captain aboard, my routine was more or less that of an understudy.

I said, "George Prince! Who is he?"

“A mechanical engineer,” said Halsey. “An under-official of the Earth Federated Radium Corporation. But he associates with bad companions—particularly Martians.”

I had never heard of this George Prince, though I was familiar with the Federated Radium Corporation, of course. A semi-government trust, which controlled virtually the entire Earth supply of radium.

“He was in the Automotive Department,” Carter put in. “You’ve heard of the Federated Radium Motor?”

We had, of course. A recent Earth invention which promised to revolutionize the automotive industry. An engine of a new type, using radium as its fuel.

Snap demanded, “What in the stars has this got to do with Johnny Grantline?”

“Much,” said Halsey quietly, “or perhaps nothing. But George Prince some years ago mixed in rather unethical transactions. We had him in custody once. He is known now as unusually friendly with several Martians in New York of bad reputation.”

“Well—” began Snap.

“What you don’t know,” Halsey went on quietly, “is that Grantline expects to find radium on the Moon.”

We gasped.

“Exactly,” said Halsey. “The ill-fated Ballon Expedition thought they had found it on the Moon some years ago. A new type of ore, as rich in radium as our gold-bearing sands are rich in gold. Ballon’s first samples gave uranium atoms with a fair

representation of ionium and thorium. A richly radio-active ore. A lode of the pure radium is there somewhere, without doubt.”

He added vehemently, “Do you understand now why we should be suspicious of this George Prince? He has a criminal record. He has a thorough technical knowledge of radium ores. He associates with Martians of bad reputation. A large Martian Company has recently developed a radium engine to compete with our Earth motor. You know that? You know that there is very little radium available on Mars, and our government will not allow our own radium supply to be exported. That Martian Company needs radium. It will do anything to get radium. What do you suppose it would pay for a few tons of really rich radio-active ore—such as Grantline may have found on the Moon?”

“But,” I objected, “that is a reputable Martian company. It’s backed by the government of the Martian Union. The government of Mars would not dare—”

“Of course not!” Captain Carter exclaimed sardonically. “Not openly! But if Martian brigands had a supply of radium—I don’t imagine where it came from would make much difference. That Martian Company would buy it.”

Halsey added, “And George Prince, my agents inform me, seems to know that Grantline is on the Moon. Put it all together, lads. Little sparks show the hidden current.

“More than that: George Prince knows that we have arranged to have the Planetara stop at the Moon and bring back Grantline’s radium-ore. This is your last voyage this year. You’ll hear from

Grantline this time, we're convinced. He'll probably give you the signal as you pass the Moon on your way out. Coming back, you'll stop at the Moon and transport whatever radium-ore Grantline has ready. The Grantline Flyer is too small for ore transportation."

Halsey's voice turned grimly sarcastic. "Doesn't it seem queer that George Prince and a few of his Martian friends happen to be listed as passengers for this voyage?"

In the silence that followed, Snap and I regarded each other. Halsey added abruptly,

"We had George Prince typed that time we arrested him four years ago. I'll show him to you."

He snapped open an alcove, and said to his waiting attendant, "Get me the type of George Prince."

The disc in a moment came through the pneumatic. Halsey, smiling wryly, adjusted it.

"A nice looking fellow. Nicely spoken. Though at the time we made this he was somewhat annoyed, naturally. He is older now. Twenty-nine, to be exact. Here he is."

The image glowed on the grids before us. His name, George Prince, in letters illumined upon his forehead, showed for a moment and then faded. He stood smiling sourly before us as he repeated the official formula:

"My name is George Prince. I was born in Great-New York City twenty-five years ago."

I gazed at this life-size, moving image of George Prince. He

stood somber in the black detention uniform. A dark, almost a girlishly handsome fellow, well below medium height—the rod beside him showed five feet four inches. Slim and slight. Long, wavy black hair, falling about his ears. A pale, clean-cut, really handsome face, almost beardless. I regarded it closely. A face that would have been femininely beautiful without its masculine touch of heavy black brows and firmly set jaw. His voice as he spoke was low and soft; but at the end, with the concluding words, “I am innocent!” it flashed into strong masculinity. His eyes, shaded with long, girlish black lashes, by chance met mine. “I am innocent.” His curving sensuous lips drew down into a grim sneer...

The type faded at its end. Halsey replaced the disc in its box and waved the attendant away. “Thank you.”

He turned back to Snap and me. “Well, there he is. We have nothing tangible against him now. But I’ll say this: he’s a clever fellow, one to be afraid of. I would not blare it from the newscasters’ microphone, but if he is hatching any plot, he has been too clever for my agents.”

We talked for another half-hour, and then Captain Carter dismissed us. We left Halsey’s office with Carter’s final words ringing in our ears. “Whatever comes, lads, remember I trust you...”

Snap and I decided to walk a portion of the way back to the ship. It was barely more than a mile through this subterranean corridor to where we could get the vertical lift direct to the

landing stage.

We started off on the lower level. Once outside the insulation of Halsey's office we did not dare talk of this thing. Not only electrical ears, but every possible eavesdropping device might be upon us. The corridor was two hundred feet or more below the ground level. At this hour of the night this business section was comparatively deserted. The through tube sounded over our heads with the passing of its occasional trains. The ventilators buzzed and whirred. At the cross intersections, the traffic directors dozed at their posts. It was hot and sticky down here, and gloomy with the daylight globes extinguished, and only the night lights to give a dim illumination. The stores and office arcades were all closed and deserted; only an occasional night-light burning behind their windows.

Our footfalls echoed on the metal grids as we hurried along.

"Nice evening," said Snap awkwardly.

"Yes," I said, "isn't it?"

I felt oppressed. As though prying eyes and ears were here. We walked for a time in silence, each of us busy with memory of what had transpired in Halsey's office.

Suddenly Snap gripped me. "What's that?"

"Where?" I whispered.

We stopped at a corner. An entryway was here. Snap pulled me into it. I could feel him quivering with excitement.

"What is it?" I demanded in a whisper.

"We're being followed. Did you hear anything?"

“No!” Yet I thought now I could hear something. Vague footfalls. A rustling. And a microscopic electrical whine, as though some device were near us.

Snap was fumbling in his pocket. “Wait, I’ve got a pair of low-scale phones.”

He put the little grids against his ears. I could hear the sharp intake of his breath. Then he seized me, pulled me down to the metal floor of the entryway.

“Back, Gregg! Get back!” I could barely hear his whisper. We crouched as far back into the doorway as we could get. I was armed. My official permit for the carrying of the pencil heat-ray allowed me to have it always with me. I drew it now. But there was nothing to shoot at. I felt Snap clamping the grids on my ears. And now I heard something! An intensification of the vague footsteps I had thought I heard before.

There was something following us! Something out in the corridor there now! A street light was nearby. The corridor was dim, but plainly visible; and to my sight it was empty. But there was something there. Something invisible! I could hear it moving. Creeping towards us. I pulled the grids off my ears.

Snap murmured, “You’ve got a local phone.”

“Yes! I’ll get them to give us the street glare!”

I pressed the danger signal, giving our location to the nearest operator. In a second or two we got the light. The street in all this neighborhood burst into a brilliant actinic glare. The thing menacing us was revealed! A figure in a black cloak, crouching

thirty feet away across the corridor.

Snap was on his feet. His voice rang shrilly, "There it is! Give it a shot, Gregg!"

Snap was unarmed, but he flung his hands out menacingly. The figure, which may perhaps not have been aware of our city safeguard, was taken wholly by surprise. A human figure. Seven feet tall, at the least, and therefore, I judged, doubtless a Martian man. The black cloak covered his head. He took a step toward us, hesitated, and then turned in confusion.

Snap's shrill voice was bringing help. The whine of a street guard's alarm whistle nearby sounded. The figure was making off! My pencil-ray was in my hand and I pressed its switch. The tiny heat-ray stabbed through the glare, but I missed. The figure stumbled, but did not fall. I saw a bare gray arm come from the cloak, flung up to maintain its balance. Or perhaps my pencil-ray of heat had seared the arm. The gray-skinned arm of a Martian.

Snap was shouting, "Give him another!" But the figure passed beyond the actinic glare and vanished.

We were detained in the turmoil of the corridor for ten minutes or more with official explanations. Then a message from Halsey released us. The Martian who had been following us in his invisible cloak was never caught.

We escaped from the crowd at last and made our way back to the Planetara, where the passengers were already assembling for the outward Martian voyage.

CHAPTER II

“A Fleeting Glance—”

I stood on the turret-balcony of the Planetara with Captain Carter and Dr. Frank, the ship surgeon, watching the arriving passengers. It was close to the zero hour: the level of the stage was a turmoil of confusion. The escalators, with the last of the freight aboard, were folded back. But the stage was jammed with the incoming passenger baggage: the interplanetary customs and tax officials with their X-ray and Zed-ray paraphernalia and the passengers themselves, lined up for the export inspection.

At this height, the city lights lay spread in a glare of blue and yellow beneath us. The individual local planes came dropping like birds to our stage. Thirty-eight passengers for this flight to Mars, but that accursed desire of every friend and relative to speed the departing voyager brought a hundred or more extra people to crowd our girders and bring added difficulty to everybody.

Carter was too absorbed in his duties to stay with us long. But here in the turret Dr. Frank and I found ourselves at the moment with nothing much to do but watch.

“Think we’ll get away on time, Gregg?”

“No,” I said. “And this of all voyages—”

I checked myself, with thumping heart. My thoughts were so full of what Halsey and Carter had told us that it was difficult to rein my tongue. Yet here in the turret, unguarded by insulation, I could say nothing. Nor would I have dared mention the Grantline Moon Expedition to Dr. Frank. I wondered what he knew of this affair. Perhaps as much as I—perhaps nothing.

He was a thin, dark, rather smallish man of fifty, this ship's surgeon, trim in his blue and white uniform. I knew him well: we had made several flights together. An American—I fancy of Jewish ancestry. A likable man, and a skillful doctor and surgeon. He and I had always been good friends.

“Crowded,” he said. “Johnson says thirty-eight. I hope they're experienced travelers. This pressure sickness is a rotten nuisance—keeps me dashing around all night assuring frightened women they're not going to die. Last voyage, coming out of the Venus atmosphere—”

He plunged into a lugubrious account of his troubles with space-sick voyagers. But I was in no mood to listen. My gaze was down on the spider incline, up which, over the bend of the ship's sleek, silvery body, the passengers and their friends were coming in little groups. The upper deck was already jammed with them.

The Planetara, as flyers go, was not a large vessel. Cylindrical of body, forty feet maximum beam, and two hundred and seventy-five feet in overall length. The passenger superstructure—no more than a hundred feet long—was set amidships. A narrow deck, metallic-enclosed, and with large bulls-eye windows,

encircled the superstructure. Some of the cabins opened directly onto the deck. Others had doors to the interior corridors. There were half a dozen small but luxurious public rooms.

The rest of the vessel was given to freight storage and the mechanism and control compartments. Forward of the passenger structure the deck level continued under the cylindrical dome-roof to the bow. The forward watch-tower observatory was here; officers' cabins; Captain Carter's navigating rooms and Dr. Frank's office. Similarly, under the stern-dome, was the stern watch-tower and a series of power compartments.

Above the superstructure a confusion of spider bridges, ladders and balconies were laced like a metal network. The turret in which Dr. Frank and I now stood was perched here. Fifty feet away, like a bird's nest, Snap's instrument room stood clinging to the metal bridge. The dome-roof, with the glassite windows rolled back now, rose in a mound-peak to cover this highest middle portion of the vessel.

Below, in the main hull, blue-lit metal corridors ran the entire length of the ship. Freight storage compartments; gravity control rooms; the air renewal systems; heater and ventilators and pressure mechanisms—all were located there. And the kitchens, stewards' compartments, and the living quarters of the crew. We carried a crew of sixteen, this voyage, exclusive of the navigating officers, and the purser, Snap Dean, and Dr. Frank.

The passengers coming aboard seemed a fair representation of what we usually had for the outward voyage to Ferrok-Shahn.

Most were Earth people—and returning Martians. Dr. Frank pointed out one. A huge Martian in a gray cloak. A seven-foot fellow.

“His name is Set Miko,” Dr. Frank remarked. “Ever heard of him?”

“No,” I said. “Should I?”

“Well—” The doctor suddenly checked himself, as though he were sorry he had spoken.

“I never heard of him,” I repeated slowly.

An awkward silence fell suddenly between us.

There were a few Venus passengers. I saw one of them presently coming up the incline, and recognized her. A girl traveling alone. We had brought her from Grebhar, last voyage but one. I remembered her. An alluring sort of girl, as most of them are. Her name was Venza. She spoke English well. A singer and dancer who had been imported to Great-New York to fill some theatrical engagement. She'd made quite a hit on the Great White Way.

She came up the incline, with the carrier ahead of her. Gazing up, she saw Dr. Frank and me at the turret window and waved her white arm in greeting. And flashed us a smile.

Dr. Frank laughed. “By the gods of the airways, there's Alta Venza! You saw that look, Gregg? That was for me, not you.”

“Reasonable enough,” I retorted. “But I doubt it—the Venza was nothing if not impartial.”

I wondered what could be taking Venza now to Mars.

I was glad to see her. She was diverting. Educated. Well-traveled. Spoke English with a colloquial, theatrical manner more characteristic of Great-New York than of Venus. And for all her light banter, I would rather put my trust in her than any Venus girl I had ever met.

The hum of the departing siren was sounding. Friends and relatives of the passengers were crowding the exit incline. The deck was clearing. I had not seen George Prince come aboard. And then I thought I saw him down on the landing stage, just arrived from a private tube-car. A small, slight figure. The customs men were around him: I could only see his head and shoulders. Pale, girlishly handsome face; long, black hair to the base of his neck. He was bareheaded, with the hood of his traveling-cloak pushed back.

I stared, and I saw that Dr. Frank was also gazing down. But neither of us spoke.

Then I said upon impulse, "Suppose we go down to the deck, Doctor?"

He acquiesced. We descended to the lower room of the turret and clambered down the spider ladder to the upper deck-level. The head of the arriving incline was near us. Preceded by two carriers who were littered with hand-baggage, George Prince was coming up the incline. He was closer now. I recognized him from the type we had seen in Halsey's office.

And then, with a shock, I saw it was not so. This was a girl coming aboard. An arch-light over the incline showed her clearly

when she was half way up. A girl with her hood pushed back; her face framed in thick black hair. I saw now it was not a man's cut of hair; but long braids coiled up under the dangling hood.

Dr. Frank must have remarked my amazed expression.

“Little beauty, isn't she?”

“Who is she?”

We were standing back against the wall of the superstructure. A passenger was near us—the Martian whom Dr. Frank had called Miko. He was loitering here, quite evidently watching this girl come aboard. But as I glanced at him he looked away and casually sauntered off.

The girl came up and reached the deck. “I am in A 22,” she told the carrier. “My brother came aboard two hours ago.”

Dr. Frank answered my whisper. “That's Anita Prince.”

She was passing quite close to us on the deck, following the carrier, when she stumbled and very nearly fell. I was nearest to her. I leaped forward and caught her as she went down.

“Oh!” she cried.

With my arm about her, I raised her up and set her upon her feet again. She had twisted her ankle. She balanced herself upon it. The pain of it eased up in a moment.

“I'm—all right—thank you!”

In the dimness of the blue-lit deck, I met her eyes. I was holding her with my encircling arm. She was small and soft against me. Her face, framed in the thick, black hair, smiled up at me. Small, oval face—beautiful—yet firm of chin, and stamped

with the mark of its own individuality. No empty-headed beauty, this.

“I’m all right, thank you very much—”

I became conscious that I had not released her. I felt her hands pushing at me. And then it seemed that for an instant she yielded and was clinging. And I met her startled, upflung gaze. Eyes like a purple night with the sheen of misty starlight in them.

I heard myself murmuring, “I beg your pardon. Yes, of course!” I released her.

She thanked me again and followed the carrier along the deck. She was limping slightly from the twisted ankle.

An instant, while she had clung to me—and I had held her. A brief flash of something, from her eyes to mine—from mine back to hers. The poets write that love can be born of such a glance. The first meeting, across all the barriers of which love springs unsought, unbidden—defiant, sometimes. And the troubadours of old would sing: “A fleeting glance; a touch; two wildly beating hearts—and love was born.”

I think, with Anita and me, it must have been like that...

I stood gazing after her, unconscious of Dr. Frank, who was watching me with his humorous smile. And presently, no more than a quarter beyond the zero hour, the Planetara got away. With the dome-windows battened tightly, we lifted from the landing stage and soared over the glowing city. The phosphorescence of the electronic tubes was like a comet’s tail behind us as we slid upward.

At the trineight hour the heat of our atmospheric passage was over. The passengers had all retired. The ship was quiet, with empty decks and dim, silent corridors. Vibrationless, with the electronic engines cut off and only the hum of the Martel magnetizers to break the unnatural stillness. We were well beyond the earth's atmosphere, heading out in the cone-path of the earth's shadow, in the direction of the moon.

CHAPTER III

In the Helio-room

At six A. M., earth Eastern time, which we were still carrying, Snap Dean and I were alone in his instrument room, perched in the network over the Planetara's deck. The bulge of the dome enclosed us; it rounded like a great observatory window some twenty feet above the ceiling of this little metal cubby-hole.

The Planetara was still in the earth's shadow. The firmament—black interstellar space with its blazing white, red and yellow stars—lay spread around us. The moon, with nearly all its disc illumined, hung, a great silver ball, over our bow quarter. Behind it, to one side, Mars floated like the red tip of a smoldering cigarillo in the blackness. The earth, behind our stern, was dimly, redly visible—a giant sphere, etched with the configurations of its oceans and continents. Upon one limb a touch of the sunlight hung on the mountain-tops with a crescent red-yellow sheen.

And then we plunged from the cone-shadow. The sun, with the leaping Corona, burst through the blackness behind us. The earth lighted into a huge, thin crescent with hooked cusps.

To Snap and me, the glories of the heavens were too familiar to be remarked. And upon this voyage particularly we were in no mood to consider them. I had been in the helio-room several

hours. When the Planetara started, and my few routine duties were over, I could think of nothing save Halsey's and Carter's admonition: "Be on your guard. And particularly—watch George Prince."

I had not seen George Prince. But I had seen his sister, whom Carter and Halsey had not bothered to mention. My heart was still pounding with the memory...

When the passengers had retired and the ship quieted, I prowled through the passenger corridors. This was about the trineight hour.³ Hot as the corridors of hell, with our hull and the glassite dome seething with the friction of our atmospheric flight. But the refrigerators mitigated that; the ventilators blasted cold air from the renewers into every corner of the vessel. Within an hour or two, with the cold of space striking us, it was hot air that was needed.

Dr. Frank evidently was having little trouble with pressure-sick passengers⁴—the Planetara's equalizers were fairly efficient. I did not encounter Dr. Frank. I prowled through the silent metal lounges and passages. I went to the door of A 22. It was on the deck-level, in a tiny transverse passage just off the main lounging room. Its name-grid glowed with the letters: "*Anita Prince*." I stood in my short white trousers and white silk shirt, like a cabin steward gawping. Anita Prince! I had never heard the name until

³ Trineight Hour, i.e., 3 A. M.

⁴ Pressure sickness. Caused by the difficulty of maintaining a constantly normal air pressure within the vessel owing to the sudden, extreme changes from heat to cold.

this night. But there was magic music in it now, as I murmured it to myself. Anita Prince...

She was here, doubtless asleep, behind this small metal door. It seemed as though that little oval grid were the gateway to a fairyland of my dreams.

I turned away. And thought of the Grantline Moon Expedition stabbed at me. George Prince—Anita's brother—he whom I had been told to watch. This renegade—associate of dubious Martians, plotting God knows what.

I saw, upon the adjoining door, "A 20, *George Prince.*" I listened. In the humming stillness of the ship's interior there was no sound from these cabins. A 20 was without windows, I knew. But Anita's room had a window and a door which gave upon the deck. I went through the lounge, out its arch, and walked the deck length. The deck door and window of A 22 were closed and dark.

The ten-foot-wide deck was dim with white starlight from the side ports. Chairs were here, but they were all empty. From the bow windows of the arching dome a flood of moonlight threw long, slanting shadows down the deck. At the corner where the superstructure ended, I thought I saw a figure lurking as though watching me. I went that way, but it vanished.

I turned the corner, went the width of the ship to the other side. There was no one in sight save the observer on his spider bridge, high in the bow network, and the second officer, on duty on the turret balcony almost directly over me.

As I stood and listened, I suddenly heard footsteps. From the

direction of the bow a figure came. Purser Johnson.

He greeted me. "Cooling off, Gregg?"

"Yes," I said.

He went past me and turned into the smoking room door nearby.

I stood a moment at one of the deck windows, gazing at the stars; and for no reason at all I realized I was tense. Johnson was a great one for his regular sleep—it was wholly unlike him to be roaming about the ship at such an hour. Had he been watching me? I told myself it was nonsense. I was suspicious of everyone, everything, this voyage.

I heard another step. Captain Carter appeared from his chart-room which stood in the center of the narrowing open deck space near the bow. I joined him at once.

"Who was that?" he half-whispered.

"Johnson."

"Oh, yes." He fumbled in his uniform; his gaze swept the moonlit deck. "Gregg—take this." He handed me a small metal box. I stuffed it at once into my shirt.

"An insulator," he added, swiftly. "Snap is in his office. Take it to him, Gregg. Stay with him—you'll have a measure of security—and you can help him to make the photographs." He was barely whispering. "I won't be with you—no use making it look as though we were doing anything unusual. If your graphs show anything—or if Snap picks up any message—bring it to me." He added aloud, "Well, it will be cool enough presently, Gregg."

He sauntered away toward his chart-room.

“By heavens, what a relief!” Snap murmured as the current went on. We had wired his cubby with the insulator; within its barrage we could at last talk with a degree of freedom.

“You’ve seen George Prince, Gregg?”

“No. He’s assigned A 20. But I saw his sister. Snap, no one ever mentioned—”

Snap had heard of her, but he hadn’t known that she was listed for this voyage. “A real beauty, so I’ve heard. Accursed shame for a decent girl to have a brother like that.”

I could agree with him there, but I made no comment.

It was now 6 A. M. Snap had been busy all night with routine cosmo-radios from the earth, following our departure. He had a pile of them beside him. Many were for the passengers; but anything that savored of a code was barred.

“Nothing queer looking?” I suggested.

“No. Not a thing.”

We were at this time no more than some sixty-five thousand miles from the moon’s surface. The Planetara presently would swing upon her direct course for Mars. There was nothing which could cause passenger comment in this close passing of the moon; normally we used the satellite’s attraction to give us additional starting speed.

It was now or never that a message would come from Grantline. He was supposed to be upon this earthward side of the moon. While Snap had rushed through with his routine, I had

searched the moon surface with our glass, as I knew Carter was searching it—and also the observer in his tower, very possibly.

But there was nothing. Copernicus and Kepler lay in full sunlight. The heights of the lunar mountains, the depths of the barren, empty seas were etched black and white, clear and clean. Grim, forbidding desolation, this unchanging moon! In romance, moonlight may shimmer and sparkle to light a lover's smile; but the reality of the moon is cold and bleak. There was nothing to show my prying eyes where the intrepid Grantline might be.

“Nothing at all, Snap.”

And Snap's helio mirrors, attuned for an hour now to pick up the faintest signal, were motionless.

“If he has concentrated any appreciable amount of radioactive ore,” said Snap, “we should get an impulse from its Gamma rays.”

But our receiving shield was dark, untouched. We tried taking hydrogen photographic impressions of the visible moon surface. A sequence of them, with stereoscopic lenses, forty-eight to the second. Our mirror-grid gave the magnified images; the spectro-heliograph, with its wave-length selection, pictured the mountain-levels, and slowly descended into the deepest seas.

There was nothing.

Yet in those moon caverns—a million million recesses amid the crags of that tumbled, barren surface—the pin-point of movement which might have been Grantline's expedition could so easily be hiding! Could he have the ore insulated, fearing its Gamma rays

would betray its presence to hostile watchers?

Or might disaster have come to him? Or he might not be upon this hemisphere of the moon at all...

My imagination, sharpened by fancy of a lurking menace which seemed everywhere about the Planetara this voyage, ran rife with fears for Johnny Grantline. He had promised to communicate this voyage. It was now, or perhaps never.

Six-thirty came and passed. We were well beyond the earth's shadow now. The firmament blazed with its vivid glories; the sun behind us was a ball of yellow-red leaping flames. The earth hung, opened to a huge, dull-red half-sphere.

We were within some forty thousand miles of the moon. Giant white ball—all of its disc visible to the naked eye. It poised over the bow, and presently, as the Planetara swung upon her course for Mars, it shifted sidewise. The light of it glared white and dazzling in our tiny side windows.

Snap, with his habitual red celluloid eyeshade shoved high on his forehead, worked over our instruments.

“Gregg!”

The receiving shield was glowing a trifle! Gamma rays were bombarding it! It glowed, gleamed phosphorescent, and the audible recorder began sounding its tiny tinkling murmurs.

Gamma rays! Snap sprang to the dials. The direction and strength were soon obvious. A richly radio-active ore body, of considerable size, was concentrated upon this hemisphere of the moon! It was unmistakable.

“He’s got it, Gregg! He’s—”

The tiny helio mirrors began quivering. Snap exclaimed triumphantly, “Here he comes! By God, the message at last! Bar off that light!”

I flung on the absorbers. The moonlight bathing the little room went into them and darkness sprang around us. Snap fumbled at his instrument board. Actinic light showed dimly in the quivering, thumbnail mirrors. Two of them. They hung poised on their cobweb wires, infinitely sensitive to the infra-red light-rays Grantline was sending from the moon. The mirrors in a moment began swinging. On the scale across the room the actinic beams from them were magnified into sweeps of light.

The message!

Snap spelled it out, decoded it.

“Success! Stop for ore on your return voyage. Will give you our location later. Success beyond wildest hopes—”

The mirrors hung motionless. The shield, where the Gamma rays were bombarding, went suddenly dark.

Snap murmured, “That’s all. He’s got the ore! ‘Success beyond wildest hopes.’ That must mean an enormous quantity of it available!”

We were sitting in darkness, and abruptly I became aware that across our open window, where the insulation barrage was flung, the air was faintly hissing. An interference there! I saw a tiny swirl of purple sparks. Someone—some hostile ray from the deck beneath us, or from the spider bridge that led to our little room—

someone out there trying to pry in!

Snap impulsively reached for the absorbers to let in the outside light—it was all darkness to us outside. But I checked him.

“Wait!” I cut off our barrage, opened our door and stepped to the narrow metal bridge.

“Wait, Snap! You stay there.” I added aloud, “Well, Snap, I’m going to bed. Glad you’ve cleaned up that batch of work.”

I banged the door upon him. The lacework of metal bridges and ladders seemed empty. I gazed up to the dome, and forward and aft. Twenty feet beneath me was the metal roof of the cabin superstructure. Below it, both sides of the deck showed. All patched with moonlight.

No one visible down there. I descended a ladder. The deck was empty. But in the silence something was moving! Footsteps moving away from me down the deck! I followed; and suddenly I was running. Chasing something I could hear, but could not see. It turned into the smoking room.

I burst in. And a real sound smothered the phantom. Johnson the purser was sitting here alone in the dimness. He was smoking. I noticed that his cigar held a long, frail ash. It could not have been him I was chasing. He was sitting there quite calmly. A thick-necked, heavy fellow, easily out of breath. But he was breathing calmly now.

He sat up with amazement at my wild-eyed appearance, and the ash jarred from his cigar.

“Gregg! What in the devil—”

I tried to grin. “I’m on my way to bed—worked all night helping Snap with those damn Earth messages.”

I went past him, out the door into the main interior corridor. It was the only way the invisible prowler could have gone. But I was too late now—I could hear nothing. I dashed forward into the main lounge. It was empty, dim and silent, a silence broken presently by a faint click—a stateroom door hastily closing. I swung and found myself in a tiny transverse passage. The twin doors of A 22 and A 20 were before me.

The invisible eavesdropper had gone into one of these rooms! I listened at each of the panels, but there was only silence within.

The interior of the ship was suddenly singing with the steward’s siren—the call to awaken the passengers. It startled me. I moved swiftly away. But as the siren shut off, in the silence I heard a soft, musical voice:

“Wake up, Anita—I think that’s the breakfast call.”

And her answer: “All right, George. I hear it.”

CHAPTER IV

A Burn on a Martian Arm

I did not appear at that morning meal. I was exhausted and drugged with lack of sleep. I had a moment with Snap, to tell him what had occurred. Then I sought out Carter. He had his little chart-room insulated. And we were cautious. I told him what Snap and I had learned: the Gamma rays from the moon, proving that Grantline had concentrated a considerable ore-body. I also told him the message from Grantline.

“We’ll stop on the way back, as he directs, Gregg.” He bent closer to me. “At Ferrok-Shahn I’m going to bring back a cordon of Interplanetary Police. The secret will be out, of course, when once we stop at the moon. We have no right, even now, to be flying this vessel as unguarded as it is.”

He was very solemn. And he was grim when I told him of the invisible eavesdropper.

“You think he overheard Grantline’s message?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Who was it? You seem to feel it was George Prince?”

“Yes.”

I was convinced that the prowler had gone into A 20. When I mentioned the purser, who seemed to have been watching me

earlier in the night, and again was sitting in the smoking room when the eavesdropper fled past, Carter looked startled.

“Johnson is all right, Gregg.”

“Is he? Does he know anything about this Grantline affair?”

“No–no,” said the captain hastily. “You haven’t mentioned it, have you?”

“Of course I haven’t. I’ve been wondering why Johnson didn’t hear that eavesdropper. I could hear him when I was chasing him. But Johnson sat perfectly unmoved and let him go by. What was he sitting there for, anyway, at that hour of the morning?”

“You’re too suspicious, Gregg. Overwrought. But you’re right—we can’t be too careful. I’m going to have that Prince suite searched when I catch it unoccupied. Passengers don’t ordinarily travel with invisible cloaks. Go to bed, Gregg—you need a rest.”

I went to my cabin. It was located aft, on the stern deck-space, near the stern watch-tower. A small metal room, with a desk, a chair and bunk. I made sure no one was in it. I sealed the lattice grill and the door, set the alarm trigger against any opening of them, and went to bed.

The siren for the mid-day meal awakened me. I had slept heavily. I felt refreshed. And hungry.

I found the passengers already assembled at my table when I arrived in the dining salon. It was a low-vaulted metal room of blue and yellow tube-lights. At the sides its oval windows showed the deck, with its ports of the dome-side, through which a vista of the starry firmament was visible. We were well on our course

to Mars. The moon had dwindled to a pin-point of light beside the crescent earth. And behind them our sun blazed, visually the largest orb in the heavens. It was some sixty-eight million miles from the earth to Mars, this voyage. A flight, under ordinary circumstances, of some ten days.

There were five tables in the dining salon, each with eight seats. Snap and I had one of the tables. We sat at the ends, with three passengers on each of the sides.

Snap was in his seat when I arrived. He eyed me down the length of the table.

“Good morning, Gregg. We missed you at breakfast. Not pressure-sick, I hope?”

There were three passengers already seated at our table—all men. Snap, in a gay mood, introduced me.

“This is our third officer, Gregg Haljan. Big, handsome fellow, isn’t he? And as pleasant as he is good-looking. Gregg, this is Sero Ob Hahn.”

I met the keen, dark-eyed somber gaze of a Venus man of middle age. A small, slim, graceful man, with sleek black hair. His pointed face, accentuated by the pointed beard, was pallid. He wore a white and purple robe; upon his breast was a huge platinum ornament, a device like a star and cross entwined.

“I am happy to meet you, sir.” His voice was soft and sleek.

“Ob Hahn,” I repeated. “I should have heard of you, no doubt. But—”

A smile plucked at his thin, gray lips. “That is the error of

mine, not yours. My mission is that all the universe shall hear of me.”

“He’s preaching the religion of the Venus Mystics,” Snap explained.

“And this enlightened gentleman,” said Ob Hahn ironically, “has just termed it fetishism. The ignorance—”

“Oh, I say!” protested the man at Ob Hahn’s side. “I mean, you seem to think I intended something opprobrious. As a matter of fact—”

“We’ve an argument, Gregg,” laughed Snap. “This is Sir Arthur Coniston, an English gentleman, lecturer and sky-trotter—that is, he will be a sky-trotter; he tells us he plans a number of voyages.”

The tall Englishman in his white linen suit bowed acknowledgment. “My compliments, Mr. Haljan. I hope you have no strong religious convictions, else we will make your table here very miserable!”

The third passenger had evidently kept out of the argument. Snap introduced him as Rance Rankin. An American—a quiet, blond fellow of thirty-five or forty.

I ordered my breakfast and let the argument go on.

“Won’t make me miserable,” said Snap. “I love an argument. You said, Sir Arthur?..

“I mean to say, I think I said too much. Mr. Rankin, you are more diplomatic.”

Rankin laughed. “I am a magician,” he said to me. “A

theatrical entertainer. I deal in tricks—how to fool an audience—” His keen, amused gaze was on Ob Hahn. “This gentleman from Venus and I have too much in common to argue.”

“A nasty one!” the Englishman exclaimed. “By Jove! Really, Mr. Rankin, you’re a bit too cruel!”

I could see we were doomed to have turbulent meals this voyage. I like to eat in quiet; arguing passengers always annoy me. There were still three seats vacant at our table; I wondered who would occupy them. I soon learned the answer—for one seat at least. Rankin said calmly:

“Where is the little Venus girl this meal?” His glance went to the empty seat at my right hand. “The Venza—wasn’t that her name? She and I are destined for the same theater in Ferrok-Shahn.”

So Venza was to sit beside me. It was good news. Ten days of a religious argument three times a day would be intolerable. But the cheerful Venza would help.

“She never eats the mid-day meal,” said Snap. “She’s on the deck, having orange juice. I guess it’s the old gag about diet, eh?”

My attention wandered about the salon. Most of the seats were occupied. At the captain’s table I saw the objects of my search. George Prince and his sister sat one on each side of the captain. I saw George Prince in the life now as a man who looked hardly twenty-five. He was at this moment evidently in a gay mood. His clean-cut, handsome profile, with its poetic dark curls, was turned toward me. There seemed little of the villain about him.

And I saw Anita Prince now as a dark-haired, black eyed little beauty, in feature resembling her brother very strongly. She presently finished her meal. She rose, with him after her. She was dressed in Earth fashion—white blouse and dark jacket, wide, knee-length trousers of gray, with a red sash her only touch of color. She went past me, flashed me her smile and nod.

My heart was pounding. I answered her greeting, and met George Prince's casual gaze. He, too, smiled, as though to signify that his sister had told him of the service I had done her. Or was his smile an ironical memory of how he had eluded me this morning when I chased him?

I gazed after his small, white-suited figure as he followed Anita from the salon. And thinking of her, I prayed that Carter and Halsey might be wrong. Whatever plotting against the Grantline Expedition might be going on, I hoped that George Prince was innocent of it. Yet I knew in my heart it was a futile hope. Prince had been that eavesdropper outside the helio-room. I could not really doubt it. But that his sister must be ignorant of what he was doing, I was sure.

My attention was brought suddenly back to the reality of our table. I heard Ob Hahn's silky voice:

“We passed quite close to the moon last night, Mr. Dean.”

“Yes,” said Snap. “We did, didn't we? Always do—it's a technical problem of the exigencies of interstellar navigation. Explain it to them, Gregg—you're an expert.”

I waved it away with a laugh. There was a brief silence. I could

not help noticing Sir Arthur Coniston's queer look, and I think I have never seen so keen a glance as Rance Rankin shot at me. Were all these people aware of Grantline's treasure on the moon? It suddenly seemed so. I wished fervently at that instant that the ten days of this voyage were over and we were safely at Ferrok-Shahn. Captain Carter was absolutely right. Coming back we would have a cordon of interplanetary police aboard.

Sir Arthur broke the awkward silence. "Magnificent sight, the moon, from so close a viewpoint—though I was too much afraid of pressure-sickness to be up to see it."

I had nearly finished my hasty meal when another incident shocked me. The two other passengers at our table came in and took their seats. A Martian girl and man. The girl had the seat at my left, with the man beside her. All Martians are tall. This girl was about my own height—that is, six feet, two inches. The man was seven feet or more. Both wore the Martian outer robe. The girl flung hers back. Her limbs were encased in pseudo-mail. She looked, as all Martians like to look, a very warlike Amazon. But she was a pretty girl. She smiled at me with a keen-eyed, direct gaze.

"Mr. Dean said at breakfast that you were big and handsome. You are."

They were brother and sister, these Martians. Snap introduced them as Set Miko and Setta Moa.⁵

This Miko was, from our Earth standards, a tremendous,

⁵ "Set and Setta," the Martian equivalent of Mr. and Miss.

brawny giant. Not spindly, like most Martians, this fellow, for all his seven feet of height, was almost heavy-set. He wore a plaited leather jerkin beneath his robe, and knee pants of leather out of which his lower legs showed as gray, hairy pillars of strength. He had come into the salon with a swagger, his sword-ornament clanking.

“A pleasant voyage so far,” he said to me as he started his meal. His voice had the heavy, throaty rasp characteristic of the Martian. He spoke perfect English—both Martians and Venus people are by heritage extraordinary linguists. Miko and his sister Moa had a touch of Martian accent, worn almost away by living for some years in Great-New York.

The shock to me came within a few minutes. Miko, absorbed in attacking his meal, inadvertently pushed back his robe to bare his forearm. An instant only, then it dropped again to his wrist. But in that instant I had seen, upon the gray flesh, a thin sear turned red. A very recent burn—as though a pencil-ray of heat had caught his arm.

My mind flung back. Only last night in the City Corridor, Snap and I had been followed by a Martian. I had shot at him with the heat-ray; I thought I had hit him on the arm. Was this the mysterious Martian who had followed us from Halsey’s office?

CHAPTER V

Venza the Venus Girl

It was shortly after that mid-day meal when I encountered Venza sitting on the starlit deck. I had been in the bow observatory; taken my routine castings of our position and worked them out. I was, I think, of the Planetara's officers the most expert handler of the mathematical mechanical calculators. The locating of our position and charting the trajectory of our course was, under ordinary circumstances, about all I had to do. And it took only a few minutes each twelve hours.

I had a moment with Carter in the isolation of his chart-room. "This voyage! Gregg, I'm getting like you—too fanciful. We've a normal group of passengers, apparently; but I don't like the look of any of them. That Ob Hahn, at your table—"

"Snaky-looking fellow," I commented. "He and the Englishman are great on arguments. Did you have Prince's cabin searched?"

My breath hung on his answer.

"Yes. Nothing unusual among his things. We searched both his room and his sister's."

I did not follow that up. Instead I told him about the burn on Miko's thick gray arm.

He stared. "I wish to the Almighty we were at Ferrok-Shahn. Gregg, to-night when the passengers are asleep, come here to me. Snap will be here, and Dr. Frank. We can trust him."

"He knows about—about the Grantline treasure?"

"Yes. And so do Balch and Blackstone."

Balch and Blackstone were our first and second officers.

"We'll all meet here, Gregg—say about the zero hour. We must take some precautions."

He suddenly felt he should say no more now. He dismissed me.

I found Venza seated alone in a secluded corner of the starlit deck. A porthole, with the black heavens and the blazing stars, was before her. There was an empty seat nearby.

"Hola-lo,⁶ Gregg! Sit here with me. I have been wondering when you would come after me."

I sat down beside her. "What are you doing—going to Mars, Venza? I'm glad to see you."

"Many thanks. But I am glad to see you, Gregg. So handsome a man... Do you know, from Venus to the earth and I have no doubt on all of Mars, no man will please me more."

"Glib tongue," I laughed. "Born to flatter the male—every girl of your world." And I added seriously, "You don't answer my question? What takes you to Mars?"

"Contract. By the stars, what else? Of course, a chance to make a voyage with you—"

"Don't be silly, Venza."

⁶ A Venus form of jocular, intimate greeting.

I enjoyed her. I gazed at her small, slim figure gracefully reclining in the deck chair. Her long, gray robe parted—by design, I have no doubt—to display her shapely, satin-sheathed legs. Her black hair was coiled in a heavy knot at the back of her neck; her carmined lips were parted with a mocking, alluring smile. The exotic perfume of her enveloped me.

She glanced at me sidewise from beneath her sweeping black lashes.

“Be serious,” I added.

“I am serious. Sober. Intoxicated by you, but sober.”

I said, “What sort of a contract?”

“A theater in Ferrok-Shahn. Good money, Gregg. I’m to be there a year.” She sat up to face me. “There’s a fellow here on the Planetara, Rance Rankin, he calls himself. At our table—a big, good-looking blond American. He says he is a magician. Ever hear of him?”

“That’s what he told me. No, I never heard of him.”

“Nor did I. And I thought I had heard of everyone of any importance. He is listed for the same theater where I’m going. Nice sort of fellow.” She paused, and added suddenly, “If he’s a professional entertainer, I’m a motor-oiler.”

It startled me. “Why do you say that?”

Instinctively my gaze swept the deck. An Earth woman and child and a small Venus man were in sight, but not within earshot.

“Why do you look so furtive?” she retorted. “Gregg, there’s something strange about this voyage. I’m no fool, nor you, and

you know it as well as I do.”

“Rance Rankin—” I prompted.

She leaned closer toward me. “He could fool you. But not me—I’ve known too many real magicians.” She grinned. “I challenged him to trick me. You should have seen him trying to evade!”

“Do you know Ob Hahn?” I interrupted.

She shook her head. “Never heard of him. But he told me plenty at breakfast. By Satan, what a flow of words that devil-driver can muster! He and the Englishman don’t mesh very well, do they?”

She stared at me. I had not answered her grin; my mind was too busy with queer fancies. Halsey’s words: “Things are not always what they seem—” Were these passengers masqueraders? Put here by George Prince? And then I thought of Miko the Martian, and the burn upon his arm.

“Come back, Gregg! Don’t go wandering off like that!” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “I’ll be serious. I want to know what in the hell is going on aboard this ship. I’m a woman, and I’m curious. You tell me.”

“What do you mean?” I parried.

“I mean a lot of things. What we’ve just been talking about. And what was the excitement you were in just before breakfast this morning?”

“Excitement?”

“Gregg, you may trust me.” For the first time she was wholly serious. Her gaze made sure no one was within hearing. She put

her hand on my arm. I could barely hear her whisper: “I know they might have a ray upon us—I’ll be careful.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.