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VANDALS OF
THE VOID

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VANDALS OF THE VOID

By

J. M. WALSH

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VANDALS OF THE VOID

CHAPTER I

THE SHIP OF SPACE

THE message that was to change the whole course of my life came through on the General Communicator about 10 p.m., Earth Time, while we were still within the planet's atmospheric envelope. The inter-stellar liner *Cosmos*, bound from New York (Earth) to Tlanan (Mars), had lifted from the Madison Landing scarcely an hour before, and we were still making altitude when the call reached me from Harran. Another fifteen minutes or so, and we would have had the gravity screens out, accelerating on the first lap of our journey across the void.

This was to have been my first inter-planetary trip as a private passenger, my first care-free holiday in years. Not that the journey itself held any attraction for me, or that I was new to the outer reaches of Space. On the contrary. As an official of the Inter-Planetary Guard, that autocratic body which is responsible for the smooth running of traffic and the maintenance of law and order in the void between the inner planets, I had seen rather too much of them. Nevertheless I was looking forward to a holiday free from emergency calls, the long restful voyage to the Red Planet, and

the hope, if time allowed, of a stop-over on Venus on the way home.

Captain Hume—a man of Earth parentage, though he had first seen the light on Mars—and I were old friends, and I expected a heartier welcome than usual, as on this particular trip I had no official status. As a rule the captains of the inter-planetary liners look askance at us. We mean trouble for them, the endless scrutinising of passengers and documents, and, as often as not, the complete suspension, where the need justifies it, of the skipper's own functions. The Rule runs that when the emergency demands it a representative of the Guard has power in the interests of traffic to supersede the captain and take over the running of the craft.

I boarded the *Cosmos* early in the evening while the liner was still tilting in the slips. Captain Hume was then in his cabin, that room where he worked, slept, and often ate, right through the voyage. His own particular duties would not begin until after the take-off, and in the meanwhile the running was in the hands of the first and second officers. The first, a man named Gond, with whom I had some slight acquaintance, came up as I crossed the gangway and told me the skipper would be glad to see me as soon as I could make time, presumably after I got settled in my new cabin.

That did not take long. To one used to the stark simplicity of the Guard-ship accommodation the passenger cabins spelt luxury, but I did not linger, as my training had taught me how to dispose of my few belongings in the minimum of time with the minimum of effort. I merely waited to see that the baggage steward stowed my traps so that they could

not cause damage should they come adrift when we shifted our gravity screens, then made my way in what I judged to be the direction of Hume's cabin.

The *Cosmos* was a new type of craft to me ; she was the first to be commissioned of the new giant liners that were meant ultimately to ply to the outer planets, though until the entire fleet was ready she was being tried out on the home run between Earth, Mars and Venus. She embodied features with which I was not familiar, and in many ways her designers had departed from the standardised plan laid down by the Board of Control in the year 2001, when the first regular space service was begun, following on that disastrous business of the War of the Planets.

I had some difficulty in finding my way, and once I was stopped by an officer I did not know with the intimation that this part of the ship was not free to passengers. I flashed my badge at him, however—that silver model of a Guardship with the letters 'I.P.G.' stamped across it—asked to be directed to the captain's quarters, and had the satisfaction of seeing him give way. Rather surlily he conducted me through a maze of cross passages to a stairway, and told me I would find what I sought at the head.

I did. I came out on the observation deck, and here I was more at home, for in this part of the ship the original design had not been departed from.

I pressed the button on the door that would show my face in the vision plate on the captain's table, and waited. Almost immediately the door swung open, and Hume's hearty voice cried, "Come in."

It was like coming into another world after the bare, bleak passage outside. A warm, cosy room, lit by suffused daylight from the store-tanks, a room

picked out in restful white that somehow lulled the senses and soothed the eyes. I ran a glance around even as Hume rose from his seat and came towards me with hand outstretched. In most respects it was like many another skipper's cabin, with the televox, the ground screens of the television, the dial charts, and the thousand and one compact gadgets necessary to an inter-planetary captain's hand at any hour of the day or night. One new feature, however, caught my eye, the book-machines racked up on the shelves.

"So you've come along at last, Sanders, and for once other than as a trouble-maker," Hume boomed at me. "Well, I'm glad to see you, anyhow. Make yourself comfortable. I've nothing to do for thirty clicks or so."

He nodded at the clock above his table. I had been subconsciously aware of the humming buzz of the seconds passing, but almost on the heels of his words came the 'click-click-click' of three minutes past the hour. This, too, was a new feature. We in the Guardships have another type of clock, one that measures in double-seconds only, for when we travel it is at a tremendous speed, and as every student of relativity knows, in free space one's chronometers must be able to adjust themselves to the pace of one's motion through the void. The principle underlying the Fitzgerald Contraction, however, is elementary knowledge nowadays as far as every space traveller is concerned, so I need not dilate on it here.

In answer to a question of Hume's I told him something of my plans. My knowledge of the surface of the planets was rudimentary; I had been a dozen times to Tlanan, and once to Shangun, the capital of the Venerian confederation, but these had all been

flying trips—literally—and I knew nothing of either land in the way I had come to know my own world.

Hume chuckled. "Mars you'll like," he said, but perhaps there his own prejudice in favour of his birth-place coloured his thoughts. "Next to Tellus"—he meant Earth—"it's the sweetest little planet I know, and I've seen some and mean to see more yet. But Venus——" He gave a mock shudder. "Yet there are some who call it mild. It's certainly beautiful, though I can't abide the perpetual cloud-drift. I like empty skies with the hot sun pouring down."

"Others don't," I said. I don't. Perhaps too much work in the absolute zero of space has tempered my regard for the sun.

"You chill being! But all you Guards are like that. Have something as a warmer for a change."

He did not wait for my nod, but leaning over pressed a button in the wall behind him. A panel slid away and a tray shot out with two glasses on it filled with—pure water!

He chuckled again at my look, then took a small metal box from a drawer of his table. The box held a hundred or more tiny brown pellets, of which he selected two, dropped one in each glass, and watched the water discolour as the pair dissolved. When a stream of hissing bubbles rose to the surface he handed me my glass.

"Martian Oxcta," he explained, though it was a thing I had never heard of. "It has all the virtue of Earth whisky without its drawbacks. Drink up. You'll feel no ill after-effects."

I tasted it, just the merest sip, found I liked it, then swallowed the rest at a gulp, the taste was so

excellent. There was exhilaration in the draught and something more. It made me feel a new man, one whom exhaustion and the few minor ills of the flesh that were left must inevitably pass by. In all my inter-planetary experience I had never tasted the like, and I said so.

"You wouldn't. Earthmen don't as a rule. Mars still keeps some of its own old secrets, things like this. But I happened to have been born there; as you know my wife's a Tlananian, and that counts too."

He slipped the box back in the drawer, and I heard a click as the automatic lock engaged. The care he took of it made me wonder what could be some of those other secrets at which he had hinted, and what, if anything, would happen to anyone who betrayed them. The Red Planet has its odd ways, as we all know, and these Martians can be touchy fellows at the best of times. A mite aggressive perhaps. They haven't the gentleness of the Venerians, whatever raptures one might go into over their womenfolk.

It came to me suddenly, sitting there, that the situation had its illegal side. I leaned forward.

"Hume," I said. "I'm a friend of yours, you're a friend of mine. Put it that way. This stuff of yours we've just drunk?"

"Yes?" He cocked one eye at me. "What about it?"

"Only this. I'm a Guard. They pick us for our qualities, integrity, moral, physical and every other way. Should I, knowing what you have, say nothing? There's an Earth law banning alcohol, even on space-ships in the void."

He laughed floridly. "No fear of that, Jack. There's not a trace or taste of alcohol in it. Giving it to you

transgresses no law in the Universe. Can you take my word for that? ”

I nodded. “ I know you, Hume. I’ve tested your word before.”

“ Good.” He said no more than that, and there the matter dropped. Quite a little thing, it seemed—then. Looking back, I’m not so sure. That odd Martian Oxcta, it appears to me, had something to do with the course events had yet to run. But let them speak for themselves.

We never felt the lift, the *Cosmos* rose so lightly from the slips. Insulated from all sound, as we were in the cabin, we heard none of the blare of departure either. Only the warning glow of the red bulb above the dial chart on the opposite wall told us that New York, the whole American continent indeed, was sliding away beneath us.

In the old days, not twenty years off, there was none of this gentleness in the take-off. We had not as yet learnt to control gravity with our screens; we could only nullify it, a practice that sometimes had dire results.

We sat and talked, and time went on. Soon the call would come for Hume to take over and sling the ship out of the Earth’s envelope of air, always a ticklish business. Already he had his eyes on the ship’s communicators, awaiting reports from the various control departments, when——

A shutter dropped in the wall, and a call came through from the communications room.

Hume touched a button. The face of the operator glowed in the screen and his voice came.

“ Call through for Mr. Sanders,” he announced. “ Televox.”

I rose to my feet, and Hume caught my eye. "I'd better leave you to it," he mumbled.

"No need," I said. I knew it didn't matter. He couldn't hear what was said if we didn't wish.

I stood before the screen, my fingers on the buttons that made contact. The surface of the screen flashed the room first of all, that room in Headquarters Building I knew so well, then the view narrowed, centring on Harran's chair, until Harran's face itself, lean, tanned and immobile in expression, completely filled the picture.

He gave me a twisted smile out of one corner of his mouth, that wry smile that boded grief and spoiled plans for someone.

"Hallo, Jack," his voice came, "release."

The command might have been Greek to Hume, but it carried a definite meaning to me. I released one button, that which intensifies the voice, and clapped the free hand over my ear. Hume could not have seen even had he been looking the flat black disc no larger than a penny that I held against my ear in that hand. Yet small as it was, its mechanism was marvellous. Even we of the Guard do not know the why of it, though what it does is plain to all.

The moment I put it into position the disc functioned. Harran's voice, which before had filled the cabin, faded away entirely; the screen itself grew dark. But I could still hear him talking, a tiny voice in my ear, clear and marvellously distinct, though a man standing at my very elbow could not hear a sound. Marvellous things, these silence discs. Just as well their use is restricted to the Guard, and the secret of their mechanism kept inviolate in half a dozen heads.

What Harran had to say was, if true, startling enough. Two space ships had come in that night with all communications paralysed. In each case the trouble had occurred in open space and was preceded by a feeling of intense cold, though the heating apparatus in each ship was working perfectly. Some passengers indeed had succumbed to the cold ; whether they could be revived had not yet been ascertained. All attempts to get in touch with landing stations had failed ; none of the communications would work, and it was not until the ships had effected a landing that they could make a report.

“ What is it ? ” I asked. “ Where do I come in ? ”

Harran told me. It might be some as yet undiscovered property of space that had caused the trouble ; it might—he thought it quite as likely—be the work of some alien intelligences, but whatever it was I was to keep an eye lifted. Should anything happen on our own particular ship I could, if I deemed it necessary, take over as Guard.

“ Hold on,” he cut in on his orders, “ there’s something else through.”

“ Quickly,” I warned him. “ We’re near the edge of the atmosphere now.”

Once we were away from the Earth’s atmosphere, of course, the televox would not function. Sound won’t carry where there is no air to carry it.

He switched back just in time to save using the slower, more cumbersome power signals.

“ Reports through from entry ports of Venus and Mars,” Harran took up again, “ state number of craft overdue, and failing to answer calls. The Guards are being notified at their stations, but to be on the safe side we’re tuning in on all who, like yourself, are

space-travelling. Use your own discretion, but solve your end of the mystery if you can."

"Is that all?" I asked.

The screen flashed up again, and I saw him nod. "That's all," he answered. "Good——"

He meant 'good-bye', but the last word came to me only as the thin ghost of a whisper. We had passed beyond the atmosphere, and we were out now in free space.

I slipped the disc back in my pocket, and looked around. The cabin was empty. At some point during my talk with Harran, Hume had been called to the control deck.

CHAPTER II

SHIP'S COMPANY

FEELING free of the cabin, feeling, too, a little bewildered by what had come through, I sat down to think the matter out. Some space-ships overdue; two others reporting excessive cold, though the heaters were working all right: that was all. Yet it was sufficient to galvanise Harran to activity, enough in his opinion to justify him calling me on duty.

What did it mean? What was that odd hint of alien intelligences? One felt tempted to say 'nonsense'. The idea did flit through my brain, only to pass. Nothing is nonsense nowadays. We cannot claim to know everything. Less than a century ago mankind sighed because there was nothing left to explore. To-day we have reached beyond the world; we have discovered other worlds, or had them discover us, not quite the same thing, as I may some day relate. At least we know that we have much to learn. that there are still secrets to wrest from space. We have set foot on four of the nine planets, the five others are in process of being explored, and we are not without hopes that soon the Galaxy may be penetrated by our space liners. Not much when one comes to think of it.

Idle speculations, of course, which took me nowhere. Hume I must see and talk with. It was clearly a matter of which he should be informed, though what

more he could do than I, it was hard to say. At least if I had to take over he would not be caught by surprise.

I got up to go in search of him, and the moment I sealed the door behind me I turned the other way and went instead down to my own cabin. I don't know why. Perhaps some impulse out of the void prompted me to do such a thing.

Everything was as I had left it. My baggage was still packed. My steward would have opened it and stowed my things away in the ordinary course had I not warned him to leave it alone. There were things in it that I had no wish for anyone to see.

I opened one hold-all and delved down to the bottom of it, and sighed with relief as I felt my hand touch the cold metal of the box I had planted there. It was sealed and locked, but I broke the one and undid the other, and drew out the ray tube from its nest of cotton-wool. It was a queer little weapon, six inches long, and no thicker than a lead pencil, but it could do deadly work up to fifty yards. I slipped the full magazine of twelve charges, things no bigger than match-heads, into the hollow butt and slid the catch over. A spare tube and the two thousand extra charges that were still in the box made me hesitate. I was about to slip them back into my luggage when once again I changed my mind.

There was a little ledge over my bed. One of the supporting girders of the deck above rested on the partition separating my cabin from its neighbour, and formed an angle and a dark shelf where the light did not penetrate. I slipped my little box in there, pushed it far back so that no abrupt motion of the ship would dislodge it. It would be safe there, I felt.

It was !

Then I did what I would have done before had not the change of mind come to me as I left Hume's cabin, went in search of the man himself. On the way up to the control room I slipped my silver badge out of my pocket and fastened it in my coat. A warning would not hurt him. He would guess the moment he saw it, and not be altogether taken by surprise.

A light metal ladder—so light a thing that had it been detached I could have carried it easily in one hand—led from the promenade deck to the control deck above. The upper end of it was closed by a bar snapped into place, charged, as I knew too well from experience, with a current that would give a nasty shock to any unauthorised person who attempted to force passage. A man, one of the crew, stood guard beside it with a ray tube in hand. It was all more or less show, for not once in a hundred trips does the need arise to use it, but routine is routine, and in free space the slightest deviation in the way of running things may well cause disaster, if not death, to the whole ship's company.

The man flung the tube forward dramatically as my head appeared above the level of the control-deck flooring, but I noticed that his fingers were nowhere near the button. The action was purely precautionary.

"I want to see Captain Hume," I said. "It's an important matter, you may tell him. Name is Sanders."

As I spoke I kept my hand clutched over the left lapel of my coat. It looked a purely nervous gesture such as any man might make, but it was not. I did it of design, to hide the blaze of the badge pinned on

my coat. I had no mind to broadcast my service before the appropriate moment. Time enough to do that when it became necessary.

The fellow stared at me doubtfully a moment.

"Stay there," he said harshly, and bending forward, peered down at me. I could see him plainer now, as he could see me. A touch of the Martian in him, I thought, though I could not be sure. After all, the characteristics, voice, manner and so on could be acquired as some of our Earthmen by constant association with the Martians have already acquired them.

The scrutiny no doubt satisfied him of my lack of evil intent, for he touched a button on the rail beside him, and the bar lifted, giving me passage. The pressure of the button, too, must have set a signal for Hume, for even as I reached the deck-level a door opened and a face looked out, then a finger beckoned.

It was Hume himself. I saw as I drew level that he looked by no means pleased to see me. Perhaps from what had gone before he already guessed at the possibilities of disturbance behind me.

"You wanted to see me?" he said; then at my look of amazement, he added, "There's a device by that rail that picked your voice up and relayed it to me. A new gadget. This ship is full of them. But a thing like that can have its uses. What is the trouble now, Jack?"

I slanted an eye towards the control room. "You're not alone?" I said.

"Something for my private ear, is it?" he said with a frown. "Well, you can say it just as well out here. There are four pairs of ears in there, you know. What is it, man?"

I dropped my hand from my lapel and the flash of

the badge caught his eyes. His face went nearly purple at the sight.

"By the Planets!" he exploded. "This is intolerable. No man's command is his own these days."

"Steady," I hushed him. "It's not as bad as that, nor near it. I've no wish to supersede you. I hope it will never come to that. What I want is co-operation, and I'll tell you why."

He cooled down at that, and I gave him the gist of my communicator message. At the end, "I don't like it," he said. "There may be nothing in it, but on the other hand there may be a lot. What am I to do?"

His tone was less aggressive, less hurt; he did not spark so much. I felt like insulating his anger a little further.

"What I'd like to do, if you do not mind," I said mildly, "is this. Call me the moment you sight or find your instruments recording anything out of the ordinary. I'd like a chatter with any other space ship we pass. And, of course, if we meet the Guards Patrol . . ."

"May the Guards fuse!" he snapped. "No, I didn't mean that, Jack. But no skipper likes to think that at any click of the clock he may cease to be master in his own ship. You know that."

"I know. I see your point of view. I won't hamper or irritate you. I'd even prefer not to take command. I've never done it yet where I could find a skipper willing to work in conjunction with me."

I held out my hand. For the moment he hesitated, then gripped me.

"There will be no trouble between us, that I'll

warrant you," he assured me. "I'll see you're kept posted, and whoever is on watch will have instructions to call you at any hour of the twenty-four if anything appears."

He stopped. His eyes lingered on my badge. I read the thought in his mind, and since I could afford to be magnanimous, I was. I slipped the badge from my coat into my pocket.

"There's no need," I said, "to advertise trouble before it comes."

He looked relieved. "I'm having you put at my table," he remarked. "I'll see you there, the first meal I'm free. By the way, do you want to scan . . . ?"

"The ship's papers?" I said, and hesitated.

He met me half-way. "Perhaps it would be better if you did. I'll have the purser warned. He's a discreet soul. You'd better confide in him. You'll find the way easily to *his* office."

He walked with me back to the bar at the head of the stairs, and spoke to the man on guard.

"Mr. Sanders is to be admitted, whenever he wishes," he said, and the man saluted. I fancied he looked at me more curiously than ever, and I wondered if he suspected my official status. Perhaps not, for it was no extraordinary thing for a captain's friends, within limits, to be given extra privileges.

Parey, the purser, was still in the throes of documentation when I appeared, but he took my intrusion in good part, and ushered me into his own private cabin off his office.

"I've seen you before," he said, but did not say where. "The skipper told me about you, too. What's it now? Something broke loose?"

"I hope not," I returned. "I'm coming to you in confidence, though," and I told him much what I had told Hume.

I thought he was a little shaken by the revelation, but he tried to make light of it.

"You fellows are always alarmists," he said, "particularly the shore-end." It was odd how the old sea-jargon still lingered in speech; one would have thought the inter-planetary service would have developed more of its own terms in the time.

"The shore-end, as you call it," I reminded him, "is staffed with men who have all graduated in space."

"That's the trouble," he grinned. "They don't realise that conditions might have changed since they came back to the atmosphere. However, here's a passenger list, shore-compiled, so any errors aren't mine. You'll mark that."

I took it, and the crew-list, too. Nothing startling in either. An average ship's company, an average passenger-list. Earthmen preponderating, the minority of Martians and Venerians about equally balanced. One name caught my eye as I ran down the list. I came back to it and paused.

"Nomo Kell?" I said, puzzled. "Queer name that. It isn't of Earth origin."

Parey smiled. "Nor Mars nor Venus either, I'll be bound. Like to see his prints?"

He meant the duplicate identification papers and photograph that are always handed in for checking at the office when an inter-planetary passage is booked. No needless precaution this, either. In the early days of space travel more than one ship was pirated because care was not taken to check the origins of the passengers.

Even now with our more efficient system of control the danger is by no means remote.

Strictly speaking, Parey had no right to offer me the documents. They are supposed to be confidential, and even had I demanded sight of them he should have surrendered them only under protest. But I think he realised that in my case the more I knew the less harm was likely to come to anyone, and after all I had opened up the matter myself.

I took the papers from his hand. The details were not illuminating. They ran to the effect that Nomo Kell was a Martian citizen, qualification, the statutory one of twenty years' residence; the spaces that should have contained his birthplace, parentage, and so on were bracketed by the one word 'Unknown'.

"Queer," I commented. It looked like laxity on the part of the Martian authorities.

"Queerer still," said Parey, as he handed me the photo. "Look at this and see why."

I held the thing up to the light and looked it over. The colours came out exceptionally well, and threw the man's features into vivid relief. The scale at the side of the picture showed that he stood between seven and eight feet high, a giant of his kind. His eyes were an odd kind of purple; even in that colour print they seemed extraordinarily alive, and—what shall I say? Not so much menacing, as holding the possibility of menace. That's nearer it. His skin, where it showed, face, ears and hands, was an odd blotchy red that gave the suggestion of having been boiled.

But the queerest thing of all about him was the shape of his head. I had never seen anything like it before. It was crested. A ridge of something that looked like horn started a little above his forehead,

and ran back, as I found from the note, to his occiput.

"Where in the Universe does such a one come from?" I asked. "Is he a freak?"

Parey frowned. "Anything but that," he said. "Listen, I'll tell you something. He came across on our last drift. In talk with some other passengers, certain questions about Mercury came up. He flatly contradicted the others' views, told them quite definitely they were wrong, let it appear that in some way he knew what he was talking about. See the suggestion?"

"That he is a Mercurian. But that's nonsense."

Parey looked at me owlishly. "Because we haven't made that planet yet, eh? Too close to the Sun our scientists say, too risky. Perhaps so. It'll be long before we can take the chance of exploring there. None the less, it would be easier for Mercurians, granted there are any such, to come to us than for us to go to them."

"We don't even know it is inhabited," I pointed out.

"We don't even know that it isn't," he countered in almost my own tones.

He was right there. There was just as much to be said for one point of view as for the other. The very closeness of the planet Mercury to the Sun has always made observation a matter of difficulty even in these days when stellar telescoping is advancing by leaps and bounds. Seeing that was so, there was nothing to be gained by balancing one unproved theory against another equally unstable. Meanwhile the fact remained that Nomo Kell, being someone out of the ordinary, might well repay a little close attention. Not that the matter seemed likely to overlap my

present duties. On the contrary, it was quite distinct. Still, as a Guard it was my duty to note the abnormal.

I drew up a report that night before I went to bed, condensed it as much as possible, and took it to the signals room for transmission to Harran. The operator looked it over in a puzzled fashion.

“What the blazes is this?” he asked. “Don’t you know all messages must be written in a recognisable tongue?”

“That doesn’t apply where I’m concerned,” I said. “Send it as it stands.”

“Why?” he said, a trifle defiantly.

I showed him why. He stared at my badge with a droop to his lip; it was marvellous the effect that little silver shape could have on the recalcitrant.

I could see, however, that he was still curious as to the language in which the message was written. I did not tell him that it was a tongue that had ceased to be a living language on earth nearly fifteen hundred years ago. He was too young to know that it was only three-quarters of a century since it had ceased to be taught in the schools as a so-called classical language. In that seventy odd years, however, it had so completely dropped out of use and sight, even amongst cultured men, that when it became necessary for the Inter-Planetary Guard to have a means of code communication of their own, it was selected as the one language least likely to be tapped. Additionally in its favour was the ease with which it could be learnt.

I waited until the fading of the helio glow showed the message had gone through, and the flash-back brought an acknowledgment of its receipt. Then I went off with the intention of turning in.

I had been but a few hours on board the *Cosmos*, but in that short space of time my plans had been materially altered. What further might happen before we entered the Martian atmosphere was purely a matter of conjecture. As one who has always dealt with events as they transpired, I preferred not to speculate.

My cabin had a window opening on the promenade deck, and when I drew the dark slide back I found I could see across and through the quartzite windows of the hull. An odd star, wondrously bright in the absence of air, showed in the black void of space.

CHAPTER III

THE LUNAR CALL

I AWOKE to the sound of a buzzing in my ears.

It took me some time to realise just where I was, and what that sound could be. Then abruptly it came to me that I had over-slept, and that this was the warning note of the breakfast call. How many, I wondered, would face the tables this morning. Not many, I fancied. Even in these enlightened days a goodly proportion of folk still suffer from a species of air-sickness, akin no doubt, to the '*mal-de-mer*' that once used to attack travellers on Earth's oceans. Seemingly it is quite distinct from the malady caused by rapid acceleration through the atmosphere.

The tables were fairly crowded, I found, when I reached the saloon. Either our doctor was not a popular man—there was a fair sprinkling of ladies present—or else he knew his work so well that he preferred prevention to cure.

Hume, heavy-eyed and with his face lined, was half-way through his meal when I appeared, but his vision was as good as though he had not spent the better part of the intervening hours on control. He caught my glance as I entered and beckoned me to a vacant space beside him. I noted as I took my seat that my name had already been affixed to the chair-back. Hume's doing again, unless it was Parey's. One or the other.

I ran my eye over my table companions. A Martian woman was my opposite, quite the loveliest creature I had ever seen. She could not have been more than twenty-five, and the full glow of health made her fine eyes sparkle, and her pink cheeks glow with a greater vitality than we Earth people are used to seeing on our own planet. Strange how, despite their height, these Martian girls seem so wonderful. Her name, I learnt, as introductions went round, was Jansca Dirka.

The man who sat a plate away was a Dirka, too, but it did not transpire whether he was her father or her brother, and there was nothing outwardly to show which he was. That, the way they wear their age, is to an Earthman another puzzling feature of the Martians. I have heard it said—how true it is I do not know—that they retain their bloom right to the very last, then fade and die almost in a night. An uncomfortable attribute.

Knowing Hume's leaning towards his wife's folk I was not surprised to find I was the only Tellurian¹ at the table. I had expected more Martians, if anything. Instead, the remaining four were Venerians, those quaint, not unlovable people who somehow remind one almost equally of a bird and a butterfly. Pretty they are, hardly human as we understand it, they seem. Yet . . . But that is running ahead of my story.

Father, mother and two daughters they were, the latter three very interested in everything strange and new, yet with an interest that one felt sure was purely evanescent. That, I am told, is the impression one

¹ Tellurian—a native of Tellus, the inter-planetary style of the Earth.

always receives on first making contact with the Venerians. How far from true of the race as a whole it is may be judged from the fact that it was the Venerians who first discovered for us the practically inexhaustible deposits of rolgar on our moon. Rolgar, as everyone knows nowadays, is the substance—one can hardly call it a mineral—without which space-flying could not have attained its present ease and safety. When one looks back on the first crude rocket flyers and compares them with the small, neat, inexpensive and altogether reliable engines driven by rolgar one begins to realise what a debt we owe to its Venerian discoverer, after whom it was named.

The Venerian himself was an official of the Rolgar Company, he told me, and was bound for the Archimedes Landing on the Moon with a party of Earth miners. His wife and daughters were stopping over with him.

I shook my head. "No place for women," I hazarded.

He smiled. "Not such a wilderness as used to be imagined," he answered me. "Little troubles to be faced due to variations of pressure and extremes of temperature, but on the whole quite a change for a short period."

His wife and daughters seemed eager to sample the new experience, as all women, no matter what their planet, welcome a novel sensation. Mir Ongar himself—such was his name—had paid more than one visit to our satellite, so counted himself something of an authority on it.

Hume rose from his seat in the midst of our talk, gave me a careless nod, then as he came round the back of my chair dropped a whispered word in my ear.

"Control room as soon as you're ready," he said.

The words slid so softly from the corner of his mouth that I doubt if anyone else heard them. A glance about almost assured me of this.

I could have lingered there at that table merely for the sake of stealing glances at Jansca Dirka, but something more in Hume's look than his speech made me imagine an urgency behind his parting words. Also, oddly now I come to think of it, I had a wish to see what Nomo Kell looked like in the flesh. The thought of the man intrigued me, though I was far from suspecting him to be one to run contrariwise to the Laws of Space. The mystery it might be my lot to probe arose without, not within, the flyer.

As I came out on the promenade deck I glanced through the quartzite windows. We were veering in now towards the moon, and its disc was beginning to fill the void ahead of us; the Earth behind was dwindling, though its size was still considerable. I judged we had not yet reached the mid-way point of gravity, for an odd quiver of the hull showed the propulsive power of the rolgar engines was still on. In a little they would be cut off and we could use the moon's attraction to draw us onward until it became necessary to counteract the pull and decelerate.

"A light-message for you," said Hume as I entered. He took an envelope from a drawer and handed it to me. "I thought it better not to mention the matter at the table. One never knows."

"Why," I said, as I slit the envelope, "is there anyone on board, at our table in particular, you suspect as likely to tamper with a Guard's private messages?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "One never knows," he said again, this time, I felt, evasively. "At least I have no intention of running counter to your tribe.

Nice thing for me and my family, if the Guards had me derated for interference when I'm within a year or so of retiring on a pension from the Service."

Cautious, extra cautious man. Well, better that than a loose-lipped babbler, though one must admit it is usually on the freighters that latter type is found.

I spread the flimsy paper out in front of me, and translated as I read. In one way it was of little import, though it came over Harran's signature. It was merely an acknowledgment of my over-night report, with the added note that if in the event of a Guard's ship being handy when anything untoward occurred I need not interrupt my holiday, but could hand over investigation to the patrol.

"Formal acknowledgment of my last night's report merely," I said off-handedly to Hume. Better to satisfy the man's curiosity at once than give him material on which to exercise his imagination.

"Thought as much," was his comment. "Though if more of these messages keep coming and going our operators will be getting headaches. It's a code none of them has handled before."

"If they'd lived a century ago," I said a mite incautiously, "it would have been child's play for them to read it."

He flashed a glance at me. "A dead language," he remarked, and said no more about that. But I could read the thought in his mind, the question whether the tongue itself had died a natural death or been legislated out of existence. As though the manner of its extinction counted one jot beside the fact that it had ceased to exist.

"By the way," I asked, not that it mattered much, but it gave him something new to think about, "these

Dirkas, who are they? Of course," I added, as I saw him hesitate, "I can get their prints from Parey."

"No need," he answered me. "They're friends of my wife and myself. Dirka herself—her father—is a director of the Martian Canal Company. The girl is nothing. Being a Martian woman she need not work for a living."

That, from an Earth-man, was a subtle jibe at conditions on his own planet, or rather the planet of his race. I passed it by, however; there was nothing to be gained by retorting that on Earth many women preferred to work.

He eyed me curiously. "Sanders, how old are you again?"

"To be exact, thirty-three," I said. "Why?"

"And unmarried as yet," he went on, not answering me direct. "Well, there's time, and, friend of mine, by the comet's tail, the best I wish you is no worse luck than I had myself."

I might have thanked him for that, but I merely grinned. Thoughts of love had never come to me; even now they seemed as remote in thought as Alpha Centauri was in fact.

He ran on. "I suppose you have the whole ship's company more or less neatly taped by this," he said.

"Not much need of that," I returned. "There's only one person aboard this ship that I'm much interested in, and that only as a matter of curiosity."

"Who," he said, with a lift of the eyebrows, "is that? I had no idea we were harbouring any interesting personages—from your point of view—this trip?"

"Nomo Kell," I said. "Have you seen or heard of him yet?"

He drew his eyebrows together at that, as though

the name seemed familiar, yet he could not quite place it. Briefly I described the fellow to him.

"Queer," he remarked at the end. "A freak, monstrosity, if you will." Still that puzzled look lingered on his face. "It strikes something in my memory, something I wish I could recall clearly," he explained. "I can't though. Some legend of my wife's people."

"Perhaps the other Martians on board . . . ?" I hazarded, but he shook his head.

"They would not know," he said quite definitely, but did not explain why.

Another of these strange taboos, thought I, a queer secret of the planet that is still after decades of contact a world of mystery to us Earth-men who, unlike Hume, have not been accepted into the nation.

As I passed back along the promenade deck I met Nomo Kell himself for the first time in the flesh. It was as well that I had been warned of his appearance. Had I come upon him suddenly, without any such foreknowledge of what I would see, I don't quite know how it would have affected me. Given me a high tension shock perhaps, left me gaping, doubting that my eyesight was functioning properly. Yet he was not fearsome. It was the utter unexpectedness of him that astounded.

We know nowadays that the human form is not the only intelligent kind of life in the Universe; even on the three inner planets there are sharp divergences of race and language, on two of them divergences even of the kind of bodies in which what might be called the man-equivalent intelligence resides; and there was no reason why I should look amazedly askance at what I saw. Yet I did. Nomo Kell's print had

scarcely done him justice. Or should you like it better it had flattered him to an extent. Leave out the flaring purple of those magnetic eyes, and the crested abnormality of his head—size of his body apart—and there was little even in the colour print to differentiate him from the ordinary planetarian.

But seen now walking within a few paces of me I sensed something else. What it was I could not say with any exactness. A force, perhaps. A radiation. I could not tell. It was something that seized hold of me almost tangibly in a way I cannot describe at all lucidly. Imagine a swimmer finding himself struggling in a sticky liquid he had a moment ago known was water, yet feeling no fear, realising no harm could come to him. Imagine that, I say, and you have some idea of what came over me then.

He gave me no more than the one fleeting incurious glance, and passed by. I might have stood there staring after him but for a voice in my ear and the touch of a hand on my arm.

“ You find him interesting, Mr. Sanders ? ”

I turned. It was Jansca Dirka at my elbow. I reddened. I had been caught in an act of rudeness, no light matter when one is likely to trench on touchy inter-planetary conventions.

“ And a little more, Miss Dirka,” I said, using the Earth style of address. I had never quite accustomed myself to the long string of phrases, flowery and complimentary, which with these Martians take the place of our more direct ‘ Mr.’ or ‘ Miss ’.

“ I thought you would,” she said gravely. “ You have noticed his steps ? ”

I had not. I hardly gave them a glance until she drew my attention to them. Now I saw that he walked

with a peculiar mincing gait, a sort of gingerliness, as though each movement was carefully timed and measured.

"He seems," I said slowly as it dawned on me, "to be deliberately shortening his paces, walking with extra care as we would on the moon's surface."

"Exactly. The *Cosmos* is still adjusted to Earth gravity; we travelled Martians and Venerians have become so accustomed to its variations from our own planets that our re-action is automatic. But he——" She flung out her hands with a curiously expressive gesture.

I caught the flash of the idea in her mind. "It looks almost," I said, still a trifle doubtfully, "as though he was used to a larger planet than we."

"It looks that, almost," she mimicked, quite in my own intonation. "Which, if so, is a matter worth thinking over. I might even suggest it would be well not to let such an idea lie dormant in the back of your mind."

With that and a tingling glance she turned and was gone, leaving me wondering. These mysterious Martians—Hume was practically half one—with their hints, and their suggestions, their puzzles and the sly thrust of their vaunted superior knowledge! What did she see or know that I could or did not? What indeed made her suggest anything of the sort to me? No hint of my office, I could swear, had escaped Hume. He was too discreet for that. And the operators would not babble. Remained there Parey as a possible talker, though only remotely so. I could only think that somehow, uncannily, she may have guessed.

Our engines shuddered, a shiver ran through our

whole framework, then died away. We had passed the mid-point of gravity, and with our motors shut off were utilising the Moon's pull to draw us rapidly towards her.

Presently landing notices were being posted up on the boards in various parts of the ship, and the crew were beginning to shift out the baggage of the landing party. Yet it was between six and seven hours later when we slid gently down to rest in the air-lock of the Archimedes Landing, and the departing passengers began to adjust their helmets before stepping out into the atmosphere-less wilderness of the Moon.

CHAPTER IV

THE WRECK IN THE VOID

I HAVE spoken of the Moon as airless, yet that is not strictly correct. Habit, however, is a hard thing to cast aside, and one clings stubbornly to old beliefs even in the face of the newer facts. Our satellite, as we have known for centuries, lacks atmosphere such as we possess, and its day and night, each of fourteen Earth days in duration, swing from torrid heat in the one to the extremes of perishing cold in the other. But in the rifts and hollows and the abysmal depths of the craters air still lingers, tenuous and all but unbreathable to us, but air nevertheless. Such life as there exists on the Moon lives mostly underground, or did until the advent of the rolgar mines.

To counteract the extremes of heat and cold, and secure a constant supply of air at earth pressure huge buildings have been erected. Each mine is practically an enclosed city, entered through air-locks. It was on one of these air-locks that the *Cosmos* had come to rest; one of her ports was jointed to a port in the air-lock, forming a sort of enclosed gangway, through which passengers ascended and descended.

Apart from the mechanical ingenuity that aided the embarkation there was nothing to see of any interest. Give me a landing in the free air every time. From where I stood I could see through the quartzite side of the promenade deck above and

beyond the air-lock, while I was able at the same time to run a speculative eye over the passengers leaving and arriving. Those taking off were mostly Earth miners, rough, rugged fellows, with an odd Earth official with them, and, of course, my acquaintances the Venerian family of Mir Ongar.

There were not so many coming on board. Mostly Venerians. A couple of those ubiquitous planet-trotting Martians with them to add a leaven to the dish. We took on no Earth-men. When one comes to think of it, it is a curious thing that the Moon should hold least attraction for those who are closest to it. If it had not been for the Venerians and their discovery of rolgar I believe we would have been content for ever to sheer past it into space. As it is the Moon—or rather its rolgar mines—gives us the means of holding the balance of Peace in the Universe ; the sinews of inter-planetary war are to a great extent ours, and none can fight should we decide to cut off supplies.

Our stay on the Moon was only of short duration. An air-port inspector or two donned oxygen helmets and made a thorough examination of our landing gear and gravity screen apparatus before passing us out. As soon as that was done and our clearance had been issued our port was sealed and disconnected from that of the air-lock, the signal given, and the lift begun.

Beneath us Archimedes dropped away until the black circle of its crater was no more than a shrivelled ring. Mars flared up redly ahead, though presently we shifted our course a little as though we meant to leave it to our left. This, however, was due merely to the fact that we were in a sense circle sailing. It must

not be forgotten that if we were travelling in space so, too, was the planet of our destination. Our course was set exactly for that point in the void, where, according to our astronomical charts, our orbit, if one can use the expression, and that of Mars should intersect. A ticklish job, you must understand, is this of space navigation, requiring a remarkable intricacy of calculation and cross-calculation.

So the days passed. Once we sighted a meteor heading, it seemed, directly for us, but our repeller ray sent it rocketing off on a new path.

A finger touching me lightly on the shoulder brought me with a jerk out of the depths of sleep. I touched a button at the wall side of my bunk and the light tube above my head glowed brightly. I blinked. Gond, the first officer, was standing beside me. Seeing that I was awake :

“Quickly, Mr. Sanders,” he said in a half-whisper. “The skipper wants you.”

“What is it ? ” I queried.

“I don’t know. Something I sighted out in the void of space. It was my control hour. I called him, he sent me to call you.”

“I’m coming.” I slid out of my bunk. “I’ll be there—control-room, I suppose?—as soon as I can dress.”

“Quickly, quickly,” he breathed again. He knew not what it was he had sighted—some wandering mystery of space, no doubt—but that the urgent need of my presence had been impressed on him deeply enough it was plain to see.

“I won’t waste a minute,” I said. “You can go back. I’ll follow almost on your heels.”

Indeed, I was half dressed before the door shut on him. A Guard sleeps often in his clothes; when he does not he can get into them with a minimum loss of time.

It wanted two seconds to the minute I had allowed myself when I slipped through the door in my turn, fastening buttons as I went. At that hour no one save the officers and crew was likely to be about; I need not fear that, half-clad, I would run into any of the passengers.

Hume himself awaited me, dressed only in tunic and shorts. The control-room was warm enough to make up for any deficiencies of costume.

"What is it?" I asked the moment I stood beside him.

He did not reply but motioned me to the screen that communicated with our look-out 'eyes'.¹ The screen darkened momentarily, then flashed into light as the beam from our searchlight shot out and picked up the object that had occasioned the alarm.

For some seconds I was not quite sure what it was. Possibly because it was drifting towards us end on, I thought for a moment that it was a meteor, but the slowness of its approach should have warned me from the start that it was not that at all. Then as we swung round and I could see it broad-side on it looked more like a space-flier. That indeed was what I would have felt satisfied it was but for the absence of lights on board. A long cigar-shaped object, tapering to a point at one end, made blunt

¹The look-out 'eye' was a selective lens that had the power of picking up an object in the same fashion as the human eye, and reflecting it on the screen. It is a very complicated piece of mechanism for all its small size, and the secret of its construction is closely guarded. Invented by Lodz in 1993.

and warty at the other by the discharge tubes that clustered there.

"Can you get her name?" Hume whispered to me.

I could not. But I made sundry adjustments to the scale knobs at the side of the screen and the projection of the space-flier seemed suddenly to leap forward and become closer.

With some little difficulty I at last picked out her name. "M-E 75 A/B," I read from the line painted near her prow.

"Mars-Earth," Hume amplified. "Carrying A and B class traffic, passengers and freight. Um. This is your job, Sanders, I think. I wonder what's gone dead in her?"

"That's yet to learn. How did you pick her up?"

"Our locator positioned her long before we were able to see her. We—Gond, that is—thought it was another meteorite. But you see it isn't."

He paused and looked at me.

"Sanders," he said abruptly, "I am in your hands. What am I to do?"

"I'd like a look at her, a closer one, if I may. Can we lay alongside?"

"We can board her if you wish."

"I'd better. I wish you'd give the orders."

He threw me a smile at that. This big bluff man had his weakness, and I played on it that night, partly from a sense of courtesy, partly because it was policy. As long as I did not interfere with his command, just so long as I asked him as favours what I was entitled to order or demand, he was my grateful warm-hearted friend. Something of his appreciation of my consideration, my care not to humiliate him before his own officers showed in his face.

I left it to him to give instructions, and set myself to watch the craft itself. We had veered a little, our speed was slackening, yet we would have to move round in a wide circle before, perhaps in another half-hour, we could come back and sheer in beside the stranger craft. Our engines, which had for a while been silent—for in free space once a certain pace is reached impetus and freedom from friction carry us onward—took up an odd pulsation, just enough to steady us.

Momentarily I lost sight of the derelict, picked her up again and again from all sorts of odd angles as the movable 'eye' mounted on our prow swung round as we altered our course. Then abruptly I saw the length of the derelict looming large beside us, a black bulk that almost filled the vision screen. Came there a slight jar and I realised that our attractors had caught and held her.

Word came up from the port control that we were connecting and that our air-tight extension had been sealed against the derelict's nearest port.

As I turned away from the vision screen Hume caught my arm.

"Can I come?" he whispered in my ear. "I'm interested . . ."

I nodded. "Certainly. I'd like a witness, and someone to check my own observations. What are her tests?"

He spoke into a tube, then turned to me. "Normal interior air pressure," he reported. "Temperature 28 degrees Fahrenheit."

I whistled. Four degrees below freezing point. Something queer there. Either she should have dropped to absolute zero, or else maintained the

normal interior temperature. What in the name of the Universe was holding her constant?

I took down one of the emergency coats from a hook, a heavy fur-lined fabric that covered me from chin to ankle, slipped my feet into the insulated boots one of our helpers held towards me, and drew them thigh-high. With the coat drawn in and its bifurcations buttoned tightly round each leg I was insulated against cold. I could even feel the warmth of the heater wires in the fabric as the current from the battery fixed to the back thrilled through them. I drew on my gloves and someone clamped on my air helmet, sealing it temperature tight on to the metal collar at the neck of my coat.

Each helmet contained a radio attachment that provided means of communication with each other and with the ship if necessary. I tried mine. It sparked, and a fraction of a second later I heard Hume's voice burring in the receiver at my ear. Sealed against air and temperature variations, we could yet converse as we chose.

"Ready, Sanders?" he said, and when I answered in the affirmative he led the way down the direct ladder to the connecting port.

The connecting port, really a long metal tube that could collapse in on itself telescope fashion, had been extended to the wall of the derelict and clamped there. The door of the latter's port had been opened mechanically, but the blasts of normally heated air the fans were sending through our craft pulsed along the connecting tube and kept the temperature there from diminishing perceptibly.

The moment we stepped through the open port of the stranger vessel, however, we sensed the change.

Despite our heated emergency kit the cold air lapped round us, clutching our limbs with icy fingers. For the moment the grip of it, no less than the inky blackness of the ship's interior, halted us. I had a feeling that the cold was not so much the absence of heat as a sentient thing in itself.

Hume touched the button of the portable light at his belt and I followed suit. The white beams sprang out, filling the place with a light akin to natural daylight.

There was nothing to see here, but then neither of us expected that there would be anything. It was up in the control departments and the living quarters that we hoped—or feared; neither of us was quite sure which—to make our discoveries.

The direct ladder that led straight to the upper control department seemed clear, and with my place as an Inter-planetary Guard to sustain I took the lead. The trap-door was closed, but it opened at a touch and I climbed into the compartment, then turned to give a hand to my colleague. A moment later we stood together, staring round the cabin.

It was nothing like as modern as its equivalent on the *Cosmos*. From some of the devices it seemed the craft was at least ten years old. I made for the log book. Search brought it to light in the drawer of the captain's table, and a comparison of dates showed that it had been written up within twenty-four hours. Therefore whatever had happened to render the craft derelict had occurred within the measure of one earth day.

Both of us had naturally expected to find some trace of humanity in the control-room, bodies, if not living creatures. But there was no sign of anyone

and no sign of a struggle. For all we could see the men on duty might have walked out the door in as orderly a fashion as though they were going ashore.

"What do you think of it?" I asked Hume.

His voice buzzed with a perturbed note in my ear. "I don't know what to think," he said. "It's weird, uncanny. It's——" Whatever else he was going to say he pulled himself up with a jerk.

"We can't form any definite opinion about anything until we've searched the ship from control to keel."

"Quite so," I agreed, but as he made a move towards the door I stayed him.

"Let us read the dials before we go," I suggested.

He moved towards me again, and we studied the indicators. The engine dials showed an ample supply of fuel, and the stud had been pushed over to 'Stop'. No question about that then. The engines had not run down or been brought up automatically. Human agency or something akin to it had been at work here.

Mindful of what Harran had told me I turned to the heating machinery indicator. It showed that the apparatus was still running. Yet here we were in an atmosphere at present a few degrees below freezing point, whereas the thermometer should actually have registered something between sixty and seventy degrees Fahrenheit.

Curious on this point I turned to the wall thermometer. The glass was shattered, the mercury had vanished. From the way in which the glass had broken it was impossible to say whether the damage was deliberate or due to excessive cold. If it was the latter the control cabin itself must have at one period endured a temperature of at least forty-four degrees below zero!

Hume clutched my arm convulsively.

"What is it?" I asked, starting.

"I thought . . . I felt," he spoke in a strained voice, "as though someone . . . or something . . . had just come in."

I swung round sharply. The door, which a moment or so before had been closed, was now open a space. Even as I stared the gap seemed perceptibly to widen.

CHAPTER V

THE SLEEPERS

As a man I am no braver than the rest. I know there are more things in the Universe than we have as yet managed to tabulate, forms of life, abodes of intelligence, that may appear monstrous to us, just as perhaps we appear monstrous to them. But as against this I believe—and experience has yet to prove me wrong—that everything there is must face dissolution sooner or later, that it can indeed be killed suddenly and violently, provided only that one can reach a vital spot.¹

My courage was oozing from the tips of my insulated boots as I turned towards the door, and I was already aware of an uncomfortable, prickly sensation about the region of my backbone. Nevertheless the fact of another's presence gave me comfort, so, taking my ray tube in my free hand, I swung the door wide open with the other, and sent the beam of my lamp searching down the dark passage outside. I saw nothing. No visible entity appeared. My audio-

¹Mr. Sanders stresses this point, probably because when the first Earth-men reached the Moon they found there in the central caverns actively inimical forms of life that it seemed almost impossible to kill. It was not until Borendeler's invention of the ray tube in A. D. 2,000 that they were finally exterminated. It is now known, of course, that they were endowed with a natural armour that effectively protected their vital parts, though for long the legend that these lunar animals were immortal persisted on the earth.

phones, which would have recorded the sound of any movement, however faint, remained stubbornly silent. Only a wave of cold that threatened to bite through the warmth of my emergency coat seemed to flow in on us like a living thing.

"Nothing there," I said in a tone meant to be reassuring.

"Nothing," Hume repeated, and I could have sworn to a faint note of relief in his voice. "I'll tell you what, Jack," he ran on, "it's the uncanniness of this place that's giving us the creeps, that's what it is. The sooner we pry into every nook and corner the better. We're losing time as it is and letting our nerves get the better of us."

There was sound good sense in that, but oh, how I wished we had brought some others with us. I would have given much then to have had a couple of my own sturdy, hard-headed Guards beside me. Something of what I was thinking must have impinged on Hume's consciousness, for :

"It's a pity we didn't bring a man or two with us," he grumbled in his helmet.

"And have them take a risk we don't care to face?" I countered.

"Oh, well, there's that to it," he answered. "Let's get ahead before we start thinking other things."

He tried to push past me, no doubt in the hope that in action he would find a spur to his own courage, but I stayed him. These space-captains may rate themselves as highly as they please, but when it comes to facing the dangers of the unknown it is the Guards' privilege to lead. I think he guessed my motive, for he flung me a whimsical smile, plain to see through the glass front of his helmet.

I shut the door carefully behind us. I was more or less sure now that some unnoticed motion of the vessel had sent it stealing open, but I had no mind in case I was mistaken that I should be taken un-awares. If that door should open again I would know of a certainty that there was an intelligent agency at work.

As we traversed the passage to the promenade deck my mind played round what was to me the most significant feature we had so far come across, the utter emptiness of the control-room. I could not imagine any officer of the Inter-planetary Service leaving his post unless there was good reason for it. And everything pointed to the supposition that the desertion, if such it could be called, had included everyone on duty in its scope.

Our beams wavered down the line of the promenade deck, fell on the chairs spread about the space, and simultaneously we stopped dead, and looked fearfully at each other.

“Did you see it?” Hume whispered.

“See what?” I asked, for I wanted corroboration of the reliability of my own eyesight.

“The people sitting in their chairs . . . still . . . lifeless.”

So I was not dreaming. Hume had seen what I had seen. “Hume,” I said abruptly, “we haven’t thought of it before. We’ve taken certain things for granted. But there should be buttons about the wall here . . . lights . . . better than our own portable lamps. Perhaps after all they may be working.”

He swung the beam of his own lamp round, then his mittened hand closed over a stud and drew it down. Instantly the length of the promenade deck

sprang into light. I shuddered. Row on row of chairs, most with occupants, met our eyes. They sat as stiff and still as figures carved from wood. Dead, it seemed, without a doubt.

I leaned over and touched the nearest figure, a woman, on the cheek, and even through the heated thickness of my gloves her flesh struck cold. I drew back with a gasping sigh.

"Hume," I said, "this is beyond us. We must know how these people died, if they're dead; if not, what's wrong with them. And that's a doctor's job."

"That's what I'm thinking," he agreed. "I'd better call him up?" He looked to me for approval.

I nodded.

He adjusted his communicators to the ship's, and purely out of curiosity I listened in on him.

"That you, Gond?" I heard him say. "Good. It's Hume speaking. Send Dr. Spence over at once. What's he to bring? I'm sure I can't say. Oh, yes"—I'd whispered to him—"say it may be suspended animation, or cold exposure. That's data enough for him. And, yes, better send two men with him. The most reliable. And give them a ray tube each. They can reach us through the control-room. No, nothing yet . . . of any importance."

I liked that. He was not giving anything away, forgetful, no doubt, that with the stranger ship's lights on and the two craft riding side by side the deck we were on would be plainly visible. Thanks be it was during the sleep-hours, else we would have had eager, excited, curious, perhaps fearful passengers peering at us across the gap from the quartzite windows. I thought of that, thought too what might happen if

some sleepless individual began to wander along the deck, saw, gaped, and went off to wake his friends.

"Tell Gond," I cut in in a quick whisper, "to close his shutters on the promenade deck. Else we may be watched. What we have to do may be better done without curious onlookers."

He put that through, and I heard the click as he cut out.

"We'd better wait," I said in answer to Hume's unspoken question. "More may turn on what Spence can tell us than we think." Nevertheless I put in some of the time of waiting by looking about me. It seemed that everyone had been frozen into immobility as he or she sat. The thing itself had come upon them suddenly, for there was nothing either of surprise or horror in any face.

The doctor came with his attendants, stared at the still figures, made such tests as he could, then straightened up and faced us. In the white light of the vessel's deck I could see his face show blank through the glass front of his helmet. His hand went up to make some adjustment of his audiophone before he spoke.

"Frankly," he said in answer to my question, "I can't tell you what it is. They've been frozen, that's what it amounts to, but several of the characteristic signs are absent."

I guessed what he meant. I'd looked closely for the blue and purple splotches, the other signs of a man frozen to death, and had failed to find them. Frozen they were in a sense, yet perhaps turned to stone more nearly described them. A little bead of perspiration trickled from my forehead down my

nose; the glass front of my helmet seemed to be clouding a little; there was a feeling of warmth that I had not noticed before beginning to permeate my body under the emergency coat. Of a sudden the meaning of it came to me.

"Hume, Spence," I called through the audio-phone, "it's getting warmer. Can't you feel it, both of you?"

Something akin to a blank consternation showed for the moment in Hume's face; the doctor looked interested, albeit a trifle puzzled.

"Don't you see," I ran on, "this cold's disappearing? The heaters are beginning to make themselves felt. All the time they've been warming up the air, not perceptibly until now. But it's a big lift from forty-four degrees below zero up to the twenty-eight it was when we came on board. That means that from the time this happened—whatever it was—until the moment we stepped aboard the heaters had raised the temperature a matter of seventy-two degrees, from minus to plus, a tremendous lift. What's more, they're still doing it. It must be getting back to normal now."

"But why," said Hume, puzzled, "didn't the heaters freeze out too when this happened?" He made a clumsy gesture of his mittened hand to include the figures on the chairs.

The answer to that hit me almost the instant he asked the question.

"Simple," I explained. "The heater plant runs in a vacuum. External cold couldn't affect it."

"Of course." His voice was tingling. "I should have thought of that before."

"I didn't until just now." I put my hands up

clumsily and caught at the fastenings at the back of my helmet.

"Steady, man, what are you doing?" Hume said agitatedly.

"I'm beginning to roast. Perhaps we can take our kit off now. At least I'll be the first to try."

"But the air," Hume's voice was vibrant with warning. "We got a normal pressure, but there may be something in it, something inimical to life."

"I'll take the risk," I answered. I had seen something out of the corner of my eye, something that looked a mite uncanny. I preferred not to say what it was—yet. But it made me think that the air was safe, breathable at any rate.

I fumbled at the fastenings myself, for Hume mumbled he did not want what might happen on his conscience if anything went wrong, and in the circumstances I was not inclined to press him to help me. But I saw the doctor was following my example, though the two men waited to see what their skipper was doing first.

The helmet came off at last and the cool air hit my face. Cool air, not cold. The temperature, as I had surmised, was lifting degree by degree as the heaters struggled with and overcame whatever it was had caused the cold. The air was breathable. At least I could sense no foreign element in it, nothing to account for that abrupt drop in temperature.

In a moment I had stripped my emergency coat, leaving only my boots. They did not matter so much. The doctor was free of his trappings by this, too. He took one gulp of the air, and looked across at me, then I saw his eyes widen.

His glance had travelled past me to the chair at my

back. I whirled round. The woman whom I had first examined was stirring, yes, visibly stirring. Her bosom rose and fell, gently at first, then more rapidly as she gulped in the air. Her eyes opened . . . wide. She stared about her. Her glance fell on us. One expression after another chased with the rapidity of light across her face—astonishment—incredulity, fear, I thought.

An inarticulate cry, a sort of strangled scream, issued from her lips, and her head dropped forward in a faint. Spence sprang to her aid.

But the little cry, almost soundless though it was, might have been some signal already agreed upon. All over the deck figures were stirring. It seemed that one surprise on another was being stacked up in front of us.

Hume, with his helmet off and himself half-way out of his coat, uttered an exclamation. I gasped as I followed the direction he indicated. A tall man with the insignia of an Inter-planetary skipper on his collar and coat-sleeves had risen languidly from a chair some distance down the deck, coming to his feet slowly, with a bewildered expression on his face, as though he had just been roused out of a sound sleep.

His expression changed as he saw us. Surprise, anger at this seeming alien invasion of his vessel, seized on him. He made a quick movement forward, then came striding down the deck towards us.

“What . . . what’s the meaning of this?” he demanded. Then a puzzled look came into his eyes and he passed one hand across his forehead.

“How . . . how did I get here?” he said bewilderedly. “The last I remember was in the control-

room, thinking it was getting rather on the cold side, wondering if anything had gone wrong with the heaters."

I took his arm. "Captain," I said, "there's a mystery here. With your help we'll solve it. We came on you, floating in free space, without lights, you . . . your people stretched out apparently dead . . . as you were just now."

"Who . . . what are you? From what ship?" he asked quickly, the light of an odd fear in his eyes.

I slipped my fingers in a pocket, found my badge and extended it flat in my palm towards him.

"You're safe . . . in good hands," I said. "Whatever you have to tell, you can say without fear."

For the moment he hesitated, staring away from us through the quartzite windows of his ship at the black shadow of the shuttered bulk of the *Cosmos* floating a few yards away.

"My officers, the men who were with me . . ." he said a trifle incoherently, running his eyes down the long lines of chairs.

The passengers were stirring now, coming back to life, all a little bewildered if one could judge from their expressions. The woman who had fainted had now revived, and it struck me that she was the only one of the lot who had shown any sign of fear on regaining consciousness. Could it be that she alone of all that company had seen something? At least I was not minded to leave the ship until I had had a chance of questioning her.

"Good," I said, "your first duty is to your officers. I think you'll find them all here, on this deck." You see, I was beginning to have a glimmer of what had happened, though the precise motive behind it all eluded

me. "Get them together, bring them somewhere where we can talk. All that were on duty when . . . when whatever it was happened."

I dropped my voice an octave, came a little closer to him. "Captain," I said, "don't look round. But tell me quick, who is that woman just behind us?"

He turned slowly as though looking down the run of the deck. I could have sworn his eyes did not so much as touch the woman in passing, but:

"A Mrs. Galon," he whispered back. "An Earth-woman, she says, though I take leave to doubt it. Why?"

"We'll want her," I told him. "After we've talked with you. But see she doesn't move away. I'd rather she had no opportunity to speak with the others in the interval."

"As you wish," he said deferentially. There was magic in that little badge of mine, a magic that made me proud to belong to the Service it represented. After all, we Guards may hold up schedules, and interfere much in many ways, but it can never be said that we use our power at any time for anything but good. Perhaps that is in the long run the secret of our power.

"Better," the captain shot at me in a whisper, "better get your men to tend her. Mine . . . I don't know. . . . Everything's bound to be disorganised."

I gave the cue to Hume, and he passed the word to his two men. I gathered they were to cut Mrs. Galon out a moment after we left, shepherd her after us, and keep her waiting in the outer room until we were ready for her. As it was while the skipper was rousing the watch on duty the others of us unobtrusively slid between her and the rest of the passengers.

I don't think she noticed it, or if she did she gave

no sign. Her interest seemed centred on Spence, perhaps because he was the first of our company with whom she had come in contact, the only one at any-rate who had paid any sort of attention to her. That it had been purely medical attention did not, I felt certain, matter in the least.

A moment it seemed and the space-ship's captain came striding back to us, behind him a little straggle of his men.

"I am ready now, gentlemen," he said, "if you will follow me."

He led the way along the deck, but it struck me in the instant's glimpse I had caught of his face as he passed that he seemed of a sudden to have grown worried and a little afraid.

CHAPTER VI

THE GUARD-SHIP

As we passed off the promenade deck on to the ladder leading to the control-quarters I flung a glance back. Mrs. Galon was sauntering along behind us, one of our men on either side of her. She was too far away for me to see how she was taking the situation, though something in the very way she moved convinced me that she was not in the least upset. Not unlikely she was feeling rather pleased in that she was the focal point of all eyes. In the little I had seen of her she had struck me as that type of woman.

I shut her out of my mind, deliberately, knowing that the two attendants could be relied on to do what was required.

The captain of the *M-E 75* pushed open the door we had so recently shut, switched on the light and stood aside for us to enter. We went, followed by the duty man, the second in command, and the captain himself. When the door was shut :

“ My name is James Bensen, and I am captain of the *M-E 75 A/B*,” he said, rattling off his declaration. “ We are homeward bound from Engahn, Mars, to London, Earth. Crew sixteen all told. Passengers, forty-three adults, two children. Cargo, marsonite¹ in bulk. Here ”—he flung open a drawer

¹ Marsonite, a Martian ore which, when combined with cobalt steel, yields the alloy from which the shell of most space-fliers is made nowadays.

of his table, and drew out a steel box—"here are my papers. You may want to frank them."

"Thanks," I said, as I took them. He had made merely the formal declaration of identity and carrying traffic that is required of every space-boat that is stopped and challenged by the Inter-planetary Guard. Before I went further I ran through his papers, found they agreed with his declaration, and scrawled my name and status in the space provided.

"And now," I went on, "I want to know something of what occurred to you. But before you start your story it may help if I tell you what we found."

I gave him in detail a sketch of all that had transpired from the moment our locators had picked up his ship drifting free until the time he regained consciousness on his own promenade deck. I was careful, however, not to hint that other ships had apparently suffered in a similar way.

His brow knitted as my story proceeded. It was plain he was more perturbed and bewildered than ever. At the end :

"I don't know that I can tell you anything much at all," he said, half apologetically. "Things were going as usual ; I was in control ; my second and the duty-man were with me, when I fancied it was getting a bit on the cold side. The indicator showed, however, that the heating machinery was running as usual."

"One moment," I interrupted, "can you give me any idea of the time of this ?"

He stopped and did a brief calculation in his head. The pause made me realise that he was still running on Enghan (Martian) time. At last :

"It would be the equivalent of about eight p.m. Earth Western time," he said. "The passengers

would have just finished dinner, I fancy. Yes, I'm sure of that, for I remember as I glanced at the heater dial my eyes passed over the time dial and I noted that in a few minutes it would be the hour. Where was I?"

"You were feeling the cold," I prompted.

"Oh, yes. I was on the point of ordering the duty-man to call up the heater control and ask what was wrong when it seemed that I suddenly dropped into unconsciousness. At least that's what I think now must have happened. When I came back to understanding I was propped up in a chair on the promenade deck. That's about all I can tell you," he ended lamely.

"Thank you," I said formally.

He looked at me a trifle anxiously. "It doesn't help matters much further forward, does it?" he remarked.

"It's hard to say . . . as yet," I told him. "Now, the others. . . ."

The second and the duty-man had much the same story to tell. In each case there was this sudden feeling of intense cold, a vague wonder as to what could have caused it, then the abrupt plunge into unconsciousness, and the puzzling awakening on the promenade deck.

"On the face of it," said Bensen at the end, "it looks as though we were carried from here down to the deck while we were unconscious. Though," he added thoughtfully, "I can't see how anyone could have existed through the sort of cold that we felt."

"You did," I pointed out. "All of you."

Bensen smiled. "I'm afraid I didn't put that too well," he said. "I should have said 'retained

consciousness' rather than 'existed'. A cold chilling enough to send us into a torpor for some hours should have had the same effect on anything . . . anybody else, I mean."

"Not necessarily," I said. "Put it this way. Suppose the people—we'll assume that's what they were—who moved you came aboard in emergency suits like ours, insulated against cold. They would have experienced little or no difficulty in doing what they did."

A light sprang up in Bensen's eyes. "You're assuming, of course, that the cold was an artificially induced state, but it seems to me that there's one point you've overlooked. Assuming you're correct the cause of the cold must have been introduced from outside, perhaps in the form of a gas. The biggest argument against that, however, is the fact that we are to all intents and purposes hermetically sealed between ports, besides being insulated against the cold of space."

"We're dealing with facts," I said a trifle testily, "not with theories. The fact is that something happened here to lower the temperature to such a degree that everyone lost consciousness. The heaters were functioning perfectly normally, so whatever occurred was not due to any breakdown on their part. And if you want any further evidence that it was the work of an intelligent agency you have it in the fact that you and the others on duty recovered consciousness in another part of the ship. In plain English, while you were under the influence you were taken from the control-room to the promenade deck and left there."

The captain regarded me crestfallenly. There was

no gainsaying what I had said. Facts are facts; in this case, however incredible they might seem, there was no denying their existence.

"That's true," he admitted wryly, and looked to me for the next move.

"That being so," I went on, "the point to clear up at the start is whether the trouble originated on board or arrived from outer space. We've already, you see, come to the conclusion that it was the work of intelligent beings."

"You mean to say," Bensen cut in with a light in his eyes, "that there's a possibility that someone on board, some passenger perhaps, was at the back of this?"

"It's not impossible," I answered, but I spoke a moment too soon, for the gleam faded from his eyes before I had the second word out of my mouth.

"No, it could not have been a passenger, or indeed anyone on this vessel," he said reluctantly. "That's too patently impossible."

"In what way?" I demanded, a glimmer of his meaning coming to me.

"Cold, like heat, has to be manufactured," he explained. "This kind of cold at least that is not so much the absence of warmth as a definitely induced state in itself. You need apparatus and chemicals and so on."

I nodded. I saw now what he was driving at. Even in the second decade of the twentieth century science was beginning to realise that cold was not so much the absence of heat, but a state quite as distinct and as readily induced, even though it happened to be at the other end of the temperature scale. A homely illustration of this was, as a matter of fact,

to be found in the old ice-making plants, or more obviously still in the whole system of artificial refrigeration. Of course Bensen would know this. A space-liner skipper must be a man of definite educational qualifications, and periodically he has to face the examiners and show that he has kept abreast of the science of his calling.

"And what you are working up to, I've no doubt," I said, "is that no such apparatus or chemicals could possibly be smuggled on board. I know the examination of passengers' baggage on embarking is pretty strict at the Earth ports, but how about the other planets?"

"Mars," Hume put in in his deep voice, "is even stricter, if possible. No, my friend, you can rest assured that nothing of the sort could have got past the examiners at Enghan."

"Very good," I said. "That's impossible. Remains the other alternative then, that some space-visitors half-froze you into a state of unconsciousness, then boarded the vessel, with what object has yet to transpire."

"One moment." It was Hume who interrupted. "Tell me why everyone was half-frozen—if you're correct in saying that—instead of being wholly frozen, stiff and stark."

"The answer seems simple enough," I retorted. "The heaters were running all the time, and once the nadir of temperature was reached they gradually managed to overcome the condition. More plainly, no one was left in the frozen state long enough for harm to ensue."

The two captains nodded almost together. "Seems feasible," Hume agreed.

"But even that's only the beginning," Bensen said glumly. "Admitting we've reasoned rightly up to this point, admitting further that by some means yet to be discovered space-raiders made an entrance to the ship, we've still to settle who or what they were, and what exactly they came for."

"What of value have you on board?"

"Nothing," he told me, "other than our marsonite cargo, and that as you can see from the indicators"—he pointed to the cargo dial on the wall—"still shows intact. Looks as if the whole thing was absolutely without motive."

I wondered. I would have liked to have known what, if anything, had been removed from those other space-ships Harran had told me about. Of a sudden an idea swept into the forefront of my brain.

"If I'm not mistaken," I said quickly, "we have a witness of sorts."

The others looked a question.

"Mrs. Galon," I said. "I think she knows or has seen something. Bring her in, somebody."

"Of course." Bensen's tone suggested that he should have thought of her before, was blaming himself for not having taken her into his calculations.

He stepped to the door, and beckoned to our two men to bring the woman in.

She came glancing questioningly from one to the other of our little group; even the presence of the doctor did not seem to reassure her. I imagine that during the time of waiting she must have been turning matters over in her mind, must have been wondering and, perhaps, finding a lengthening fear beginning to throw its shadow across her path.

Yet she was a woman of character and of decision

Before any of us could speak—the slowness was mine in all truth, for the initiative had been left to me—she lifted her head, quite regally, and swept us with a glance different from that she had given us only a moment ago. This was something imperious, one could almost call it defiant.

“ Well, gentlemen,” she said, “ what is the reason why I have been brought here and kept under guard awaiting your pleasure ? ” Her voice had a clear note in it, rather on the musical side ; her dark eyes glowed with life. They flashed even brighter as she turned to the one man of our little group she knew.

“ Perhaps you, Captain Bensen, can explain it ? ” she said.

He gave a deprecatory shrug of the shoulders, shrugged the responsibility right off and on to us—to me, rather.

“ The doing is not mine, Mrs. Galon,” he said. “ I’m under orders, too.” A smile flickered for an instant about the corners of his mouth, and in that moment I decided I did not altogether like the man.

“ No ? ” she said with a quick, questioning lift in her voice. “ Is that so ? ”

“ It is,” he said. “ We are in the hands of the Guard.”

In such a moment one imagines all sorts of things, most of them without any foundation in fact at all. I thought, however, though probably I was mistaken, that a glance of understanding passed between them. Yet this in the light of his remarks about the lady the moment I questioned her identity, could not be so. He would hardly have hinted she was not all she seemed had there been any understanding, however slight, between them.

"The Guard?" she repeated, and her eyes searched our stranger faces with greater curiosity. Her voice had sounded her relief; of its genuineness there was no possible doubt.

"At least in the hands of one representative of it," I said, and bowed.

She looked at me with a genuine interest she had not hitherto displayed. Her irritation at her detention appeared now to have vanished entirely; indeed it had gone so quickly that I was more than half convinced it had been assumed from the very first.

"Then . . ." she said, . . . "then . . ." and there she stopped.

"Then," I prompted gently.

She made a slight movement as though the mental resolution she must have made had its physical reaction. "Then," she said very steadily, "I wasn't dreaming. It wasn't a nightmare. Only something serious, extremely serious if the Guard is playing a part in it."

Mystifying, too much so in fact. Getting us nowhere at that. I made an abrupt movement of impatience.

"You saw something," I said sharply. "In those few minutes on the deck in your chair before you fell asleep, something happened. What was it?"

"If I said just what I saw, or rather what I fancy I saw, no one would believe me," she said a little fearfully. "I . . . I don't want my sanity questioned."

"No one will doubt you," I told her. "Listen to me, Mrs. Galon. I can tell you something that may help you. I can trust you to keep it to yourself, not breathe a word of it to the other passengers?"

"Of course," she said. "I won't say a word to a soul."

Frankly I did not believe her. I was certain that inside an hour it would be all over the ship. Not that it mattered much, not that it could do any harm . . . now. But thinking she was being taken into my confidence, believing that she would have the sole right of retailing every word I said to whomever cared to listen, she was almost certain to tell me without reservation everything she knew.

"This, then," I said slowly, "is not the only ship that has had a similar adventure. This, however, is the first ship I've boarded, and I'm not conversant with the exact details of what happened on the others. But from that you can rest assured that there are more things in space than we've yet charted, more things perhaps than we are ever likely to chart. However, it's my business to get to the bottom of this particular mystery, and if you can give me the slightest help the Service and I will for ever be your debtor."

Flowery, you will say, and so thought I, and hated myself while saying it, but something told me she was of the type to whom such phrases were meat and drink. Out of the corner of one eye I saw Hume frowning. He was a straight, blunt man who preferred the straight, blunt ways. The pity of it is they do not always work.

"Oh," she said. "We—ell, I don't know that there is much to tell, really. But what there is . . ." She took a deep breath. "I was sitting in my chair on the deck just where you found me. Of a sudden I began to feel cold. I wondered if anything had happened to the heaters. I've heard of such things happening, though, of course, they don't occur nowadays. Then I thought perhaps I'd better go to my cabin for a wrap.

"I should have got up at that, risen to my feet, I mean, but, you know, I didn't, because I couldn't. I tried. I'm sure of that. But it was as though I'd become completely paralysed all of a sudden. I could not move a limb, not even a finger, only my eyes. Why they weren't paralysed too I can't say. Then there was that feeling of intolerable cold and another feeling on top of it just as if I were sinking away into unconsciousness under an anæsthetic. Not actually an unpleasant feeling at that.

"I think I must have been on the verge of going, for things seemed very misty before my eyes, when the odd, startling thing happened that I'm still not sure wasn't something I dreamt. Two figures carrying someone came down the length of the deck. The person being carried, a limp unconscious body, must have been Captain Bensen or one of the officers. I couldn't see the face, only the uniform.

"But it was the people, things, whatever you care to call them, that were carrying the body that . . . that made me think I was dreaming. Figures perhaps eight or nine feet high, higher than any Martian. Figures even isn't right. They weren't real, not tangible, isn't that the phrase? They seemed just like mist. Have you ever seen the sunlight on Earth of a hot day? You know a beam of sunlight seems to become visible, with little motes—specks of dust, are they?—dancing in the middle of it. Well, that was just what these figures looked like, only not so clear, if you understand me. They were vaguer. Almost invisible, one might say. But the most horrifying thing about them was that I could see clean through them. As they passed I could see the side of the deck and the quartzite windows, and even a

star or two in the black void beyond, just as if they were transparent, made of glass themselves. It was horrible ! ”

Her voice faltered to a stop.

“ Yes ? ” I said encouragingly. “ And after that ? ”

“ After that ? Oh, I’m sorry. Well, after that I don’t quite know what happened. Either I fainted off or the lights went out ; I don’t know which. All I can say is that everything seemed to go dark. The next I remember is seeing you good folk round me.”

She finished and looked expectantly from one to the other, as though she fancied we would treat her tale with derision. Yet there was nothing in it to laugh at, nothing at all impossible or outside the realm of scientific possibility. She had told her tale better than I had expected ; she had shown a touch of dramatic instinct, and a sense of detail. There was just one thing she seemed to have omitted.

“ Can you describe the figures more closely ? ” I asked, but she shook her head.

“ I’m afraid I can’t. I saw only the vaguest outlines, and they, if you understand me, seemed to flicker. They weren’t quite steady.”

“ As though light, a faint light, were playing on them ? ” I suggested.

“ Yes, that’s just what it looked like,” she said quickly. “ How do you know ? ”

“ I don’t,” I said, smiling. “ I merely guessed right, as it seems.”

Truth to tell, all the while she had been speaking one idea after another had been tumbling through my mind. Something about light and its refractive qualities, something about things being made invisible through the light beams being bent. I wasn’t quite

sure of it, but I had a book in my luggage on the *Cosmos*—one of the old print-books—that dealt with problems of the kind. If my guess was right the puzzle of the space-visitors' invisibility was solved though there still remained enough of other problems concerning them to send a man grey-headed.

"That's all right then, Mrs. Galon," I said the next instant. "We won't keep you any longer. Thank you very much for what you've told us. It will be a great help."

She smiled. "Do you really mean that?" she said challengingly.

"Most certainly," I said, and this time there could be no doubt of my sincerity.

When she had gone, "I'd better take her discs and prints," I said.

The radio operator who had been with us all the time and whose business it was to attend to such matters turned to the little wall machine. A compact piece of mechanism that recorded every word that had been uttered and every gesture made in the room since the moment Mrs. Galon had entered; it was so cleverly hidden that I doubt if any outsider would have suspected its existence. It was more or less a development of the old sound film idea, and one not dreamt of by the general public since the so-called talking film had fallen on evil days with the advent of the televox-television machines. Nevertheless it was in pretty general use in space-ships, examining-rooms and in all places where permanent records of statements were required.

The operator pushed a button placed in an inconspicuous part of the machine, and a little panel slid back, revealing a cavity from which he took a roll of

still dripping film, and three or four discs. The spoken word was recorded at the side of the film, of course, but since it was not always advisable or possible to run the film through when one wanted to consult it, the sound was also recorded on discs rather after the style of the old gramophone records that one sees nowadays only in museums.

"Be careful of that film," the operator said to me as he handed it over. "It's not quite dry yet. Perhaps I'd better dry it out for you."

"How long will it take?" I asked.

"Three to five minutes," he answered. "I'll have to go cannily, as I don't want the stuff to run."

"Go ahead," I answered. I could spare five minutes.

I saw Hume shift from one foot to the other, then glance impatiently at his watch. It was evident he was getting impatient and wondering how much longer he was going to be held up. There is nothing these space captains like less than to have their schedule upset, and after all Hume had double grounds for irritation at the delay. This was in a sense a trial trip of the *Cosmos* and a good deal would depend on the time she made on the voyage. I tried to level things down as much as possible.

"It amounts to this, Captain Bensen," I said. "You've been boarded in mid-space, and subjected to a good deal of inconvenience and annoyance. On the other hand your cargo as shown by the indicators is intact, and nothing has been touched here in this cabin. Is that a fair summing up?"

"More or less," Bensen agreed. "Except that you'd better record that there's nothing to show who our visitors were, or even that we had any at all."

"Only Mrs. Galon's statement," I cut in.

"Barely visible entities," he said, "things without form or substance."

I could have retorted that they at least had been able to carry him and his colleagues half the length of the ship, but I did not. There was little to be gained by antagonising the man unnecessarily. Instead :

"I should imagine," I said mildly, "that it would be hard to explain what has happened in any other way."

"I think," said Bensen with almost my own intonation, "that you will find it hard to explain matters in that way."

What more he might have said I can only guess. For at that moment there came the low whine of the locator, a shutter on the wall of the cabin dropped and a red bulb glowed to life.

The operator sprang to the television screen, connected the communicator, and with the receivers to his ears took the call. The plain surface of the vision plate suddenly brightened, but the operator's body screened it so that I could see only the warty tube projections on the tail-end of the ship that had signalled us.

I moved a little nearer, and at that the operator swung round.

"Inter-planetary Guard-Ship E.22 calling," he said. "Wants to know what the trouble is."

The E.22 ! My own Guard-ship !

CHAPTER VII

THE VOYAGE RESUMED

FOR the moment no one moved in the little control-room; no one, I imagine, was anxious to shoulder the responsibility of any move, then :

“What shall I reply, sir?” the operator asked abruptly.

It was significant that he looked, not at me, but at his own captain.

Bensen flashed me a look. “It’s for Mr. Sanders to say,” he said dryly. “We’re in his hands.”

“If I may,” I said, “I’d like to answer that call.” I looked to Bensen for permission, a needless formality as we all knew, but it is ever my way not to ruffle a man’s dignity more than is necessary.

“Go ahead,” said Bensen gruffly. To the operator he added, “Mr. Sanders will tell you what to reply.”

I moved nearer to the machine, and the man glanced up at me enquiringly, his finger on the transmitting button.

“Do you mind,” I said silkily, “if I send the message myself?”

He did not answer but stepped aside with, I thought, an ill-grace. There is a certain close communion between these service operators which leads them to resent the intrusion of an outsider, more particularly when the latter has power to ride rough-shod over them. I could understand his resentment, mild though

it was, even sympathise with it, but as the innocent cause of it all I had my duty to do, and that to me was paramount.

I'll swear the change-over did not occupy more than a quarter of a minute, nevertheless it was long enough for the man on the *E.22* to grow impatient. Even as I fixed the ear-phones over my head the crackle of his signalled questions sounded in my ears.

"Don't be so impatient," I signalled back, as fast as I could work the button with my finger. Then without giving the *E.22*'s people time to think up something snappy in return I changed over to the Guard-ship code. The vision screen beside me was now showing up their control-room, just as ours must have been becoming visible to them.

A man was standing near the operator, watching the screen that reflected the interior of our control-room. I saw him start, peer at the surface of the vision plate, then a broad grin came over his face. It was Glenn Vance, my relief. Recognition came to him almost at the moment that it had come to me.

Curious to think that, though we were separated by the gods know how many miles, by virtue of the magic of the television screen we could look, as it were, into each other's faces, and see the thoughts mirrored there. Had we been within the atmospheric envelope of any planet we could have spoken just as readily. However, for some reason that seems to elude our scientists the televox does not function in the void; it will carry the voice only where there is air. Myself I have never been able to understand why sound impulses cannot be sent across free space in the same way that our beam impulses can. There must be a reason, but I have never heard it given.

Some day the difficulty may be overcome as worse difficulties have been overcome in the past; meanwhile when in space we rely for communications solely on our signal and television apparatus. In which connection there is a story of the operators on two Guard-ships—brothers, they were—who contrived to talk to each other without the aid of the power beam and all the cumbrous machinery of signals. Both brothers were experts in the sign language of the deaf and dumb, and needed only to see each other pictured in the vision plate of the television screen to hold an intelligible conversation. As a story it is no doubt apocryphal; nevertheless it is one of these things that deserve to be true even if they are not. But I digress.

I gave Vance an outline of the situation, told him why I was here, and waited for the suggestion I hoped he would make. It came without hesitation.

“Pity to interrupt your holiday,” the reply clicked in my ear. “I’ll take over if you wish and let you get on your way.”

I signalled delighted agreement.

“Coming over at once then,” he signalled back. “Will clamp on to your vacant port opposite side to the *Cosmos*.”

The screen went blank and the crackle died in my ears. I turned to Bensen.

“The *E.22* is coming over,” I told him. “She’ll connect up on your free side and her people will take over, probably escort you to the atmosphere’s edge, if you wish.”

Bensen nodded. “Good,” he said. “Anything that will get us safely and quickly to our destination sounds good to me now. But you?”

"I'm going back to the *Cosmos* as soon as I've handed over," I said. "I'm no more anxious for delay than you are. Also I have Captain Hume's feelings to consider. I've upset his schedule enough as it is."

"Oh, don't worry about me," said Hume. "We're all in the hands of the Guard nowadays. It's the price we pay for safety and smooth-running."

I scented an under-note of smouldering sarcasm that might yet burst into flame; I knew that he had it in his mind to add that scarcely a voyage passed without the Guards having to hold up the ship. Of course, the safety of his craft and his passengers had probably depended on the Guards' action, but there is no manner of use pointing out that sort of thing to a potentially irritable man. Bensen, I felt, would probably sympathise with him if it came to a matter of argument, might even find a grievance for himself arising out of my supercession of his operator, cannily as I had tried to arrange it.

I was saved from saying something that, however well intentioned, might have led to an exchange of remarks for which we would all be sorry a moment later by the glow of the warning bulbs advising us the *E.22* was connecting and would want the port opened on signal. It came a second later, a dull buzzing that filled the room.

Bensen gave the order to open the starboard port. It would have been just as easy for the *E.22*'s people to have opened it by the manual locks from outside as we had done on boarding, but then they knew this was a live ship and under control, whereas we had believed her a derelict. Circumstances alter cases, and after all these little niceties of courtesy are not all empty conventions.

Came there the clump of feet up the ladder, then the smiling face of Glenn Vance appeared.

"So it's really you, Jack, in trouble as usual," was his greeting as he gained level flooring and came towards me.

"The only trouble I'm in is that of delay," I said a little sharply. I was not in quite the mood for bantering, anxious as we all were to be on our way. "The sooner you can take over and let us get off the better we'll be pleased."

"'so?" he said agreeably. "Well, tell me what it's all about, and you can hand over at once."

He had already had my resume over the power beam, and it only needed filling in. He seemed to find the matter vastly interesting, and did not appear altogether surprised at it. As I learnt presently, Harran had sent him a flash, an all-ships' call, setting out the situation in outline.

Thereafter we speeded things up as much as possible, and in a little less than ten minutes from the time Vance had arrived, Hume and I and our people were making our way back to the *Cosmos*. As I turned to go I put my hand into my pocket and drew out the compact little packet of film and discs.

"You'd better take these," I said to my colleague. "Mrs. Galon's statement."

"Good. They'll do as a check. Everyone of course will be examined again at London Landing. It'll be interesting to see how close she keeps to her original statement. Well, good-bye and a good journey. I wouldn't change with you, anyway. I'm in the thick of it here, trying to unravel this mystery, while you . . ."

He stopped significantly.

"While I," I said, "am right out of it, leading a calm and placid existence."

"Vegetating for the duration," he laughed. "Well, you'll hear all about it when you get back to duty, and probably will want to kick yourself for being out of the climax of the most interesting investigation in years."

"Probably," I agreed.

If I—if he—had only known!

We got back to the *Cosmos*, found her still the same silent ship, sleep-wrapped save for the duty watch; closed our port, and signalled our imminent departure to the others.

Slowly we slid away from the bulk of the *M.E.75*, then, as the rolgar engines began to take hold and the phosphorescent glare drift from our reaction tubes, we gathered speed and shot ahead. The *M.E.75*, with the Guard-ship now unbuckled and hovering close by her, receded behind us remotely into space.

CHAPTER VIII

' A MARTIAN GIRL SEEKING KNOWLEDGE...'

I SLEPT late. The buzz of the breakfast call did not wake me. I knew nothing until the steward at the door filled my cabin with the grotesque wailing of the sounder. I came to with a start, dimly realising what had happened.

After our adventure in mid-space and our return to the *Cosmos* I had tumbled into bed, dog-tired. I had locked my door against intrusion, but had forgotten everything beyond that. Since I had slept beyond the normal hour, had not answered the breakfast call, and there was no indication in my message grid beside the door of the time I wished to be called, my steward had not unnaturally concluded that something was wrong. As a preliminary to forcing entry he had given an emergency call on the sounder.

I sprang out of bed the moment the wailing started, and made shift to open my door. Had I not done so, had I altogether ignored the noise of the sounder, the electric control that locked the cabin would have been thrown out of gear at the control board, and entrance, in the nature of an investigation, would have been made into the cabin. Oddly enough, it is not at all unusual on such trips to find neurotic, depressed or nerve-strained people locking themselves in their cabins, and taking some form or other of euthanasia. Not very pleasant for the other passengers,

for no sight in the Universe can be so weirdly depressing as a burial in space. . . . From this, however, you can understand how the fact of a passenger failing to answer a call spreads uneasiness, if not alarm, through the ship.

I released the switch and flung open the door. My steward's face showed relief when I appeared.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sanders," he said awkwardly apologetic, "but when you didn't appear for breakfast and there was no message in your grid, I thought . . ."

"You did quite right," I told him. "My fault entirely. I tumbled in tired last night. Never dreaming I'd over-sleep the breakfast call, I left no message. I'll be more careful next time. What's the hour now?"

"Ten a.m. Earth western time," he told me. "We'll change over to Martian time at midnight to-night. We're working up velocity now."

That was news to me, good news in a way, for it showed our trip would be over sooner than I thought. I might have guessed it had I awoke sooner, for the fabric of the vessel quivered slightly to the soft yet steady pulse of the rolgar engines. Not often are they used in free space, save to take off or slow down. Evidently Hume had decided we had wasted quite enough time over the unscheduled stop last night, and was using the engines to work up to a velocity where our impetus would carry us on.

The steward lingered. "If you'd like . . . if you want something to eat now, I think I can manage it," he said hesitantly.

Looking out for an extra tip no doubt, the rascal. Well, it didn't matter much. He'd looked after me

well to date, and I could do with something to eat and drink. The night call on my strength—amazing how those emergency suits take it out of one—had left me famished. I knew I couldn't bide the time till the next meal without something in the way of food.

"Get what you can as soon as you like, and bring it here," I told the man, and with that dismissed him.

I made ready while he was away. A certain giddiness that I did not like attacked me from time to time as I moved about. It was nothing much when all was said and done, nevertheless it worried me. In some way it was akin to space vertigo, an affliction I dreaded, for it would mean the end of my career in the Service. In all my eleven years in the Inter-planetary Guard-ships I had not been troubled by it, and so had concluded I was immune. It would be a pity now if, after all that time, the attacks should come on.¹

The trouble passed away, however, by the time my tray arrived. Probably it was no more than momentary weakness engendered by the exertion and the tenseness of the night. The fact that it left me completely once I had made my meal seemed to satisfy me on that point.

A knock came to the door just as I was putting the finishing touches to my toilet before venturing out. Thinking it was my steward coming back for the empty tray, I called, "Come in."

The door opened, but it was another steward, a

¹ Space vertigo, a species of giddiness akin to mountain- or air-sickness that occasionally attacks inter-planetary travellers. While comparatively harmless in the opening stages, if not checked immediately, it exercises a depressing influence on the sufferer, and often establishes a disposition to suicide.

man whose face I had not seen before. He had a message from Hume, it appeared. The skipper was enquiring after me ; if I was up would like a word with me ; if not, wished to know how I was.

A graceful gesture, I thought. " I'll come along and see him," I said. " Where is he ? In the control-room ? "

In his cabin, in bed, the steward told me. That was rather a surprise. It set me wondering, wondering if there were any connection between my recent giddiness and Hume's indisposition.

Hume was sitting propped up in his bed when I entered. He looked a little grey, I imagined. He did not speak until I had closed the door and we were left alone.

" Glad to see you're about, Jack," he said then. " I was beginning to wonder."

" Wonder what ? " I asked. " What's wrong with you, anyway ? "

He made a wry face. " I thought it was space vertigo when it came on," he said. " I was up before the breakfast call, not much sleep naturally, seeing what we were at during the night, but when I tried to move about the first thing that happened was that the cabin started spinning round me."

" That's bad. And then ? "

" I won't bore you with my symptoms. I got a scare, however ; began to imagine space vertigo was seizing me, saw my career snapping off short, and all that helped to make me worse, I suppose. However, the long and the short of it is that Dr. Spence came down, tested my reflexes, and decided that it wasn't space vertigo after all."

" No ? Listen, Hume. I had a somewhat similar

experience this morning myself." I gave him details. "What do you make of that?" I ended.

"What Dr. Spence does, that we got out of our emergency suits too soon last night. There must have been something in the air of *M.E.75*, something other than the cold, an ingredient with a slightly anæsthetising property. We're feeling the after-kick of it now. It's got into our systems and is acting according to our various resistances and the length of time we were exposed to it. Seems that it's something that seeps through the insulation of those emergency suits too. Spence and the two members of the crew with us merely complained of a slight lassitude; I got the full kick of it, while you overslept this morning, and so probably gave time for the worst of it to wear off."

"That's about the size of it, I should imagine," I agreed. His explanation seemed quite feasible. The one of us with least sleep and most exertion had been the one to feel the worst effect.

"What's Spence ordered you to do?" I went on.

"Stay in till I'm better," Hume smiled. "I'm feeling that way already, and—if you don't mind—we'll have the complete cure in a moment or two."

"Oxcta," he went on. "You'll find the box in that drawer. The lock's a simple switch one. The white button breaks the circuit, the red one opens it."

I did as he told me, and drew out the little steel box I had seen my first evening on board, and handed it to him.

"Now the water," Hume said.

When I handed him the glass, "I'm glad you were able to come," he said. "I wouldn't risk getting out for the things myself—that's how I feel, you can

see—and I've no mind to let others into my secrets. People blab, and if the whisper got out that I drugged, I couldn't very well contradict it without revealing just exactly what it was I took. And that I wouldn't do, except to an odd one like yourself, whom I trust implicitly."

He knew he could trust me, was so well aware of it that he had not even to hint it was a matter he wished kept quiet between our two selves.

"I needed that," he said as he swallowed the last of the draught. Then he eyed me. "I've been thinking of myself solely. You need a taste of it, too. Draw yourself a glass."

I did, mixed it under his supervision, drank the stuff, and felt immeasurably the better for it. I said so. He did not answer, merely nodded, and still eyed me, a trifle more thoughtfully now. Abruptly:

"Jack," he said, "I've been thinking. Last night put a fancy or two into my head—came in since, I mean, while I've been lying here and thinking. Yours isn't altogether a pleasant job, though no doubt it has its romantic side. Still, you may get into tighter corners than I'm ever likely to. Corners of the sort we were both in last night."

What was coming, I wondered, as he paused. Something momentous?

"A few of these on hand"—he held out a dozen of the Oxcta pellets to me—"might be valuable. Only, I must ask you never to say that you have them in your possession, never indeed acknowledge that you know of their existence. I shouldn't do any such thing; I've never been expressly asked not to, you understand, though I've always felt there's been an implied prohibition."

“In that case,” I said, not taking the pellets, “perhaps you shouldn’t offer them.”

“A time may come when you’ll be glad I did. You’ve seen their effect on me; you’ve felt it—twice—on yourself. Here, take them. Call it humouring me, if you like.”

“All right, as you’re so pressing. And after all they are handy things to have about, particularly as they aren’t drugs in the ordinary sense.”

“They aren’t. Only keep them in a metal box, steel for preference. You’ve got one you can use? No. Well, you’ll find an empty one in the same drawer. It’s Earth-made, so there’s nothing to connect *it* up with *them*.”

I found the box, and transferred to it the dozen pellets he had given me. A lot of fuss to make about them, I fancied, when after all, if his assurances were to be believed, as I felt sure they were, they were no more than a remarkable tonic whose constituents were kept a close secret by its Martian manufacturers. A little thing seemingly. . . . Yet had it not been for those tiny pellets my life might have run on altogether different lines. A pity if it had, for I would have missed much of the fulness of things. . . .

The box slid into my pocket. . . .

“As far as we are concerned,” said Hume, a trifle anxiously, “I take it that last night’s affair is over and done with.”

We still kept to the old Earth style of dividing the day into periods of darkness and light, though here there was neither day nor night as we knew them, only the blackness of space with the stars and the planets doubly bright, doubly brilliant, what of the absence of air. The arbitrary arrangement of time

was marked only by the clock. Still, it was a convenient arrangement, and we stuck to it in lieu of something better.

"The Guard-ship's taken over," I pointed out. "That should end it as far as this voyage goes. But seeing Mars and Venus have reported more or less similar experiences, there may be enquiries at Tlanan when we reach there. It depends on what the Martian authorities think."

"At any rate, we won't have our schedule upset," Hume remarked.

"I shouldn't think so. In a day or so we'll pass the beat of the last of the Earth Guard-ships; and the Martian ones, I'd imagine, would be more interested in speeding us towards Tlanan for an enquiry than hanging us up for one in mid-space."

"I hope so." He did not seem so sure of that. Perhaps he knew the Martians better than I; perhaps it was merely that his imagination was conjuring up visions of unpleasant, possible delays. Which it was hard to say.

A moment's silence, then :

"Well, Jack, if you don't mind clearing out, I'd like to get up," he said. "I'm feeling fit to face things again, now that I know it isn't space vertigo coming on. Also, the Oxcta has made a new man of me. By the way, use the stuff sparingly. It will lose its effect if you take it too often."

"Never fear. I don't like forming habits, good, bad or indifferent," I told him. With that and a nod I left him.

There were many things to think about. Free though I now was of the necessity of probing further the particular matter of *M.E.* 75, I still was interested

deeply. Here was a mystery doubly intriguing. It seemed to defy solution, yet ever and again I had a queer feeling that I was very close to a revelation. I might be deluding myself—the wish father to the thought—though most probably it was that I had not yet completely rid my system of that stuff, whatever it was, that had produced that anæsthetic cold.

It was not unlikely that contact with my fellow beings might not only clear my befogged brain, but perhaps set it working along new lines. There is always a certain stimulation in companionship. At anyrate I was more likely to puzzle uncertainly over everything if I kept to my cabin. I made my way to the promenade deck.

For some reason or other there were few about at that hour. My chair had already been marked out for me, though so far I had made no use of it, and now I found it without difficulty, dropped into it and began to fill my pipe. That alone of Earth's vices was left me for comfort. The Martians and the Venerians for some queer reason regard our Tellurian habit of smoking as rather laughable, though of late some of the more advanced nationals of both planets are adopting the practice.

I felt drowsy. I believe I must have dozed, for the next I remember was a voice in my ear, musical, resonant. I opened my eyes with a start. Jansca Dirka was standing beside me, smiling.

I jerked upright in my chair, and began some remark about having dropped off to sleep.

The merriment died from her eyes, her face became grave of an instant. How attractive she looked, I thought; hard to decide whether I preferred her more gay or serious. Either way she was infinitely charming.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said in a voice that held just the faintest trace of her native accent. Her tendency to labour each particular syllable equally would, however, have betrayed her Martian origin. "I had no idea you were dozing," she ran on. "I wouldn't have disturbed you had I known."

I drew up a vacant chair beside me. "Sit here," I invited her. I did not quite believe her statement that she did not know I was dozing. She was not quite so foolish as all that. Patently she wanted to talk with me. Well, let her make the running. Who knew but that something of interest might yet come out in conversation.

She seated herself, and half-turned towards me. "You do not mind?" she said, as though asking permission for what she had yet to say.

"Go ahead," I said amusedly. "I can see you want to ask questions. What is it now?"

Her eyebrows lifted a little, archly. "Nothing much, nothing of any importance. I am merely a Martian girl seeking knowledge. . . ."

"In that case I'll be happy to tell you anything I can, providing I can."

Her eyes sparked up at that. Was it, I asked myself, that she read into my last three words a meaning other than that which appeared on the surface? If so, she showed no other sign of it.

"I have been reading," she went on gently, "delving into the ship's library of your Earth books. Somehow I prefer them to the book-machines. They are more restful, more convenient to carry about. They are not noisy. One can read them and at the same time maintain privacy without the need of sound insulators."

"I'm glad you like them," I said simply. "I, too,

have a leaning towards the old print. In many ways I like the old ideas. The book-machines seem to lack something. Yet we took them from you."

She frowned. "From Mars," she said thoughtfully, using the Earth-title for her planet. "Well, not all that comes from us is good." She stopped abruptly, thinking perhaps, as I imagine, of that disastrous War of the Planets that came near to wrecking the civilisations of the Inner Planets.¹

Abruptly she pulled herself back to the point of origin of the conversation, yet actually she had not strayed so far from it after all.

"I found amongst those books an old one by an Earth-man named Wells—*The War of the Worlds*," she said slowly. "I thought at first it was an actual history, then I discovered as I read that it was what you call . . ." She hesitated, looking at me to supply the elusive word.

"A romance?" said I.

"An imaginative romance," she qualified. "I read on and on. Tell me, was Earth once like that? Did men drive animals about?"

"As a picture of those times I fancy it is pretty accurate," I said. "That is, of course, if you leave out the invasion part of it."

She shuddered. "To think that Earth-men once imagined we might assume those shapes . . . the things that came in the cylinders. Octopus shapes. Loathsome things." Then quickly, before I could comment, she ran on, "Yet it was you Earth-people who first reached out into space, who first of all voyaged to the distant planets."

¹ The War of The Planets took place in 1989. A history of this is in course of preparation.

"I've often wondered about that," I said. "Time and time it has puzzled me why neither your people nor the Venerians branched out in that way."

"There were many reasons," she told me. "You are a predatory folk, an exploring, restless race. Also you had certain things we lacked. We could fly, but we had not that urge to reach out for the stars that is your heritage."

Yet in this she was not quite accurate. Inter-planetary travel could never have become the accomplished fact it is to-day had it not been for the discovery of Rolgar. True, we found it on the moon, in our own territory so to speak, though we did not immediately realise its significance. As every student of history knows, the first flights, which took us no further than the moon, were made by means of a development of the Goddard Rocket; they were expensive and unreliable, and on an average one in every four met with tragedy. Even with the improvements Leyton-Browne introduced in 1975, and which enabled our space explorers to extend the radius of their travels, inter-stellar voyages could not have become a commercial proposition. It was only when we made contact with the Venerians and learnt from them the true value of rolgar that we began to progress at all. It is odd to recall that to the Venerians rolgar was practically a theoretical substance, one as rare, if not rarer to them, as radium is on Earth, while we, ignorant of its value and its almost incalculable powers, possessed on our Moon a practically unlimited supply. Sad to think that it was over that, too, that the first, and, we hope, the last of the Inter-planetary wars was fought. . . .

"Do you then think"—I switched back to the

immediate subject—"that there would never have been communication between us had it not been for our Earth-folk?"

She looked at me then, not squarely, but with a quick glance shot from under her veiling eyelashes.

"Do you?" she said, and for the moment I failed to realise that the question was merely rhetorical. I was about to answer when she went on, "Do you ever pause to think, perhaps wonder, Mr. Sanders, whether somewhere in the Universe there may not be others, intelligent beings, like us in form, immeasurably our superiors in intellect, who may even now be reaching out to contact with us? One hears strange stories."

I stared at her. What she was saying ran so close to the ideas in my own mind, paralleled so nearly my own recent experiences, that I asked myself was she throwing out feelers. A Martian girl seeking knowledge. . . . Was this the particular knowledge she was seeking, word of the mystery that was even then puzzling me?

I looked again to meet her eyes, frank this time, yet questioning, with all a child's frankness, yet with behind it all, vaguely, that baffling something that is symptomatic of the Martian mind. And in a flash it came to me.

"You know," I said. I might have phrased it otherwise, have said, "You've guessed!" But I used instinctively the one word that accurately summed up the situation. She knew, but how much she knew I had yet to learn.

"I know," she said, this Martian maiden seeking knowledge, and her hand dropped comfortingly on

mine. "I know. Indeed, I am aware of more about you than perhaps you think. You see, you have interested me . . . us. My father and I."

She did not take her hand away. A moment later she could not, even had she wished, for I had prisoned it in mine, I, who never thought to do such a thing, least of all to a girl from another Planet. Yet. . . .

"You know," I said challengingly. "But how much after all do you know?"

She laughed softly. "Much. Enough to startle you," she told me. "That you are no mere private tourist, that you hold one of the high positions in Earth's Guard-ship Fleet."

"That could be guessed," I said. "It could have been found out quite easily. I am not unknown. It is quite feasible that many travellers on the space liners should have seen me in an official capacity and have remembered."

"That is so," she agreed. "As you say, such a discovery, though annoying, is of little or no importance. But do not worry. If you wish to preserve your secret, it is safe with us. Save my father and I, none on this ship but those you have confided in shall know exactly who you are. But as you say, that is a little thing, no sure test of the knowledge I boasted I possessed. But"—she leaned a little closer to me, so close that I could have taken her in my arms without an effort had I wished and had I been that sort of man; then "but suppose"—her voice dropped to a whisper that could be heard by none but me—"suppose I were to tell you what else I know, of the things that have worried you and threatened to upset your holiday, of—this will startle you—the events of last night, of the ship adrift in space, and the sleeping

half-frozen men you found there, supposing I told you all this, what would you say?"

"That there has been a leakage somewhere," I said promptly, "that someone has talked."

She nodded. "You could explain it so," she agreed. "But what you could not explain by that or any other form of reasoning is this, a thing known to you alone, that in this pocket"—she tapped it lightly—"you have a little steel box containing twelve pellets of Martian Oxcta."

I stared at her stupefied. Only Hume knew I had those tiny pellets in that box, but even Hume did not know into which pocket I had slipped them. I had so arranged it, more by accident than design, that he had not seen.

Knowing this, what else was there she might not know—strange, dark secrets, perhaps better left unrevealed?

CHAPTER IX

'A FRIEND, OR PERHAPS A LITTLE MORE . . .'

I STARED at her stupefied—as I have written—while the unrecoverable seconds ticked remorselessly away. I scarcely knew what to say or with what counter to meet this frank outspokenness. The fact that she knew something and no doubt guessed more of the mystery in which I had played my little part, did not matter so much ; it was the uncanny knowledge she displayed of something trifling enough in itself, yet about which no one but myself should know anything that was so disconcerting.

For the moment I fancied I had the solution of the puzzle in my grasp, that she had seen the outline of the box showing through my coat, and had deduced the rest. But I had no sooner formed the idea than I saw it could not be. The box itself did not show through the material of my coat ; even had it done so, she could not have reasoned its nature and contents—even the exact number of the pellets—so surely. No, the true explanation was a less obvious, more uncanny one than that.

The light in her eyes changed to something softer than a mere smile ; a touch of commiseration, I fancied, crept into it. In a way it roused me from my momentary stupor.

“Tell me,” I demanded, still in that same soft whisper she herself had used, “tell me how you know

all this. It's . . .” In my turn I halted for a word, and this time it was she who supplied the needed one.

“Uncanny?” she suggested, and when I nodded, “No, Mr. Sanders, it isn't. It's anything but that. To show you what I mean I'll tell you something more. Wait one moment, please.”

She thrust her hand through the V opening at the bosom of her dress, held her hand there under the shadow of the material almost as though she held something in her palm, something at which she looked and frowned a little, with a drawing together of those fine eyebrows of hers.

“Face me squarely,” she commanded. “Ah, that is it. Now. Under the left lapel of your coat, where you can show it in a moment, if necessary, is your inter-planetary badge, a silver badge in the shape of a space-ship with the letters—English letters—‘I.P.G.’ spread along its length.”

“Go on,” I said with interest. So much she could have told me from memory if she had ever—as no doubt she had—seen a Guard's badge before.

She did not look up, but, “You're still a little doubtful,” she whispered. “We—ell—— On the back of the badge is a number—723. Beneath the number are the two letters ‘S.C.’”

She could not have known that without having seen my badge—which I swear she had never done—could not possibly have known that I was numbered ‘723’ of the Inter-planetary Guard, and that my rank was ‘Space Captain’. It savoured of witchcraft.

She went on calmly, coolly, “In your right-hand coat pocket you have an envelope, buff in colour. It contains a space radio form. The message on the

form is written in an Earth-language I do not know. It is not one in use, that is all I can say. But I can spell the words out to you." She did, spelt it through until I thought it time to call a halt, for I had no mind that Harran's last message to me should get this sort of publication.

"Please, please," I said almost breathlessly. "Don't go any further. I'm convinced."

She looked up mischievously at me. Her hand came out of the bosom of her dress, empty, as it had gone in. Yet I could swear that the moment she raised her eyes to meet mine I heard a slight click as of a spring being released.

"And of what are you convinced?" she whispered.

"Of the reality of what you're saying . . . or doing," I told her. "But it's magic, witchcraft."

"No. No. Applied science, that's all. You Earthlings beat us Martians in many ways. You are our masters in most things—in space travelling, not the least. But here and now, in one thing and another, we can still teach you a little. You have seen what I can do, I, a Martian girl, not clever. A little toy it is, yet how it shakes you, saps your confidence and makes you talk of magic, of witchcraft, of things no sane planetarian really believes in in these enlightened days."

"Tell me," I said quickly, for I thought I saw some method in her madness, "why you do this thing? I am sure it is not merely that you want to puzzle me."

Again she bent a little nearer, again the voice sank to a low, caressing whisper.

"It is," she said, "because I want to help you, because I may be able, if only in my small way, to aid you a little."

“With that little toy? What is it? May I see it?”

She took my questions in their order. “Yes, with that little toy, as you call it. It is worked on the principle of your X-rays, something analagous, at anyrate. But it can see through anything, yet strangely enough the form and substance, the colour of the thing seen through, are not blurred and lost as happens with certain substances viewed under your X-rays. You wish to see it? I cannot show it to you here. There may be prying eyes about, people who would not approve.”

She flung a swift glance about the deck. No one seemed in the least interested in our talk, but then, that was nothing to go by. Men—women too—can watch and listen without showing the slightest outward sign of interest.

“Mr. Sanders, you are Earth-born. You have conventions that are not ours; we have conventions that possibly you do not understand. Would you therefore think it a thing that should not have been said if I were to ask you to come down to the seclusion of my cabin where we can talk undisturbed?”

My hesitation was but for the moment, only the drag of an old Earth-convention, as she had hinted pulling at me. To hold it longer in my mind was in a way an insult to her.

“No, of course not,” I said readily.

“Well, leave me now,” she said. “My cabin is C 8. In ten minutes you will find me there. We had better not go together.”

There was wisdom in her suggestion. With a brightly flung word and a cheery nod for the benefit of anyone who might chance to be watching, I rose to

my feet, sauntered off along the deck, stopped to re-light my pipe, strolled through the saloon, moving aimlessly until I came to the notice-board. There I halted to read the bulletins of news. Nothing startling from any of the three planets, no mention certainly of any space-ships in trouble. It occurred to me to wonder if by any chance news on that matter were being censored. Most probably it was. The Board would not run the risk of panic if it could be avoided.

So casually I made my way to the accommodation deck, and presently located C 8. The glow from a light tube streaming through the grille over the door told me it was in occupancy. I glanced at the name grid, ' Jansca Dirka ', that was all. She then had the whole cabin space to herself. We were not a very full ship that trip.

I knocked. The door opened a space. She saw me, opened it further, and without a word beckoned me in.

She closed the door behind me, snapped the switch, and closed the sound insulators. Then she turned to me with a smile.

" Why," I said, " are you doing all this, as you say, to help me ? "

" Because," she said, " I would be your friend."

" A friend, or perhaps a little more," I said softly, overwhelmed by that other world intoxication of her presence, that lure that was not Earth's. I had her hands in mine as I spoke. She said nothing, did not even look at me, but I felt them drawn softly away.

" We can," she said with meaning, " speak of such matters after. There are more important things to talk of now."

She turned swiftly away from me for a moment. What she did or where it came from I could not say,

but when she faced me the next second in the palm of her outstretched hand there lay glistening a watch-like thing with a tiny thread-thin chain attached.

"Take it," she said. "It's yours. It will help you."

I took the thing. It was shaped like a watch, as I have said, save that back and front were made of some vitreous substance, neither glass nor quartzite, as I knew them, and what metal there was about it was strange, some Martian alloy I had no doubt. As I looked into one crystal face I could see nothing, but the girl leaned over, touched a spring I had not noticed before. I nearly let it drop, for the floor of the cabin under the crystal face seem to vanish, and I found myself looking into the deck below, seeing everything beneath me as clearly as though the floor were made of glass.

She laughed softly at the amazement in my face.

"It is rather startling when one sees it for the first time," she said, "but, as I've told you, the principle underlying it is quite simple. It is merely a matter of penetrative rays. You Earthlings have progressed somewhat on the road, with your discoveries of X-rays, gamma rays, and the rest. Perhaps some day you will discover this also for yourselves."

"It is rather astounding," I said, as soon as I recovered my composure. "You don't know then how the principle is applied?"

I asked merely from curiosity, though I realised the moment I had spoken that it was a question that should never have been put.

Slowly, seriously, she shook her head. "I do not know," she said deliberately, "and if I did I would not tell. I am giving you this little instrument because

I know it will help you, but not even for you would I betray the secrets of my people."

I turned on her, suddenly stricken contrite. "Of course," I said. "You are doing a wonderful thing even in giving me this. I should not have asked you any such question. But it slipped out. Human curiosity. . . ."

She waved that aside, came a little closer, and as though afraid that even in that sound-proof cabin she might be overhead she dropped her voice to the merest thin thread of a whisper.

"Keep it there," she said, pointing. "On the inside of your buttoned jacket. Make a pocket for it there, to keep it hidden out of sight. You have only to put your hand down—you need never pull it out more than is necessary for you to see the dial face on one side or the other. Its rays will penetrate through almost any substance. But you must never, never breathe a word that will indicate you have it in your possession."

"Your father . . . ?" I suggested.

"He does not know," she said quickly. "I do not want him to know. He is well-disposed towards you, friendly, as who would not be? But even he, if he knew, that I was even to this extent betraying a Martian secret to one not of our race by blood or by adoption, would be harsh with me. . . ."

Her voice trailed away into silence, leaving me with the impression that she had not said all that was in her mind, that much, the worst perhaps remained unspoken.

"Tell me," I said quickly, "if this were known . . . what would happen to you? Anything dire?"

She did not answer me, but the droop of her head

told me all I wished. This Martian maiden, in so many ways like an Earth-girl, in so many other ways unlike, was for me taking the stars knew what risks.

“Tell me, tell me,” I begged. “I would not have anything—any gift such as this—at the price of suffering to you. Is it merely because I am an alien, because I have no Sonjhon blood in me that you would be punished?”

In my eagerness, anxiety, call it what you will, I had stumbled into using the Martian word itself, and at the sound of it she looked up, as I thought, startled.

“Yes,” she said slowly, thoughtfully, “yes, it is because you have no Sonjhon blood in you that I must fear for myself.”

For a space she paused, her eyes searching me, weighing me. Then . . .

I saw the glitter of the little knife in her hand, and I sprang forward, but she thrust me back with the other hand, and for once I was not minded to use force.

“Stay,” she said fiercely. “I mean no harm to you or anyone else. But I see a way.”

Something in her eyes compelled me to wait. There was resolution in her looks, yet such that I no longer felt anxiety or fear, only a great wonder.

She took the little knife, a vicious sharp thing, held it down near the point, made a tiny scratch in the fleshy part of her left arm, and waited till the red blood came. I waited, doubting what this meant, yet in a vague way feeling that I knew.

Suddenly she thrust the arm towards me, and spoke commandingly.

“See,” she said, “I have drawn blood. With your lips remove it.”

She meant, I could see, that I should suck the wound, and I suppose I must have involuntarily recoiled. To my mind there was something barbaric about it all.

"Don't waste time," she said sharply. "Do as I tell you."

She came of a long line of those born to rule, this girl; there was something of their concentrated magnetism in her, something, too, that was all her own. Scarcely knowing what I did my head whirled so, I obeyed her. My lips touched her warm flesh. . . . She drew her arm away, and as I straightened up, looked at me with a new light in her eyes.

"You are one of us," she said with a strange dignity and a stranger softness in her manner. "Now you can always say with truth that you are of the Sonjhon blood, for you have that blood, my blood in you."

Then it was the meaning of it all dawned on me. It was no barbaric rite, no ancient survival of blood brotherhood such as once pertained amongst certain peoples on Earth; it was her way, the only way she knew, of giving me power to claim, if necessary, the rights by blood of a citizen of Mars.

The deed, as much as the thought behind it, amazed me. I knew enough of her planet's customs to realise that it would hold as binding in any Martian community, but whether it had any deeper implication, of course, I could not say. Perhaps I should have felt revulsion. I do not know; all I can say is, that I did not.

Our eyes met; she stepped back a pace, drew a long breath, and slid the tiny knife into a sheath at her girdle. Then:

"I had better explain," she said in studied calm tones, "the working of the——" She used a word I

did not catch, most probably it was a Martian phrase new to me. She smiled at my puzzled expression. "That little instrument I gave you," she explained, but I noticed that she did not speak its name again, and I did not ask her, for reasons which perhaps were wise.

I took the thing from my pocket—for a lack of a better name I called it in my own mind 'the Crystal Eye', and as such it will be referred to hereafter—and handed it to her. She showed me that the spring at the top was in reality a sort of screw; it could be adjusted to suit the distance in much the same way that one adjusts binoculars. She made absolutely certain that I thoroughly understood its workings before she allowed me to return it to its hiding-place.

"Tell me one thing before I go," I said, for it was a thought that worried me. "Do all Martians carry these?"

She eyed me as though she fancied there might be more behind the question than actually appeared.

"No," she said slowly, "no. Only those of . . . Only a favoured few carry them."

I read in her eyes the meaning of that hesitation, could almost hear the word she had left unsaid. I knew without a doubt that she had meant to say 'Only those of the blood', and had pulled herself up just in time. Well, it seemed—if suppressions and hesitations went for anything—that now it was a matter not to be referred to between us again.

It had come to this, that now I must make some sort of graceful retreat, and having uttered my thanks—which she cut short, a little indignantly, I thought—I was looking for some excuse when I chanced to look up again, and see her eyes.

I saw in them, what I had never expected to see in woman's eyes looking into mine, be she of Earth or any other planet—tears, diamond-bright, glistening like dew-drops in the morning sun. Eyes, dear eyes, whose very glance plucked the soul from me, drew me out of myself as the magnet draws the steel.

Blindly I made a step forward, fumbled, caught her in my arms, and kissed the lips that for the moment feinted resistance, then clung passionately to mine.

. . . I released her, but it was not the Jansca I had caught in my arms. It was another being, glorious, ethereal, one who looked at me with something in her eyes that thrilled me to the very root and marrow of my being.

"Jansca," I said stumbingly, haltingly, "can it really be?"

"It is," she said simply. "It is and always will be so. Nothing now can take us from each other."

Who or what, thought I in my ignorance, was there to try such a thing?

CHAPTER X

I TAKE OVER

THROUGHOUT most of that day the ether must have been super-heated with the messages that were coming and going between worlds, and in the administrative centres of the three confederated planets wild-eyed men must have been working feverishly, preparing to deal with a menace whose actual purpose, whose identity even, had not yet become manifest.

To us, sealed up in our space-ship, hurtling through the void to our destination, nothing of this was known, and it was not until the dinner-hour that night that the first repercussions of the trouble became apparent.

Supremely happy in my new-found love I had taken my seat at the table, to meet the ardent glance from Jansca's glowing eyes, and the approving look from her father, whom I had already seen and talked with. I noticed as a thing of little moment that Hume's place was unoccupied; his hours were irregular compared with ours, and I was no more surprised to find him absent than I would have been to see him present.

Jansca leaned across the table and said something to me. What it was I cannot say at this distance of time—some chance remark, no doubt. The first course, I remember principally because I had to go without it, was in process of being served. I was about to

make some light answer to Jansca's remark, whatever it was, when a finger touched me lightly on the shoulder, and I heard my name spoken. I turned. It was one of the officers.

"Captain Hume would like to see you at once, Mr. Sanders," he said. There was a serious note in his voice that was not in the least encouraging.

"At once?" I echoed. "Won't it do when I've finished dinner?"

The other shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Captain Hume was insistent that I should bring you back with me, even if it meant you foregoing dinner." All this in so low a voice that it impinged on my ear alone.

"Oh, well"—I shrugged my shoulders—"I suppose I'll have to go."

I faced Jansca, and she leaned across to catch my words. "My dear," I said, "I'm afraid I'll have to leave my dinner untasted. I'm wanted. Apparently urgently."

"Go," she said swiftly. "Don't wait. I think I understand." Her hand, reaching across the table, caught mine and gave it a gentle pressure.

I met her eyes. There was something in them that startled me. Agony, fear, anxiety: all somehow mixed together. A moment, and they faded to yield to a tenderness that no words can possibly describe. One look flung between us, heart talking silently to heart. Then I rose to my feet and swung off behind the man who had summoned me. At the saloon door I caught up to him and asked the inevitable question.

He did not know, he said, what was behind the call. Possibly even had he known then he would not have told me. Mystery was deepening on our ship, secrecy becoming the order of the day.

Hume sat before a desk littered with papers, and he raised a grave face to meet my glance as I was ushered in.

"Sit down, Jack, there, opposite me," was his greeting. Then to the officer who had conducted me, "Insulate us against all outside interference," he said, and did not speak again until the switch clicked over and the warning lights inside against the door showed that we were secure from eavesdroppers.

"Man, what is it?" I cried. "What's gone wrong now that you look so grave?"

His brow furrowed into lines. "Jack," he said earnestly, "I'd give a lot to be able to answer that question of yours. But perhaps this may tell you something."

He pushed over a message form to me. It was written in plain English, and it had been sent out from the New York headquarters of the Earth division of the Inter-planetary Board of Control not two hours before.

I stared at it, for it began with the triple call of urgency, that call that we seldom get more than once in a generation. The message was a long one covering three sheets of closely written lines, but the gist of it can be given in a sentence. It was a general call to all Space liners to rendezvous at the nearest Guard-ship base as quickly as possible, and wait for escort before proceeding to their destination. The message closed again with the triple urgency call.

"Well, what do you make of it?" I asked.

For answer he passed me another wad of sheets. The top one I saw was a similar message, word for word with the previous, sent this time from London. It was timed a few minutes later. I turned the others over. One was from Shangun, the Venerian capital,

and it was in that planet's international language, of which I knew only a word here and there. The third message, also indecipherable, was I guessed from the office of despatch, in Tlananian, the language of two-thirds of the Martian peoples.

"You can't read them, of course," Hume said, as I turned the last sheet, "but I've had the one from Venus translated—the Tlananian I can read myself—and you can take it from me that they're identical with the Earth messages. Now, what do *you* make of them?"

"There's no doubt about the urgency of the matter," I said slowly. "The fact that the Venerian and Martian messages have been broadcast in their own tongues shows that, to my mind. They couldn't afford to waste even the time necessary to translate them into international code."

"Or they meant them solely for their own ships, knowing Earth messages would reach liners like us," Hume said with a puckering of the forehead. "But even that isn't answering my question. What's behind it all?"

"The thing that has been worrying me all along, and that has threatened to upset my holiday more than once," I frowned.

"The Space-visitors—the things—people—that were responsible for the trouble on *M.E.75*? Isn't that what you mean?"

"I can't see any other explanation."

"Then—perhaps I'm wrong; I hope I am—it looks as though something has happened, some new development of which we're not yet cognisant, that menaces the safety of every space-liner from the three planets that happens to be en route at the moment. But

to think of traffic proceeding under an escort of Guard-ships! It's incredible. Such a thing has never been heard of before in the history of the Universe, not since space-travelling became an accomplished fact. But what are you going to do? Is this the crisis your instructions cover?"

"It's hard to say. Looks to me like a matter for individual judgment, possibly. But at present, providing there are no further developments, I can make no move in any direction. You have already got your orders; they've come from a body that can over-ride anything I do or suggest, and I think in the circumstances you will be wise to abide by them. Not only that, but carry them out with the greatest celerity possible."

"I haven't wasted time, Jack. I've changed course already." He pointed to the dial-chart, where the quivering pointer showed us edging off at angle from the red line that had hitherto marked our route to intercept the orbit of Mars. "Also, our locators are sounding space to pick up the nearest Guard-ship. It will probably be a Martian one now, we're so far advanced on our way."

"Whatever it is does not matter as long as it is a Guard-ship," I said wearily. A heaviness had come over me, a weight on my heart, as that dark uncontrolled hinterland of my mind where speculation dwells began to play with grisly responsibilities.

Hume shot a glance at me from under his tired and drooping lids.

"Sick of it all, already," he said, and "you're only holidaying. Don't like the interruption to your vacation, eh? Ah, well, you've no responsibilities, no——"

"But there you're wrong," I cut in before he could go further. "I have responsibilities, one big one, at least, aboard this ship."

Something in my tone must have warned him, for his eyes widened.

"Aboard the *Cosmos!*" he exclaimed. "What . . . who is it?"

"Jansca," I said. "Jansca Dirka."

"You mean that, Jack? Is it fact or merely a hope?"

"A fact, accomplished. We agreed only this morning that our paths lay together. Her father knows, and has approved."

For one long second he looked at me, then across the table his hand reached out and gripped mine heartily. Only that. He spoke no word of congratulation, but his looks and his handclasp told me all he felt.

"I understand," he said at last. "I understand. Of course our safety means more to you even than perhaps it does to me." Then, almost under his breath, "But a Dirka!"

I caught the word. "Why a Dirka?" I demanded. "What is strange in that?"

"Your luck. Call it that. The Dirkas are the nearest to a race of Kings Mars has had in a thousand years. But you will learn more about that yet . . . from them. Jack, coming back to immediate urgencies, what are we to do?"

"Follow instructions, that's all that's left us. We can't make any other preparations, for we don't know what we may have to face."

"Our armament . . . ?" he suggested tentatively.

"Oh, yes. What have you in that way?"

"The two rays . . . heat and the repeller rays. The former won't function too well in free space, however, I should imagine."

"Why not? It doesn't need an atmosphere. It will go where light goes. We'll see, however, or rather I hope we won't have the need to see. We"

There came a warning crackle, thrice repeated, from the sounder at his elbow.

"More messages," he said wearily. "Manners, take it . . . them."

The officer, my conductor, made the sundry adjustments that allowed the door to be opened. It was a messenger from the transmitting room—the *Cosmos* was big enough to have a separate one of her own—with a sealed envelope in his hand.

"For Mr. Sanders," he said. "I was told he was here."

Manners passed it to me, the messenger sped away, and the insulating barrage went up again. I tore open the envelope, glanced at it. A word here and there was plain, though it was not the sort of message I could read in its entirety on the spur of the moment.

"A sheet of paper and a pencil, Hume," I said, fumbling. "This is an urgency one, too. I'll have it out for you in a minute or so."

He sat silent while I turned it word by word into readable understandable English. As I thought, it was from Harran.

"Have reason to suppose," it ran, "that concerted attack is to be made on all space-ships. Possibly invasion of three planets projected. Follows on space-ship discoveries reported in last few days. Confirm general rendezvous order. All Guards where-

soever are to hold in readiness for immediate duty. All emergency regulations to be put into operation forthwith. No private messages are to be transmitted from space-ships or if received aboard delivered to addressees, except under direction and at discretion of Guard until further orders. Emergency regulations in force from moment of receipt of this message. Identical instructions relayed all Guard-ships and all Guards on space-liners.

Signed. Harran (Tellus)
Tambard (Mars)
Clinigo (Venus)."

I thrust my translation over to Hume. "You had better read this," I said. "It explains the situation far more clearly than any words of mine can do."

Slowly he read it through, and as he read his face blanched. At the end he handed it back to me.

"It means," he said simply, "that you are now in command."

"It means that," I agreed. "But it means more, that you and I and all the rest of us must work together for the common good, the safety of our ship and passengers."

"Yet," he said heavily, "there is so little we can do, save carry on."

I nodded. That was quite patent. We had our rendezvous to make, whether with an individual Guard-ship or a floating base depended on our luck. Apart from that, we could only keep watch and guard.

"Arm your men," I said. "Serve out your ray tubes at once. Are all your officers trustworthy?"

"Every one of them. They will take their orders and carry them out if that's what you mean."

"I do. I want them paraded at once . . . here. Would you care to advise them, or shall I?"

"Better you, Jack. I won't cavil at what you say or do in a time like this. You know more of what's tending than I do, and anyway you have my authority to reinforce yours if necessary. About the operators. . . . Had they better come too?"

"Oh, yes. All except the man on duty."

He called Manners to him and gave his orders, and soon the emergency signals were sounding in each man's quarters. I glanced round the room. It was certainly more spacious than most control-rooms, but then the *Cosmos* had been built for big things. Yes, it would hold the officers without any undue crowding. It would be better to talk to them assembled here rather than out on the control deck where we could not be effectively insulated against listeners.

One by one they came to the room, the three officers, the apprentices, who were actually junior officers in training, the purser, Parey, the doctor, and others. All told, there was a round dozen of them in the room in the end.

Hume wasted no time in preliminaries. "You've been called here," he said, "because of certain matters of importance with which you should be acquainted at the earliest opportunity. What they are Mr. Sanders will explain."

He stopped and gestured towards me as much as to say, "It is your turn now."

I saw curious pairs of eyes turn wonderingly towards me; even Parey, who knew who I was, knitted his brows, though I fancy he must have guessed part at least of what I was going to say. But the others had no hint either of my identity or the purport of my remarks

until I pinned my Guard's badge in the lapel of my coat, where it was plain for all to see. Even then I could see most of them were still frankly puzzled.

I began. I had much to say, but I contrived to get it within small compass. I gave a brief sketch of the condition in which we found *M.E.75*—there was no need to enlarge on that, as it was already more or less common property amongst the after-guard—and added that from what I could gather similar things had happened to other space-ships. I insisted that as yet we did not know anything about the motive behind these visitations—one could hardly call them attacks—and certainly we had no idea from which planet, if any of the solar system the beings responsible had come. I however hinted, what was purely an idea that came into my mind at the moment of speaking, that there was a chance they hailed from somewhere in inter-galactic space. Then, to round everything off, I read out the message signed by the three. I finished, and glanced round the little company. For the moment it seemed they were stunned to silence by my communication.

“Any questions?” I said. “Now is the time to ask them. We may not have the opportunity to ask or answer them later.”

One youngster, one of the apprentices, possibly fed on one of those hectic romances that have been written round the War of the Planets, spoke up.

“Was that right . . . I mean,” he stumbled, “is there anything in the suggestion in your message, Mr. Sanders, that an inter-planetary invasion is projected?”

“I read you what the message said,” I answered. “That is merely supposition. It may be right;

it may just as easily be wrong. At least we can take precautions against every possible contingency without being alarmists. You understand me ? ”

“ Yes, sir,” he said, but I wondered if after all he really did.

Parey caught my eye. “ Does this mean, Mr. Sanders,” he said, “ that you are in absolute command here ? ”

“ It means,” I said deliberately, “ that I am responsible to the Inter-planetary Board of Control for the safety of this ship and her complement, and if anything goes wrong it is I who will be to blame. I have told you quite plainly exactly what is the state of affairs as far as I know it, and more than that I cannot do. But let us have no talk of absolute or any other kind of command. Captain Hume and I have discussed the matter thoroughly between us, and we are agreed, as I want you all to be agreed, that the interests of all are the interests of each of us. Unless each man does his utmost with a right good will we may fail to pull through. And it may hearten you in what is yet to come for you to realise now that in a thousand ships all up and down the void this message is being repeated and similar scenes to this being enacted. Now, has anyone anything else to say before you dismiss ? ”

The first officer, Gond, took a smart step forward. “ I have, Mr. Sanders, and I’d like to make it snappy. I think I can speak for the others. I know them all, so I believe I can take it for granted they’ll agree. It’s this. What you say goes with us, the more so as Captain Hume is backing you up. That’s a mouthful, I think.”

I smiled at the quaint archaisms in his little speech,

but I could not smile at his sincerity. It was too affecting for that. A murmur that rose from the little group showed, too, how well he had expressed the sentiments of all of them.

"That's that then," I said. "Captain Hume, will you take over, please?"

With a word or two relative to certain re-arrangements he found it necessary to make in the ship's routine, Hume dismissed those off duty, and as the last of them disappeared he turned to me with a sigh.

"There's no doubt about their loyalty," he said. "I'd stand hostage for anyone of them. But, Jack, what do you think those chiefs of yours had in mind in censoring private messages? Are they thinking of spies aboard?"

Spies? I had not thought of them in that connection before, but the moment Hume made the suggestion an idea hit me between the eyes.

"Spies?" I repeated. "Yes, I believe that is just exactly what they do mean, but whom we should begin by suspecting here is more than I can tell."

Did he believe me? Something in the glance he shot at me implied that he did not.

CHAPTER XI

THE INEXPLICABLE INCIDENT

My further duties took me half an hour or so, then all precautions that we could think of having been taken, I was free to go about my own small concerns.

Dinner had long since ended, and the saloon was bare and empty. Knowing the long hours that the kitchen staff put in, I did not feel like giving them the extra trouble of serving me a late meal. Ordinarily I am a small eater, and anyway it would do me no harm to wait for my next meal till morning. But on the heels of that it occurred to me that in my pocket was something that was quite a good substitute for both food and drink.

I slipped down to my cabin, drew a glass of water from the faucet, and dropped an Oxcta pellet in it. I drank up the resultant mixture and felt all the better for it. But, I warned myself, it would not do to make a regular practice of this; despite what Hume had told me about the stuff, that it was not habit-forming, I had no wish to put the matter to the test. Yet looking back now, what seems to me the strangest thing of all is that my solicitude for others, my wish to save the serving staff from trouble, was actually the means of my salvation.

Too early to go to bed yet, I thought, and to tell the truth I was not in the mood to sleep for some hours yet to come. The greater part of the responsibility

for the safety of the ship's company devolved on me, and it must be admitted that it was no light weight. I wanted time to think things out, and if possible formulate some plan of campaign. Since I can always think better with a pipe in my mouth, I filled and lit one. It was against rules to smoke in one's cabin, but as I am naturally, where fire is concerned, a careful man I did not give that aspect a second thought.

The result of half an hour's intensive thought was nil. A week's meditation possibly would not have got me any further. When all was said and done the initiative did not lie with us, but with these invaders out of space, and until we learnt a little more about them and their objects I could see no use in speculating. At the same time I was inclined to discount the alarmist suggestion the Council of Three had made in their broadcast message, for I felt that any interplanetary invasion would have been preceded by something rather more spectacular than what had happened to date. Summed up, what did it amount to? Only this, that some strange force had paralysed a number of space-ships and their crews; the space-ships in one case, certainly in others, probably had been boarded by these semi-invisible entities, but nothing had been touched or removed that we could learn, no one had been harmed and no damage done.

Was it possible, to borrow a phrase from one writer who one hundred and fifty years ago forecast something of the sort, that we were being examined in much the same impersonal fashion that a man will examine infusoria under a microscope?

A soft yet penetrating rap sounded on my cabin door, and brought me out of my reverie.

I opened the door an inch or so, and peered out.

Jansca was standing there, the light of a mild perplexity and alarm in her eyes.

"Oh, Jack," she said almost breathlessly, "I've been looking for you and wondering . . . Then I saw your light, and knocked."

"Come in," I said, "come in, dear. I've been here some time."

I shut the door and threw the insulation switch. I was getting jumpy these days, taking precautions that a week ago I would have laughed at.

"When you left the table, your meal untouched and untasted, and did not return, I feared something was wrong," she said, looking up earnestly into my face.

"You should not," I said gently. "Nothing was wrong with me."

"No?" Her fair brow wrinkled. "But there have been comings and goings, a certain amount of activity amongst the officers that made me think . . ." She stopped abruptly, and looked to me to supply the end of that truncated thought.

"Made you think what, Jansca?" I said encouragingly.

She put her two hands on my shoulders, and looked me straight in the eyes. Under that penetrating scrutiny I think I must have shifted uneasily, for:

"Dear," she said suddenly, "tell me what is wrong, if not with you, at least with things in which you are implicated. I know that something, good, bad or indifferent, is afoot."

I made my decision then and there. Jansca was no child to be scared at the unknown; she already knew something of what was afoot, and no doubt guessed more; moreover, I was not without the hope that

if I took her fully into my confidence her help would prove invaluable.

"Jansca," I said gravely, "sit down. I have something to tell you."

She obeyed, but flung me one quick glance of interest, a hint of amaze behind it, as though already she had glimpsed something of what I had to tell her.

"This," I said, "is between ourselves. It must go no further than you, not even to your father. Will you promise me that?"

Her face glowed. "Where you and I are concerned, Jack, there is no need of promises, given or taken. We are too much to each other ever to break confidence."

I nodded. That was good hearing, and I said so. "But, Jansca, what I wish to impress on you is that I am revealing to you secret matter, messages that have passed and will be passing between myself and the Council of Three. Perhaps, strictly speaking, I should do nothing of the sort, but are you not my promised wife, are we not one in thought and hopes?"

She smiled at that, and nestled close against me, looking up at me with her large wistful eyes.

"Never, never, dear one, will you find your trust misplaced," she breathed. "And now tell me what has happened."

Briefly I told her, omitting nothing, stressing nothing. She did not look as grave at the end as I had expected.

"It but follows on what we already knew," she said simply. "What it may portend I cannot say. It may mean trouble for our worlds, or it may be something that can be dealt with very easily, once we understand the reason behind it. But in the absence of more detailed information I believe the Council are taking the right course. But, dear one, does this

mean that when we reach Tlanan, if we do in safety, that you and I will be separated for a time ? ”

That indeed seemed to be her greatest worry.

“ I hope not,” I said with truth. “ If things were left to me I would marry you out of hand and make the rest of my space-voyage a honeymoon.”

“ A honeymoon ? ” For the moment she seemed puzzled, then the meaning of it dawned on her. “ Of course,” she said brightly, “ that is your Earth term for the period of adjustment. It is a sweet phrase. Sometimes I wish we Martians were a little less practical in sentimental matters, and a little more sentimental in practical affairs. Strange that we should so reverse things. But you Earthlings with your idealisation of love, of women, and all that they imply, are teaching us, though ”—she turned abruptly to me with eyes and cheeks glowing—“ there are those of us who do not need teaching, for to us the whole-hearted gift of ourselves to our men comes as naturally as the day follows night.”

“ We all can teach each other something,” I told her. “ We all have much to learn. Perhaps the ultimate aim is that by mixing as we do we planetarians may yet evolve a race as noble as it is good.”

She smiled at that. “ Too much to hope for, prophet mine. Men and women are much the same the planets over, and they will be the same strange mixtures of good and bad until the end of time.”

“ Well, we needn't worry about it, as long as we're happy in ourselves,” I remarked. My thoughts leaped off at a tangent. “ Jansca, beyond that little knife you carry in your girdle, a mere toy at that, have you any weapon of defence ? ”

“ Do I need one ? ” she queried.

"I don't know," I said frankly, "but it's just as well to be prepared. Can you use a ray tube?"

"I can use anything," she said in a tone that robbed her words of all boastfulness, "once you have shown me how."

Without more words I climbed above my bunk to the ledge where I had hidden my spare supplies, took down the case containing the charges and the duplicate tube. She had seen such before—the ship's guards carried them on every space-boat—but she had never held one in her hands before, and had no idea of its mechanism. But the thing was quite simple to use, and within a very few minutes she had acquired as complete a command over the weapon as though she had been handling it for years.

I loaded the tube, gave her an extra clip or two of the charges, and advised her to conceal it in her dress somewhere, for the ray tube is not the sort of thing a private citizen should carry openly.

"Now," I said as she slid it out of sight, "my mind's at rest. At the worst you have the means at hand to defend yourself if necessary."

Her lips curved in a smile. "I wonder if it will ever be necessary," she said softly. "I hope not."

I did not answer that, for my mind was troubled about possibilities, and presently she spoke again.

"Are you coming up on deck for a while, Jack?" she asked. "It wants an hour or two yet to retiring time. We can sit and talk, and perhaps find pleasure in each other's company, if not forgetfulness for the while of what hangs over us."

I chuckled. "Jansca, my dear, you seem to be taking rather a pessimistic view of the situation, all of a sudden too."

“And you,” she countered, “who should be that way inclined, are almost cheerful. Missing a meal seems to do you good.” As though her own words brought back recollection she dropped her bantering tone. “Oh, I’m so sorry,” she rushed on. “Of course you must be starving, and here have I been talking and keeping you from getting anything to eat. Do you think you could now?”

I smiled. “I don’t know that I need food,” I told her, and I pointed to the empty glass standing on the ledge beneath the faucet.

For the moment she looked puzzled, then took up the glass—some of the dregs were still in it—and held it close to her nose.

“Ah,” she said, “I understand.” There came a little pause, just the merest hesitation while she was framing the thought in her mind before putting it into words. Then: “Jack, it is years since I last tasted Oxcta. Do you think to-night, seeing this is a special occasion, that a little, one sip even, would be allowed me?”

“Of course,” I said, without thinking, though later it occurred to me to wonder whether she could have had any foreboding of what Oxcta was to do for us that night. She declares she had not, myself I am not so sure.

. . . . Five minutes later we made our way up-deck. It was quite crowded, possibly because we were far out in space now, and the myriad stars—more than one can see on any of the inner planets—set in the absolute black of the void had a singularly peaceful and soothing look. I brought Jansca’s chair and set it next to mine.

Heads turned and eyes followed us, for I think

the news of our impending mating had somehow got about on board, and interested people in us. It is worthy of record, however, that the eyes that followed us were nearly all those of Earthlings. The Martians as a rule are self-contained enough to mind their own affairs, and the Venerians, like butterflies, never rest long anywhere. Flitting and tireless they seem to be.

I do not know what Jansca and I talked about. No doubt we chatted idly, as lovers will. One thing is certain; we deliberately avoided all talk of the future that was likely to impinge on that dubious thing that menaced the Universe, if we were to believe the warning of the Council.

A man came mincing down the deck, one seemingly wrapped in his own thoughts. It was the careful selected steps that made me think it was Nomo Kell, though for the moment, when I glanced up, I did not recognise the man. He wore some quaint kind of head-gear, rather like a cap with a visor and ear-flaps, that I do not remember to have seen before, and though the ship's heaters kept the temperature at normal he was muffled to the chin in a coat of light shiny material. It was the first time I had noticed him dressed thus, but apparently his garments were familiar enough to the other passengers, for no one gave him more than a passing glance.

"Nomo Kell must be feeling cold," I remarked to Jansca. "See how he is wrapped up."

She did not answer in words, but her hand—we were very close together—tightened warningly on mine. Of course it was no more than coincidence that he should glance up at the exact moment I spoke and shoot a deliberately searching look towards us.

It could not have been anything else than the veriest accident, for he was too far from us to have heard what I said, even if I had spoken in far louder tones. Yet Jansca's warning grip, coming at the same instant, sent a stir of uneasiness through me. What if by some species of necromancy he had been able to hear me? What again did it matter if he had?

I dismissed the matter temporarily from my mind, and presently the man turned about, retraced his steps and disappeared in the direction up-deck from which he had originally come. But now as I watched him I fancied his steps were a little quicker, a trifle more alert, his whole attitude carrying in it a hint of impatience. I waited until he was out of sight, then:

"Jansca," I said, "do you really think he could have heard me?"

She gave the tiniest shrug to her shoulders. "Who knows?" she said absently. "At least I thought it wise to stop you before you said more."

"But," I objected, "there is no way he could have heard."

"Your own audiophones," she reminded. "That cap he wore could easily have concealed a pair."

I did not quite agree with her there. The audiophones, after all, were attuned to special receivers. I had yet to learn of any invention that could pick up ordinary conversation out of the empty air without the intermediary of mechanical transmission.

I was on the point of explaining this when of a sudden it struck me that the heaters must have developed a defect, and that some of the cold of space was trickling through our shell. The temperature seemed to have dropped perceptibly. Perhaps Nomo

Kell, with a greater sensitiveness, had become aware of this before we had.

"I think," I said softly, "that our friend knew what he was about. Jansca, it strikes me it is getting cold."

She did not answer, and I turned my head to see why. Her hand, too, had suddenly gone chill in mine. I gasped. Her head had slumped down on her breast, fallen in such a way that it would have seemed the natural outcome of her nestling against me had it not been for the iciness of her hand.

A great horror crept over me, a feeling of utter lassitude. Something within me urged me to rise to my feet, to get out of the chair and keep moving at any cost, but even the mental effort necessary to initiate such a course of action was beyond me. I did make some sort of ineffectual movement, but the only result of it was that my grip on Jansca's cold hand loosened, and it fell to her side as though it were weighted with lead.

Through split fractions of a second—too small to measure by any accepted time standard, though to me they felt like hours—the advancing tide of chill torpor crept over me, numbing my faculties, freezing my nerve centres, until with a gasp of horror I realised what, had I had my wits about me, I should have realised before, that we were in our turn in the grip of that mysterious force that had sent more than one space-liner floundering like a derelict about the void.

And at that all things seemed to go misty before me. It was as though a veil of mist had been drawn down between me and the rest of the ship, shutting me out from sound and sight and consciousness of all other life.

CHAPTER XII

THE SPACE RAIDERS

BUT this phase must have been merely momentary. For a reason that became apparent later I did not entirely lose consciousness. I must have trembled on the brink of coma for an instant, then the rising tide of my life came flooding back through my veins. In some unaccountable fashion that which was in me managed to subdue the pressure of this other exterior force, and a gentle glow stole over me.

I felt the slight stir of movement beside me, tried to turn my head, discovered to my great surprise that now I could, and found myself looking into Jansca's wide, expressive eyes.

"Jansca, darling, are you all right?" I exclaimed.

"Yes," she said quickly. "But what has gone wrong? What has happened?"

"Can't you guess?" I said. "The cold . . . the messages I got this evening . . . those space-liners adrift in the void. . . ."

"Oh." There was an odd catch in her breath. Her eyes widened; her face hardened as she flung a glance about her, and saw all the others on that deck slumped down in their chairs.

"The space-raiders," she breathed. "We are in their hands. But I thought the cold . . ."

"So did I, Jansca, but for some reason we've managed to fight it off apparently. It's a puzzle."

I made a movement as though to rise, but she caught me by the arm, dragged me back, and clung fiercely to me.

"What were you going to do?" she demanded.

"Look about. Investigate. See what I can learn of this puzzle."

"You mustn't. You mustn't do anything of the sort. My dear, we'll learn more by stopping here, remaining as we are, pretending to be asleep . . . unconscious . . . like the others. If we move round, we may blunder into someone, something, gain nothing, lose everything. Don't you see?"

I nodded. There was wisdom in her suggestion, even though the forced inaction rowelled me. But she was right. Whatever we did we must not blunder.

"Oh!" She caught my arm again, so tightly that I gasped. There was an odd accent of fear in the monosyllable that sent a shock through me.

"What . . ." I said, "what is it?"

"Look. Can't you see it?" She pointed to the quartzite windows that gave us a view of empty space and the stars beyond. Only now it was not empty. Something that might have been a wisp of smoke, or the drift of thin rain, only that such things could not be in the airless void, seemed to be blocking the windows. Then I saw that it had blotted out the stars, that it was one with the blackness of space, so totally black as to be invisible. Had it not been that it hid the stars we would not have become aware of it.

In the self-same instant we both realised what it was that we saw. It was the ship of the space-raiders.

More correctly, we did not see it. We could not see its shape, had no means of knowing it was there,

save from the fact that it interposed between us and the stars and hid them from our vision.

An idea came to me. I closed one eye. Dimly then I began to see a form, a cigar-shaped thing, the space-ship of these strange entities, resting in mid-ether, so to speak, side by side with our own vessel. No doubt its connecting port was already clamped against our port, which could be opened from the outside by the emergency manual machinery. Even now entrance was probably being made in much the same way we had boarded the drifting *M.E.75*.

I opened my eye, and stared at the shape beyond the quartzite windows with the sight of both eyes. The shape was no longer visible. It had become absorbed into the blackness of space. Still, I knew it was still there, since the myriad diamond bright stars that should have met my gaze were still hidden. But I was satisfied in my own mind that at last I held the clue to this mysterious quality of invisibility the raiders possessed.¹

Jansca's hand gripped mine tighter than ever. The same thought, I knew, was going through both our minds; the same explanation had occurred to us simultaneously, and now that we knew, or thought we knew, much of our apprehension had vanished. Once the nature of a danger is realised it ceases to terrify, and the way is open to combat it.

"You see?" I said. "You understand what it is?"

Jansca nodded. "I know why nobody has seen them so far," she answered, "and I can guess at the

¹ The precise principle underlying this problem—a question of light refractions and stereo-optics—is dealt with more fully in Chapter XIII.

principle by which they make themselves invisible, But what I can't yet understand . . .”

She did not complete the sentence. Instead, “Hush,” she said in a fierce whisper, and slumped down in her chair, releasing my hand as she did so. I took the cue from her. No one glancing at us the next instant would have dreamt that out of all that ship's company we two alone retained consciousness of what was going on about us.

I could not see what it was that had alarmed her, and I dared not raise myself in the chair to find out. I could only wait.

I did not have to wait long. But what I saw seemed for the moment so monstrous and incredible that I could hardly believe my eyes. A procession of bodies was advancing along the deck, the bodies of those officers who should at this time of the night have been in the control-room. The eerie thing about it all was that the bodies were seemingly floating in the air, at a distance of three to four feet above the deck. Yet, when I say floating, I must stress the fact that while the extremities, heads and legs, were more or less on a level, in each case the middle part of the body sagged, dipped or drooped, whichever you care to call it.

For a split second I stared, forgetting I was supposed to be unconscious, then quickly the meaning of it all came flooding back on me, and with it memory of that queer tale—which I had half-disbelieved at the time—told to us by Mrs. Galon on board the *M.E.75*.

The unconscious figures of the officers were not floating along of their own accord; they were being carried! Carried by those invisible entities whom, for want of a better phrase, we called the space-raiders.

I watched. The procession came closer, drew level. At the head and shoulders of each of our men I could now see a vague, misty outline, a thing that flickered uncannily in the glare from the stored-sunlight tubes that lit the deck.

Neither Jansca nor I made a movement. We were too utterly unnerved to do anything save sit still and stare through lowered lids at this weird company. We saw the unconscious men deposited in vacant chairs, waited a moment, then came the passing in front of eyes again of those flickering, misty things.

I counted. I think there were eight of them. I cannot be sure now, for at that exact moment Jansca made a slight movement. But it was not so much the movement itself as what it caused that mattered. She had a tiny little handbag in her lap, a thing of light and glittering metal, and as she stirred it slipped to the floor with a tinkling clatter. Foolishly we can see now, she bent to pick it up, before I could stay her.

It was as though several columns of mist opposite us stood still for an instant, then began to advance towards us. A chair was in the way of the uncoming entities. I know that because I saw an odd flicker behind it, then it was pushed to one side.

I think I must have lost my head, that is the only explanation of what I did. I sprang to my feet, drawing my ray-tube as I did so and levelling it at the nearest mist-like figure. In my agitation I loosed the full charge.

Came there a spurt of light, and I staggered back half-blinded. But where the mist had been a moment before there was a tumbled heap on the deck, something whose outlines were rapidly thickening and

taking shape. It was as though a body were being moulded there under our eyes.

Jansca must have sprung to her feet a moment after me, for almost on the heels of my discharge came another spurt of light, from beside me this time and the almost inaudible click of the ray-tube mechanism. I did not look to see what damage she had done, but tried to keep my eyes on the other mist-wraiths. They were so close to the point of absolute invisibility, however, that I found it harder than I had expected. The very vagueness of their outlines endowed them with a kind of Will-o'-the-Wisp quality that was in itself disquieting.

A moment I waited, expecting I knew not what diabolical force to be loosed on us in reprisal, but nothing happened, and then abruptly it seemed to me the swirls of mist were vanishing away up the deck in the direction of the control-room quarters.

Ray-tube in hand, I started in pursuit, Jansca panting along beside me. And as I ran I flicked the button of my weapon. We did not wait to see what became of the things that fell at our feet, but kept on, for I did not know what damage the others might do if we did not keep them in sight.

The door of the control room opened and closed uncannily as we came abreast of it. It opened again the very next instant, and something came hissing out. What it was I could not see—either because it too was invisible or else it moved too swiftly—but it passed between us, and crashed against the opposite wall of the deck. A huge wet splash appeared on the Marsonite surface, as though someone had cast a bucket of water there, and the air seemed of a sudden to have turned icily chill.

"We must get them," I breathed. "Jansca, you stay here. You mustn't take the risk."

"That's for me to say," she gasped with a sob in her voice. "Where you go, I go too."

There was no time to argue with her. With a feeling that we were taking our lives in our hands I dashed in through the open door of the control-room, expecting every second to find another icy missile, better aimed this time, hurled at us. But nothing happened. No one opposed our passage, and of the mist-wraiths there was no sign.

Still, to make doubly certain we followed the descent down to the port against which they had linked their ship. It was very dark in the passage; for some reason the light here had failed, but we blundered on. Then with the most surprising luck in the Universe I blundered into something. What it was I could not say. It felt soft, and cold and repellent, to the touch like a dead body, save that there was a jelly-like flow of it away from under my hand. In my horror I flickered the button of my ray-tube. The catch must have slipped somehow, for I don't think it could have given a full discharge. I heard an odd sound like a thin wail, there was a rush of cold air past me, then as something creaked under my feet I realised that we were on the edge of the passage way our visitors had clamped against the port of the *Cosmos*. I drew back abruptly, pulling Jansca with me.

The planets know what might have happened had I not done so. It was purely an instinctive movement, I must say, for I hadn't time to stop and think that the stranger ship would probably cast off at once. Yet this is much what must have happened, and had I not pulled back then another few seconds might

have seen us being hurled out to our deaths in space, as certainly would have happened when the connection with our port was severed.

I heard a creaking almost at my feet, and blindly flashed my ray-tube in the direction from which the sound came. I know now, what I did not realise at the time, that it was the preliminary movement of casting off. But what I did realise the very next instant was the air of the *Cosmos* was beginning to whistle off into space. Another few minutes and we would have been bereft of our atmosphere. I got the port closed just in time. Thank Heaven it had an automatic action from the inside and one touch of a button was sufficient to seal the *Cosmos*.

Panting, I leaned against the port through which we and the whole ship's company had nearly come to our deaths, striving to get my breathing back to normal. Jansca, who had been further back than I, had not fared so badly, and, no doubt, that was why she was able to see the initial stages of the catastrophe I had precipitated.

Her cry of horror roused me.

"What—what is it?" I gasped.

A quartzite window had been let into the port, and for some reason or other the slide of this had been drawn back, giving us an outlook on empty space. At the moment it framed a picture that I shall remember to my dying day.

A huge space-ship, larger than anything I had ever seen, was slowly taking form before our eyes. It was a glistening monster that would have made six of the *Cosmos*, the latest product of inter-planetary genius though she was. But the most appalling part of what we saw was that the stranger vessel seemed

as though she were breaking in halves. A great gap showed in the quarter nearest to us, a red-rimmed outline, that spread as we watched. To this day I am not quite sure just exactly what occurred, though I feel that that last flicker of my ray tube must have set my opponent afire instead of killing him outright. How or why the blaze spread I cannot say; the only thing of which I really can be certain is that they must have had a store of explosives of unknown potency on board, for, even as we watched, the huge ship seemed to stretch like an over-filled balloon, and burst into a myriad fragments that whirled and glowed, that faded and passed at last in flickering extinction out into the uncharted depths of space.

The *Cosmos* bounced like a kicked football, and the vibrations of that explosion, soundless though they were, reached out and buffeted us a thousand miles or so out of our course. Jansca and I were thrown against each other, and dropped, battered, bruised and breathless on the dark floor of the passage.

I climbed to my feet, spoke to her, fumbled for her hand, found it, and helped her upright. For the moment we both gasped in the thin, rarefied air. It was that which reminded me how narrowly we had escaped a terrible death.

Ordinarily, the moment the connecting tube of the stranger vessel had broken away from our open port, every scrap of air in the *Cosmos* should have rushed out into the vacuum of space, hurling us before it like straws before a gale. But no such thing had happened. Beyond the whistle and sizzle of escaping air nothing had happened. True, I had jumped at once and pressed the button that sealed the port, but ordinarily even that would not have saved us.

The actual explanation, however, was that the *Cosmos* was divided in a series of small, practically air-tight compartments that could be sealed instantly and automatically. The abrupt withdrawal of the air in the particular compartment in which we were had, by the alteration of pressure, at once sealed all the other parts of the ship against leakage, and saved our lives. Now that the port had been closed, however, valves had come into operation that allowed more air to seep gradually back into the empty compartment.

It was the realisation of this made me go cannily. The little air left in the passage where we were was thin enough in all conscience, and its effect on us was momentarily becoming more pronounced. I felt dizzy, and something was wrong apparently with both my lungs and heart. Jansca used to a greater degree to a thinner atmosphere was not so distressed. Nevertheless, the sooner we got back to a normal pressure the better for us both.

I did not waste words and air in telling her what I wanted, but drew her along back to the centre of the ship. She came staggering, as I most certainly did myself, until a few yards brought us up against the valved door that had fallen into place behind our backs. Though the lights were off here there should be a switch somewhere, and after some ineffectual fumbling I found it, and a tube overhead glowed brightly, enough to show me the mechanism that opened the door. I turned the graduated scale, letting the air fill in by degrees, for too sudden an alteration of pressure might have done us immense harm.

Gradually our lungs filled out, our hearts ceased racing and our distress vanished. We could open

the door now and pass on without any bad results. The rest of the way, too, was lighted.

Jansca still clung to me. Now that the worst was over the reaction had come, and it was hard to recognise her as the daring Amazon who had taken a stand beside me and driven the strange invaders from our ship.

I made at once for the control-room, for I had no idea how the vessel was drifting, and until I saw the charts and dials there was no way of determining how far off our course we were. It took a few minutes' intricate calculation before I learnt what I wished to know, but that done it was a simple matter to correct the error, and bring the *Cosmos* back to the space-lane she had been following. Locking the gears, so she could not slew off again, I turned away to find Jansca regarding me.

"Well, my dear," she said, "is it all right now? I didn't care to interrupt you before by speaking. I know how important it is for us to get back at once on our course."

"I think everything's right as far as this end of it is concerned," I told her, "but there's still quite a lot for us to do."

I took her in my arms and kissed her. "That," I said, "is for the help you've given me. Come on now, my dear, better not waste more time. I'm not sure, you see, whether we killed or merely paralysed those folk we dropped, so keep your ray tube handy in case of trouble."

I think she must have forgotten till that moment that, dead or alive, there were still some of the space-raiders left on board, for she started at my words, and her face paled.

"Oh," she said, with a hint of anxiety in her tones.

Our fears were groundless, however. None of the raiders was left alive. Jansca and I, by some species of lucky accident, had killed all those we struck. There were seven of them, scattered at intervals along the route from the control-floor to the spot on the promenade deck where we had first encountered them. Whatever the process they used to render themselves invisible, its effects evidently were neutralised by the discharges from our ray-tubes, for the bodies themselves were now quite plain to be seen.

We did not linger to examine them, however. More pressing matters awaited our attention, and when we got Hume and his assistants revived, then would be time enough to satisfy our very natural curiosity.

Either we had not been treated to as big a dose of the anaesthetising cold as the *M.E.75*, or else something had happened to neutralise it very quickly, for there were signs as we made our way down the deck that some of the company were already stirring. Hume as matter of fact had slid down from the chair on which they had placed him—not too carefully it appeared—and was lolling on the decking in a sitting position with his back resting against the chair.

I caught him by the shoulder and shook him. He opened his eyes, blinked stupidly, then lurched sideways as though he were going off into a faint. I caught him.

"Steady on," I said. "Here, wake up." And I shook him again.

This time he opened his eyes to their full, stared from Jansca to me in a puzzled fashion.

"Ah, Sanders," he said slowly, "what's wrong?"

"Look here, Hume," I said desperately, "pull yourself together as quick as you can. Something has gone wrong, terribly wrong, but I can't tell you while you're in that state. Make an effort, man."

He held out his hand to me, and with an effort I hauled him to his feet. He stood there an instant, swaying, then with what must have been a powerful effort of will he got himself under control.

"Go on, Jack," he said urgently. "I think I'm all right now. I'm coming round at anyrate. What *has* happened? The last I can remember is doing something in the control-room, and now I come to and find myself out here. It's not . . . ?"

He did not finish the sentence, but a flicker of alarm passed across his face. I guessed what he had left unsaid.

"Those space-visitors we were warned against," I said. "Yes, we had a raid from them, though this time there's been casualties."

"Casualties? Gods! Any of us killed?"

"No. The raiders. Jansca and I——" I stopped, finished with an expressive gesture.

"But how"—his brow wrinkled—"how in the stars did you escape? Why weren't you both sent off into a coma too?"

"I don't know, not rightly. I've my own ideas, but they can wait for explanation until later. Meanwhile. . . . Do you feel better now?"

"Much." He brushed a hand across his brow and involuntarily squared his shoulders. "This stuff seems to wear off quickly, once one opens one's eyes. Head a bit dizzy still, but I think I can carry on. But, Jack, the ship!"

"I've set her on her course. The automatic control will carry on."

"But a meteorite. . . . If we should strike one."

"I think the locator and the repeller ray will deal with it before that happens. Still for the time being we'll have to take our chance. I would suggest, however, we lessen the possibility of danger by waking up the rest of your fellows."

He made a movement as though to go off and do it at once. I caught his sleeve.

"Stay," I said. "Jansca will attend to that. You and I have other things to do. We've killed some of the space-raiders. Their bodies——"

"Yes?" he said quickly.

"Had better be taken from here. We don't want curious passengers prying round. Perhaps you and I between us can get them on to the control-deck. Then we may have the worst of it over before the bulk of the passengers are wide awake enough to realise what we're doing."

He hesitated a moment, then looked round. Jansca, dear, lovable, helpful soul, had not waited for me to make a direct request. The moment she had heard my suggestion she had gone systematically to rouse the unconscious officers, and acquaint them with the situation.

"All right." Hume took a step forward. "Your suggestion is a good one, Jack. The less we alarm anyone the better."

The details of our task can well be spared, but it was over and done with and our dead space-visitors removed to the control-deck in less time than we had anticipated. Jansca, too, had done her work well, and when at last we paused for breath and looked about

us, it was to find the officers had trickled back to their places, looking sick and bewildered, and from the mechanical side the running of the ship was being taken up again where it had been incontinently dropped.

The passengers, too, were stirring, all aware that something bizarre had occurred while they were unconscious, and each trying to fit his or her own impressions in with those of their neighbours in the vain hope of forming some intelligible design from the whole. The guard-bar at the entrance to the control deck was set, however, and a junior officer stationed there to prevent any invasion of our privacy. Curious as they might be the passengers would have to wait their turn.

The moment we began to take up the running again I gave Hume an outline of what had transpired. I could see that he was not quite sure whether to be most impressed by our luck—he called it daring—in clearing the ship between us, or puzzled because the general coma seemed to have passed us by. It was pretty plain to me now why we had been left unaffected, but the reason of it was something that I did not want advertised unduly. I fancied he would agree with me when he knew.

“And now,” I said, “perhaps it would be as well to have a look at our bag.”

Thus unfeelingly I spoke of the dead space-visitors, yet in a way I could feel no contact of humanity with them. That they were not ordinary interstellar bandits I felt convinced already; they were alien beings with whom I could have nothing in common.

Jansca moved forward with us. I would rather

she kept away, but she was insistent, and for once I did not gainsay her.

An odd sense of familiarity struck me the moment I had leisure to look the dead beings over carefully. There were, I think I have noted, seven in all, and each was clad from neck to knee in a coat of some light shiny material; the head of each was covered by a cap of the same material, with a mica-like transparency in the front for the eyes.

I gasped as I realised where I had seen such garments before. Jansca too recalled, for her eyes met mine meaningly.

I bent down swiftly, fumbled with the visor of the helmet. Inadvertently I must have pressed some spring, for the visor shot back, revealing the face of the dead being. Even in death there was a certain horrible suggestion of malignant power about it that made me recoil involuntarily. But in an instant I recovered myself.

A cry from Hume brought me round to him. He had been examining the next being, and had managed to get the helmet clean off the head. As I turned he was standing with it in his hand, an expression of utter amazement stamped on his face.

"What is it?" I cried, and Jansca and I moved a step nearer.

"Look!" he said huskily, pointing.

We looked. The wide staring eyes, vacant of life now, were an odd kind of purple, the pupils queerly flecked; the skin of the face was an odd blotchy red and starting at the forehead and running back to the occiput was a horn-like ridge.

I nodded. "They're all like that," I said. "They're all the same race, not a doubt of that."

"Yes, yes," Hume said quickly, "but this particular one. . . . He's not a stranger. I've seen his face before . . . on this ship."

"I know," I said deliberately, letting the words sink in. "And his name, in case you have forgotten, is Nomo Kell."

CHAPTER XIII

RENDEZVOUS

"NOMO KELL." Hume nodded. "The man you were suspicious of from the first time you saw him. I only wish now," he added bitterly, "that I'd taken notice of your suspicions."

"What could you have done, or I, for that matter?" I returned. "I couldn't give a name to my suspicions. I felt he was odd, that's all. And all the taking notice in the Universe wouldn't have made matters one whit the better. As it is now we know something. We've made a point of contact, and we have some sort of a clue to guide us when we want it."

Others of the officers were gathering round now, staring curiously. Gond, the first, came out of the control-room, and stopped with a little gasp of amaze. I could see from the man's face that he was itching to know all that had happened, and I could hardly blame him. In his shoes I would have had even more difficulty in suppressing my curiosity.

He was passing by when Hume called him. "Just a moment, Mr. Gond," he said. "We may need you."

Hume himself turned back to me. "Jack," he said, "what should we do with these bodies? It's for you to say."

"Keep one, dressed and all," I said promptly. "It may be wanted for purposes of study. The others, perhaps we'd better bury in space. But strip their

cloaks and helmets first. They'll certainly be wanted for examination, whatever comes or goes."

"Good," he said; "that's what I thought you'd say, and that's why I asked Gond to wait. I'll tell him now."

He gave the first officer instructions what to do, satisfied his curiosity in part, and came back to us, over his arm the cloak and helmet he had stripped from Nomo Kell.

"Jack," he said, "you and Miss Dirka may wish to have a talk with me. I know I want one with the two of you. My cabin's the most private place on this ship, and I suggest we go there."

I looked at Jansca and she nodded. "All right," I said to Hume. "Lead the way."

It wasn't until we were seated comfortably in Hume's cabin and all precautions taken against outside interference that any of us spoke again. At last Hume looked at us, a trifle suspiciously, I fancied, though that may have been merely my over-wound imagination, and:

"What I'd most like to know," he said deliberately, "is why you two alone, out of all the ship's complement, were not overcome."

"It's quite simple," I said, smiling.

"You suspected something of the sort—such a raid as this I mean—and took precautions against it, I presume?"

I laughed at that. "Look here, Hume," I said, "as it turns out we did take precautions against being sent to sleep, but the oddest part of it all is that we did it unwittingly. We hadn't the faintest idea at the moment of what we were really doing."

"Well, then, by accident you've discovered some

way of combating this stuff or force or whatever it is that Nomo Kell's people use, so I think it's up to you to make your discovery public property."

"It can't be done," I told him. "You and Jansca, for instance, would be the first to protest against me doing anything of the sort."

Jansca made an odd movement of impatience. "Don't mystify us merely to amuse yourself, Jack," she said softly. "I don't know anything more than Captain Hume does of this matter. True, I fancy I can guess what you're hinting at, nevertheless I want to hear the facts from your own lips and confirm or disprove my guess. What is it, my dear? Can't you see we're both impatient?"

For answer I put my hand in my pocket, drew out a little steel box, opened it and placed it on the table between us.

"That," I said.

Hume half started to his feet. "Oxcta!" he exclaimed, shooting a glance across at Jansca. "Is that what you guessed?"

She nodded. "Rather," she corrected the impression in the next breath, "I arrived at that conclusion by process of elimination. Something must have acted on our behalf to counteract the effects of that perishing cold. The only thing common to us to-night—the antidote—was that." She gestured towards the open steel box and the pellets of Oxcta.

"Jack," she went on, "missed his dinner. With his usual forethought for others he wouldn't trouble the kitchen staff getting a late meal solely for him, so he decided to carry on on Oxcta. I came down to see him, saw the signs of the stuff and asked for some myself. I'm glad now I had it. It kept me awake,

energised me, and gave me a chance of being of help."

"And it seems you were of considerable help, too, Miss Dirka," he said heartily. "If the Council don't make you an Honorary Member of the Guard, they don't know merit when they hear of it. If Jack won't report you, I shall."

"You'd better do it," I hinted. "Mightn't look well coming from me, seeing we're going to marry soon."

"Never mind me, what I do or don't deserve," said Jansca calmly. "There are more important matters to be dealt with now than my deserts."

"Good girl," said Hume, appraisingly. "Jack's going to have a helper, I see. Practical at that."

"You men aren't," she shot back. "Let us get to business."

"In what way? What can we do?" I queried.

"We've discovered certain facts," she began. "I suggest we make them public. It may save lives; it will certainly save trouble."

Hume leaned forward across the table, his dark face suddenly gone grave. "Up to a point you're right, Jansca," he said with the easy freedom of an old friend. "But the main fact, the one that is going to be the most important factor in fighting this menace, is one that we can't make public. You and Jack retained your consciousness and were able to make a clean sweep of this ship's crew simply because of Oxcta."

"And," I cut in quickly, as he paused, "that we can't broadcast."

"No, I'm with you there," Jansca agreed. "I hadn't that in mind anyway. But before we leave that particular item let me tell you there is a method

of getting over that difficulty. I'm Martian born, Captain Hume is Martian by adoption, and Jack here is"—for the moment I thought, shuddering, that she was going to say 'of Sonjhon blood', but she ran on—"going to marry a Martian. It's a bond, of a sort. We can talk between us of things we'd otherwise keep to ourselves. When we reach Tlanan, if you'll allow it, I'll see the Council, tell them what Oxcta did for us, and suggest a plan. Tambard will listen to me, that I know. We can make a solution of it—no need to divulge the secret of its preparation—and supply it to the fighting forces of the planets."

"Not a bad idea at all," said Hume. "But we've yet to reach Tlanan. Go on, Jansca. I think you've more to say, however."

"I have. The Oxcta I'm merely suggesting as the safer and surer way. In the meanwhile there's another method, more cumbersome, of course, but it will serve until a better one can be put into operation."

"What is it?" we both asked simultaneously.

She flung us a glance of withering scorn. "You men, with your superior intellects. Why, it takes a woman to teach you what you've seen with your own eyes. Didn't your experience on the *M.E.75* show you anything, the two of you?"

It had shown me at least, and the meaning of it hit me as she spoke.

"The emergency suits!" I cried.

"That's it," she agreed. "It means wearing them day and night, but they're built to stand the absolute zero of space at a pinch. And the one thing we know about this anaesthetising cold is that no matter how it is produced, it doesn't remain constant. It drops—to 44 below, you thought, Jack—and when it

reaches a certain point the temperature begins to rise again till it gets back to normal. Perhaps it could be kept constant, though all we can say is that so far we've had no experience of that. Point No. 1, then, is the constant wearing of space-suits. I'm taking this, of course, as applying only to the fighting forces. Probably all passenger and freight vessels will be laid up if this menace develops to any extent."

"Have you any Point 2?" I asked. I had made a contracted note of the first item while she was talking.

"And three and perhaps four, too," she said. "Taking them down, Jack? Good. Well, log it this way. The space-visitors can be killed. We—you and I—have killed them with the ray tubes. Death, accident or injury renders them visible again. Their ships can be made visible by the same means."

"Wait. One moment," I interrupted her. "I've an idea. Hume, that helmet and cloak. Hand them over, please."

He did so. For a few moments there was absolute silence in the cabin while I examined first the cloak, and then the helmet. I had begun by thinking that invisibility was induced by the substance with which the two articles were painted, but a second's reconsideration showed me that in one case at least this could not be so. I had seen Nomo Kell walking the deck with this self-same cloak on him, and no doubt the queer head-gear that had then attracted my attention had been the helmet with the visor and ear-flaps drawn up. Obviously then this invisibility was not a permanent feature due entirely to the nature of the reflecting surfaces of the material; they might play a certain part in the result, no doubt, but actually

the invisibility could be turned on or off at will, so to speak.

In view of that the problem narrowed down to a question of vibrations, and this pre-supposed a battery of some sort. Presently I found one, a tremendously light battery like the new Dirac type, small enough to be concealed under the left armpit of the cloak. I doubt very much if it could have weighed more than a couple of ounces. Then by accident I discovered that one of the buttons on the cloak acted as a switch by which the current inducing the vibrations could be turned on and off. I found this out by the simple process of turning it idly. To my astonishment the button pivoted round in a half-turn, and the cloak incontinently vanished. I could still feel its weight and substance in my hand; I fancied even that I could see it as a vague misty transparency, but even of this I could not be sure.

“ You see ! ” I cried. “ It has vanished ! ”

Neither of the others seemed as surprised as I had expected. Jansca seemed to take my discovery for granted, and as for Hume, well, I fully believe that by then he was past being astonished by anything.

“ I’ve never seen the principle applied before,” he remarked, “ but it’s a thing that’s been more or less common knowledge for many years. Ever since Einstein enunciated his views on the curvature of space early in the twentieth century it has been felt that invisibility could be induced. Curved light, that’s what this is, light curved so that it flows round the object instead of being reflected back from it. Once you’ve found a mechanical method of bending a light ray out of its path, you’ve achieved practical invisibility.”

"I won't say you're entirely wrong," I remarked, as I twisted back the button and once more rendered the cloak visible. "In fact, I think you're quite right . . . up to a point. This prepared surface does play a big part in the process; how much so we can't say until the stuff has been examined by experts. But apparently its properties aren't constant. They have to be activated by the vibrations set up by this battery."

"I'm afraid I don't quite grasp that," Jansca said with a puzzled air. "You must remember I haven't studied light vibrations and stereoptics like you space-liner men have to."

"It's quite simple," I told her. "Put it this way. You know that human ears, whether they are Martian, Tellurian or Venerian, have a limited range of audibility."

She nodded. "I know that. The range varies a little from race to race and also from individual to individual."

"And from man to animals and from animals to birds," I went on. "Birds and animals can hear sounds that are too high or too low in the scale to make any impression on our ear-drums. The same thing applies to sight. Our eyes are attuned to respond to merely a limited range of vibration. Get above or below that limited range, and a thing becomes invisible. It is a result that can be obtained mechanically by speeding up the rate of light vibrations."

"Or slowing them down," said Hume. "Either would answer, I take it."

"I should imagine so," I said a trifle dubiously. "It's merely a matter of getting beyond the limited scale of light vibrations that can be perceived by the

human eye. Above or below that scale, the result to my mind would be the same. At anyrate this little gadget in the cloak apparently works the oracle, so I don't see that the rest matters."

"Doesn't it?" Jansca interposed. "I should think it rather important."

"Why?" I queried interestedly. I knew she had a singularly clear sense of perception in most matters, and when she made a suggestion it was usually worth listening to. In this case no doubt, seeing she came to the discussion with a mind unclouded by pre-conceived ideas the chance was by no means remote that she had seized on some point that we had overlooked.

"Because," she said slowly, "if we wish to combat this invisible menace we must know something about the methods they use to produce it."

I flung out my hands, and nodded towards the cloak and helmet on the table.

"We do," I said. "There's the evidence."

"And your last words," she retorted scathingly, "are evidence that you don't quite realise the nature of one at least of your discoveries."

"Go ahead," I smiled. "We're both willing to be instructed."

"Well, in the first place we found that when we attacked these people with our ray-tubes their visibility returned, slowly, and gradually. Therefore the ray has power to neutralise the vibrations that induce invisibility. Most probably it breaks the circuit, somehow. Is that plain enough?"

"Of course," I cried, springing to my feet. "I see what you're driving at now. Our ray becomes effective by using a high-scale vibration. It is so high in fact

that it can also speed up the vital processes of a human being to the very point of dissolution. What you actually mean is that if the invisibility vibrations were high-scale ones our ray would not neutralise them, but would merely accentuate them.”

“Speed them up,” said Jansca. “Exactly. So the vibrations we are seeking must be below, not above the range of human perception. The ray-tube discharge speeds them, you see, to a pitch where they again enter our scale.”

Yet the idea even when so expounded took some digesting. I was familiar with the possibility of light vibrations so fast that they became imperceptible, but this suggestion that they could be so retarded that they could not be seen seemed utterly fantastic. Nevertheless, as events were to prove, this was exactly what had happened. The field of force set up by the vibratory apparatus slowed the light waves down so much that for all practical purposes they ceased to exist. Put in another way, they took so long to make themselves perceptible that they made no impression at all on the retina of the eye. Yet even that statement must admit of modifications. Our own experiences and those of Mrs. Galon on the *M.E.75* showed that objects thus rendered invisible for all practical purposes really retained a sort of wavering tenuosity of outline that was however far too vague and misty for them to be recognised as substances and forms.¹

“And now,” I said, dropping back into my seat again, “the sooner we make our discoveries known in the proper quarters the better for the three worlds. None of us are scientists, and our deductions may have

¹The parallel of slow-motion films forms perhaps the best practical exposition of what this slowing-down process involves.

to be checked over for errors, but the main point is that our ray not only renders our antagonists visible, but will also kill them. If it is not necessary to kill them I think they can be deprived of their invisibility by a non-lethal ray of the same vibratory pitch. How's that?"

"An epoch-making discovery, I should imagine," said Jansca, with a slightly sarcastic note in her voice. "Jack, suppose you code this information—you Guards have a code of your own, I believe—beam it on to the representatives of the Council."

A subtle way of intimating to me that I was wasting time in speculation that could be done better by trained minds!

I drew my pad towards me, scribbled quickly for some minutes, while the others sat silent awaiting my pleasure. At last I flung down my pencil and looked up.

"I've made it as clear as I possibly can," I said, "though I've had to put some words in English, since there is no equivalent in . . . in the code I use." In my unthinking hurry I was near to blurting out the name of that language we Guards used for our communication, but luckily I pulled myself up in time. Near and dear as Jansca now was to me, good friend and comrade though Hume might be, to neither of them could I divulge what was an oath-bound secret of the Inter-planetary Guard.

"Want to send it yourself?" Hume said in reference to the message. "I'll have the transmitting-room cleared if you wish."

He was not anxious to do that, however, I could see quite plainly, for even as he made the offer his hand hovered over the bell-push on his desk.

"Doesn't matter," I assured him. "The operator

on duty can send it providing he sends it as he stands. He won't know what it means, of course, so he'll have to take particular care."

"Right." Hume pushed the button, and waited for the answer to come from the transmitting-room. Almost immediately the surface of his vision plate glowed, and the voice of the operator sounded in the room. Hume had left his communicator open so that we could hear every word that was said.

"Operator? Captain Hume here. Message to be sent on at once. Yes, general call to all Guard-ships. Is your vision plate clear? Good. Here's the message then."

He took the sheet on which I had written my report, special sheets prepared for the purpose and cut to size, and placed it in a clamp that held it steady against our own vision plate. A few seconds passed, then came the voice of the operator through the communicator, "Next sheet, please, Captain."

The process was repeated until the sheets were exhausted, then again came the calm, unhurried voice of the operator, "Message completed, Captain. I'll call through when we get an answer."

The light in the vision plate surface died, and Hume handed me back the sheets.

"You know best how to deal with these," he said meaningly.

I did. I wadded them up, dropped them in the little basin under the water faucet and allowed a trickle to play on them. The sheets spread out, dissolved into liquid, and passed down the flush-pipe into the depths of space.

I was turning back from my work of destruction when the communicator sounded again.

“Message for Inter-planetary Guard Officer Sanders, aboard Space-Liner *Cosmos*,” came in the operator’s metallic tones. “Message begins. ‘Space-Liner *Cosmos* required to report immediately at Martian Rendezvous base. Signature Tambard.’ Message ends.”

I whistled softly. The message had been hurled at hot-speed from Gaudien, the Martian Guard-ship base, and since it was signed by Tambard it followed that he was already at work on the problem that had suddenly been offered the planets for solution. I had met Tambard once or twice in the course of my work. A singularly dynamic personality when roused to action, yet one whom it took much to stir. That he should be directing investigations in person away from his own planet suggested that matters might already have reached a stage of greater seriousness than we had imagined possible.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GAUDIEN BASE

EXACTLY twenty-three and a half hours after receiving the message we arrived at Gaudien.

On board the *Cosmos* things had already reached the stage where it was manifestly impossible to keep the real state of affairs hidden any longer from the passengers, so rather than have wild rumours racing round the ship I prepared a digest of the situation, and had it posted on the various notice-boards. I flatter myself that I made it as bromide as possible in tone without in any way seeking to disguise the position. There was no sense in saying there was no occasion for alarm. I believed there was, and that nothing would be gained by attempting to pretend otherwise. Instead I called on all to give every possible help to the staff to enable them to maintain smooth running.

My appeal, I fancy, justified the terms in which it was cast by the result it achieved. There was no panic, and no sign of alarm anywhere. A touch of anxiety and apprehension I did notice, and Jansca reported that she had literally been besieged by questioners, who wanted a fuller explanation of the events of the night. She handled them all with her good-humoured Martian tactfulness.

Feeling from the first that we required someone who, while still one of the passengers, could speak with a

certain authority, I had appointed her to the position. Her work was simply to keep the social activities moving, and deprecate any alarmist tendencies. Our alliance was a matter of common knowledge throughout the ship by this, and as a consequence Jansca was taken as being absolutely in my confidence, and so every word she uttered carried twice the ordinary weight. Apart from that she did her work nobly. The Council, I was sure, would have no hesitation in appointing her an honorary Guard once my report went in and they had time to study it. Both she and her father would certainly value the silver comet's tail that is the symbol of that honour far more than they would the Inter-planetary Guardsman's own badge. After all, not one civilian in a million ever qualifies for that honorary award, perhaps the highest decoration the planets know.

To come back to Gaudien.

Long before we made contact, that huge structure of glittering metal, a veritable city in the void, was visible against the background of inter-stellar space. I have seen it a hundred times, and each time I find myself marvelling anew at the mechanical ingenuity that constructed it as much as at the brains that conceived it.

In the early days of inter-planetary travel it became increasingly obvious that the Guard-ships should have some base in mid-void to obviate the necessity of having to run to their home planets for repairs and fuel. We Earthlings were fortunate in that in our Moon we had a ready-made base a quarter of a million miles away, and on the side of our satellite that is invisible from Earth our refuelling and repair depot was established.

Mars, less fortunate, had to construct such a base in space, and the result is a lasting monument to the friendship between three worlds that banished the last of that ill-feeling which lingered for years after the disastrous business of the War of the Planets. For the engineers of three worlds gave of their best in combination to produce this floating miracle in space. If we Earthlings can claim more credit for it than the engineers of the other two planets it is traceable to the fact that the plans for the Gaudien base were actually based on designs drawn up as long ago as the year 1929 by Captain Hermann Noordung, a German engineer and authority on mechanics, who was perhaps the first of all Earth-men to deal with the problem of space navigation as a serious subject for discussion.

The final result is all the more remarkable when one remembers that the greater part of the work was done in free space, that only the nucleus was built on Mars, and the rest of the floating base built up bit by bit by men working in space-suits of metal, which again we owe to Captain Noordung's fertile invention. These space-suits were necessary at the beginning, since the men had to work in an airless, heatless void, and under remarkably trying conditions; but once Gaudien—for so the base was named, after the Martian engineer who played the greatest part in its construction—was completed the scientists immediately set to work to provide it with an atmosphere of its own. For long they were unsuccessful, but at last the many difficulties were overcome, and to-day Gaudien exists as a distant satellite, or more correctly a minor planet which moves with Mars along its orbital path round the Sun.

The huge city in space, for such it was, was alive

with lights, lights so confusing that only the Guards' captains actually know the meaning of them all. The ordinary space-liners seldom approach close to Gaudien; usually they are content to give the place a wide berth, and when they do not it is because either they are in trouble or in charge of a Guard. The facetious claim that the two conditions are more or less synonymous, though this is a libel on a highly specialised and admirable force.

Naturally I had to take over control myself, and order the approach, and on the nose of the *Cosmos* we had switched on the three triangular lights, green, white and red, that showed an officer of the Guard was on board.

An answering signal flashed out from the nearest light pylon on Gaudien, a directional beam that told me where to berth my vessel. I had merely to keep the nose of the *Cosmos* dead in the centre of the beam of light, and the rest would follow. We had already, quite three hours before this, slowed down as much as possible. Nevertheless, the force of our impetus was so great that we had to work the repeller rays to keep from crashing headlong into the vast mass of Gaudien. However, all went well, and we made a beautifully soft landing in the slips alongside the pylon from which our directional beam had been flashed.

As the clamps closed over our hull and drew it down softly into the nest prepared for it, a gangway was run up against our main entrance port, and the moment it was opened half a dozen Martian officials strode through.

I was there at the entrance to meet them, and I recognised the foremost one as the redoubtable Tam-bard himself, and a little to my surprise I saw just

behind the dapper, bird-like figure of little Clinigo, the Venerian member of the Council. I had not expected him, and the latest news had been that he was on his home planet. But apparently I had been misinformed on this.

Tambard was tall even for a Martian, but he was built so perfectly in proportion that it was only when one saw him standing beside an Earth-man that his real height became apparent. He towered over me and there was a frown on his face that I liked but ill.

I need not have troubled myself about that, however, for his first words set me at my ease.

"Ah, Clinigo," he said to his *confrère* with that easy disregard of all titles that marked the Council out as men apart, "here is Sanders himself. Clinigo, it is your good fortune now to meet in the flesh the youngest Vice-Admiral in the Inter-planetary service. Tellus has the honour of producing him."

Long before I had become acquainted properly with Tambard I always fancied there was an under-current of sarcasm in words such as these, but now I knew him well enough to realise that he meant exactly what he said, neither more nor less. He was pleased with me, pleased with my poor way of handling things, and he said so in the Martian fashion, extravagantly.

I reddened under his words; none the less I was pleased in my heart that Jansca was near me to hear it all. Words like these from one of the three who in their own way have more to do with the destinies of the inner planets than any other men can mean much when one has the consciousness of duty done to the best of one's ability.

Clinigo stepped forward at the introduction, with his right hand on his heart in the formal acknowledgment

of the Venerian, and I brought my hand smartly to the salute. I was no longer in mufti, but had donned my uniform for the occasion, the sky-blue of the Guards with the silver Guard-ship on each wing of the collar, and the silver lace design of the planetary system—the badge of my rank—on my left sleeve. A uniform pleasing to the eye, though I say it myself.

The two stood a little apart after that, ignoring me for the moment, as was the custom while the port chief, or his deputy—which it was I am not sure—examined Hume's papers. I put in the interval talking to Jansca, and I noticed that once or twice Tambard's eye strayed over our way, and his brow furrowed as though he saw something he did not quite understand.

The port authority moved back; Hume handed the initialled papers to the purser, and for the moment there was a pause. Then Tambard crooked his little finger to me.

"Sanders," he said when I came, "we must talk things over. No, not here on the ship, but on Gaudien. I think you have much to tell us that was but hinted at in your report. You mentioned others whose words would support your conclusions. Is Hume one?"

"He is one," I agreed.

Tambard looked curiously at me, and a light flickered for a moment in the depths of his piercing eyes. A strange man this. Not one with whom I would care to be at cross-purposes.

"And the other? She?"

He made the slightest motion of his head in Jansca's direction, and I could swear that a smile curved the corners of his mouth, though it was gone as quickly

as it had come that a moment later I was not sure.

"She," I said, striving to hold my voice so that it would not betray me, "she, sir, is the other."

"Who is she?" The question was rapped out.

"One Jansca Dirka, daughter of a director of the Canal Company of Mars," I answered. "She also," I added, "and this, sir, is the more important in my eyes, is my affianced and my invaluable assistant."

Tambard's eyes twinkled then, though I wondered if, after all, her father's position had anything to do with the softening of his manner towards me. Afterwards I learnt better, for even then I did not know my Tambard well.

His eyes still twinkling, Tambard turned to Clinigo. "There seems some magic in these Earth-men, Clinigo," he said, "that in a few short days one of them can not only win a Martian maiden, but can fire her with his own spirit, so that she can qualify for an honorary membership of the Guard."

Ah! Then he had read between the lines of my message, condensed though it was. What a man!

Clinigo smiled a little. I think he was not very interested in us save in so far as the information we had to give concerned him and his office.

"An apt help-mate, I should think," he said.

Tambard shrugged. I often wondered in the days that followed if there was any possibility of friction between the pair, but luckily for the Planets it never came to that. The interests at stake were far too great for them to be swayed this way or that by any personal animus.

"Ah, well," said Tambard. "This conference now . . ." He touched me lightly on the arm, and beckoned Hume and Jansca to come with us. It was

symptomatic of the man that he did not address my lady, merely giving her the slightest, gravest inclination of the head as an acknowledgment of her presence.

Jansca walked between me and Hume, with Tambard on my right—this was once we crossed the gangway and emerged on Gaudien—but Clinigo kept a little way ahead, as though he had sufficient to interest him in communing with his own thoughts. I, for one, foresaw trouble ahead of us when it came to mentioning the matter of Oxcta, for where that was concerned Clinigo would be more of an Outlander even than I had been.

But in life—one must record it—the anticipated difficulties always vanish when one comes to face them. It is those to which no one has given a thought that most often cause trouble.

Tambard apparently was using with Clinigo the room of the officer in command as an office. At least I saw there, when we came to it, many gadgets that were not usual, and some of which bore traces of having been hurriedly affixed, quite recently at that.

The Martian motioned us to seats, but surprisingly it was Hume who first broke the silence.

“My ship and the passengers, sir . . . ?” he queried.

“Are safe,” said Tambard. “The passengers will not get into mischief, for they will not be allowed to land. It is scarcely worth while. All of you will be on your way to Tlanan again before thirty of your Earth minutes have passed.”

Good news this, I thought. After all, it would have been the reverse of pleasant to have been ordered back to duty then and there, leaving Jansca to go on to Mars, with the prospect of meeting again, when we could not say.

Then a sudden doubt assailed me. Was Tambard including me in what he said? I would dearly have liked to have asked him, and cleared the matter up at once, but I did not dare.

He produced a paper and placed it on the table. Either it was my message or a duplicate, as I presently discovered. He addressed himself first to me.

"Start from the moment of sailing," he said, "and tell us all that has the slightest bearing on the case."

I did. I told him everything, suppressing only those matters of purely private concern which had transpired between Jansca and myself. And, of course, seeing Clinigo was present, I mentioned nothing of that purely Martian secret, the Oxcta pellets.

Both members of the Council listened attentively to the end, when Clinigo spoke for the first time.

"An admirable exposition," he remarked. "Even more admirable is the fact that despite its condensation you have been able to add little of material value to your message." He gestured towards the paper in Tambard's hand.

Again I felt myself flushing. Not for many a day had I had so much praise given me.

Tambard sat silent and thoughtful, his fingers drumming noiselessly on the table-top in front of him.

"An odd situation," he said at last. "Frankly—we can all be outspoken here and know that nothing goes beyond the walls of this room—we don't quite know what to make of it all. If an attack had been made on any of our ships we would know what to expect. But so far nothing of the kind has occurred. The only blood shed, the only destruction achieved, rests at our door—or yours rather." He looked towards us three.

“One moment.” I spoke. “That explosion, when the stranger ship flew to pieces, to my mind throws a side-light on things. I reason it was the ignition of high explosives that caused her end, and I’d say those high explosives, be their nature whatever it was, were intended for a purpose.”

“I agree. Your reasoning is perfectly correct,” said Tambard coolly. “But what you say does not affect my contention, that these explosives were not used against our ships. Your space-visitors—we must call them that for want of a better name—boarded each ship they came to, and seemingly left it in the state they found it. At least they caused no harm. The obvious conclusion is that they boarded it for purposes of examination.”

“Infusoria under the microscope.” For the life of me I could not help using that century-and-a-half old phrase of Wells.

Tambard looked puzzled, so I explained the allusion, delicately, of course, for *The War of the Worlds* as a book is ever a sore point with your Martian. He can never quite get over the fact to him that we Tellurians once pictured him as the repulsive beast of the cylinders.

“Quite so,” said Tambard, when he had grasped what I meant. “Yet that is not altogether true. I would agree without reservation if we seemed to be dealing with vastly higher intelligences than our own; but we do not. They are using forces of whose existence, and of many of whose methods of application, we are already aware. Even the method by which they paralyse the ship’s complement is not altogether a mystery. Given time, our scientists can puzzle it out.”

"The point," said Clinigo, "is that we may not be given time. Tambard, why are we being studied?"

"Our ships? It may merely be a spirit of scientific curiosity, though I doubt that. Most probably we are dealing with spies. But what in the stars they wish to know, and what they intend to do when they've learnt it, passes our comprehension."

"In the message I received," I interposed, "there was a phrase referring to a menace to the Universe."

Tambard's face went grave. "That is so," he agreed. "I was responsible for that. It was my suggestion, but Clinigo here agreed with me, and Harran is already of the same opinion. Since the trouble first arose we have been in constant communication with him in your New York."

"May I ask a question?" It was Jansca who spoke, and Tambard nodded.

"What is it you wish to know?" he said.

"I'm not sure that any can tell me," she said daringly, "but I should imagine that we might arrive at some more definite conclusion about the menace we may have to face if we knew with whom we are to deal. Can you suggest where the space-visitors are likely to have come from?"

"I can hazard two guesses," said Tambard. "One is that they come from beyond our own solar system, but that I am reluctant to credit. The nearest potentially inhabitable planet of any extra-solar system is too many light years away."

"And your other guess?" I said as he paused.

"That they come from our own system."

"But where from?" Clinigo exclaimed with an odd note of surprise in his voice.

"We can narrow that down to definable limits by

a process of elimination," the Martian returned. "They do not come from Tlanan, Venus or Tellus, of that we can be certain. The major planets—such as are inhabited—possess no peoples so far advanced in space navigation. There remain to be considered then but two possible planets, the outermost and the innermost."

"Pluto and Mercury!" I exclaimed.

"Exactly," said Tambard. "Of Pluto we know little, of Mercury even less. One is too far from the Sun, and the other too near to it to allow observations to be made of them with any degree of accuracy, and so far we have found no explorers daring enough to visit either."

"Of the two I would favour Mercury more," I told him, and when he looked a question I explained what I had learnt of Nomo Kell. Apparently he had not paid so much attention before to that part of my story, but now I stressed the point, particularly in relation to what Parey had told me about the argument over the condition of Mercury in which Nomo Kell had flatly declared the others did not know what they were talking about, he had to admit that there were strong probabilities in favour of my suggestion being correct.

"There is always the possibility," he said thoughtfully. "I wonder if we could learn anything from the body."

"The dead space-visitor we kept on the *Cosmos*?" Hume queried.

"Yes," said Tambard. "Only he's not on the *Cosmos* now, but down in the laboratories. Our scientists——"

He stopped abruptly. "Excuse me," he said, and

turned and whispered something to Clinigo. I saw Clinigo nod. The tail of a sentence drifted to me: ". . . better if you went, no doubt. You can use your eyes."

Again Clinigo nodded, and rose to his feet. He sauntered to the door, and passed through. Tambard turned to us.

"Clinigo and I agreed," he said with a curious half-smile that held a slight ironic quality, "that it would be well if he went down to the laboratories and had a look about himself. He can use his eyes; he is trained to observation of that sort"—was there a slight emphasis on the last two words?—"and may see something that has escaped the observation of the others."

"Oh," I said, and was beginning some remark or other when Tambard silenced me with a gesture.

"Someone here has something to say that had better be said before Clinigo returns," he stated.

I gasped. For Tambard had looked meaningfully towards Jansca.

CHAPTER XV

THE NEW COMMAND

"I HAVE," said Jansca simply, yet with emphasis.

I stared at her, then back at Tambard. Somehow, somewhen, during the course of conversation, some word, some sign must have passed between them, something that a Martian alone could understand. What it was I could not say. I had seen nothing, heard nothing that did not carry its intrinsic meaning on the surface, but then I had to admit that I was by no means infallible.

"Speak on," Tambard advised her. "Time is short."

I could have given a good guess now as to the subject-matter of her remarks, and as events proved I was right.

"It's only this," she said hurriedly, "though it's rather important. The reason why Jack"—she nodded towards me—"and I were not stupefied when those people boarded the *Cosmos*. We'd each had some Oxcta not long before."

"So that's it, then," said Tambard gravely. "I thought from that mention of emergency suits as temporary measure"—he was referring to a line in my message—"that there was something more to come. But what it was I could not guess. But . . . Oxcta!"

He looked from me to Hume, and the latter coloured.

"I'm afraid," he said apologetically, "that the fault was mine. I gave it to Sanders."

Tambard stared at him a space, and then his stern face relaxed.

"You have the right to carry it, of course," he said. "You've acquired that right because of your wife . . . a Tlananian lady. You also have the right to exercise your discretion as to whom you should offer it. So far, so good."

He turned easily to Jansca. "You had your own supply, I suppose?" he said, as though it were something he took for granted.

Jansca slowly shook her head. "I got mine from Jack," she said simply.

"Ah!" Tambard's eyes came round to me. This time there was a glow in their depths, a hardening of the jaw and a tightening of the lines about the mouth that I did not altogether fancy. "And you got it from . . .?" he demanded.

Hume pulled himself upright in his seat. "From me," he said. "I used my discretion."

For one long second Tambard brooded over us. I think he was not pleased with Hume's explanation, yet I fancy he did not quite know what to say in the circumstances. But again it was Jansca who saved the situation.

"I don't think there's any question about the rights or wrongs of the case," she said with a touch of indignation in her voice. "Jack is perfectly entitled to Oxcta, if he wants, even more so than Captain Hume here."

"He has not yet married a Martian wife," Tambard reminded her, ever so gently I thought.

"But"—Jansca's voice quivered a little as though

she found the rest hard to say—"but he is of the blood . . . a Sonjhon!"

Hume uttered a wordless exclamation and stole a curious glance at her. Tambard stared at her long and thoughtfully while a man could count ten, and I waited, wondering what outburst was coming now. Instead:

"You did that?" he said, with the note of a perfect amazement in his voice. "You thought enough of him for that?"

"I thought more," she asserted. "I would do it again. But"—her voice faltered—"I did not expect so soon to have to make it known."

Tambard sighed. "Perhaps it is just as well," he said softly, "just as well I mean that I know now. It may simplify matters considerably. However, dismiss this matter of the Oxcta from your minds for the present. I'll attend to all that it implies. But the thought that has come to me is this: Will you take over a new command?"

I hesitated. A command of a Martian Guard-ship fleet, temporary though it might be, was not a thing lightly to be undertaken. Even had I been a free agent I would have debated before accepting. As it was, even though on vacation I was still attached to the Earth service. True, the Inter-planetary Guards were looked on as a sort of international body; nevertheless we were recruited according to our planets, and we were under the orders of our planetary Council chief, theoretically at least.

"There's nothing I'd like better," I said at last, "but I can't decide of myself without Harran's permission."

"And if Harran gives permission?" said Tambard purringly.

"In that case, I am at your disposal."

"Harran has already given it," said Tambard. "Even if he hadn't, in case of emergency Clinigo and I could over-ride his decision, a thing we would not willingly do. But he has . . . he will instruct you to place yourself at my disposal."

I think I must have looked some of the chagrin I felt. Duty tugged me one way; the thoughts of my interrupted holiday, and what the company of Jansca meant, drew me the other.

Tambard looked up at me thoughtfully. "Still," he said, "unless the unexpected happens, you will not be required immediately. I would suggest you resume your interrupted voyage to Tlanan in the *Cosmos*—it might not be wise to follow your original intention and proceed to Venus—and wait there for orders, or developments, whichever come first."

"I shall do that," I said stiffly. A holiday of this sort with the hourly prospect of having to part from Jansca at a moment's notice was not so inviting as it seemed at first glance.

"A pity," he said musingly, "that you are not mated. It would solve many difficulties. If the emergency is great enough we may yet be compelled to revive the old custom of picking our best, whether they be men or women."

"And if we were mated," Jansca asked interestedly, "what difference would it make?"

"I could give you place with your lord on his ship as second-in-command," Tambard said steadily. "It is no new thing. You are too young yourself to remember the old custom, but I . . ."

He stopped abruptly, and the eyes clouded. It was then I realised how old a man Tambard must be,

If truth were told he was well into his second century, for these Martians live longer than we on the average. Then he would remember, might even have participated in, those wars that twenty or thirty years before the coming of the Earth-men to the Red Planet had welded the Martians into one nation. Stay, wasn't there some story—dimly remembered—of him having lost his wife in that conflict? That must be what he was thinking of then.

"I will take that place then," Jansca announced with decision. "That is"—abruptly she remembered that I had not been consulted and she dropped her eyes—"if my lord is willing."

The formal humility invested her offer with a certain sanctity. Couched in that fashion one could not refuse it without giving offence. Yet for once I felt I must run counter to the customs of her land.

"Jansca," I said, "I'm an Earth-man, and I'm not so conversant with your ways as I might be, so that must be my excuse if I say anything you think I should not say. You're a dear to make such a suggestion, and I'd jump at it if it wasn't for the risk."

"What risk?" she asked.

"The risk you would run if you came with me, if it is necessary I should go."

"The risk you would run yourself?"

"That is different."

"The difference," she said slowly, "is that with you I would be sharing in your danger. I would know what it was and realise how little it mattered after all, and if the worst came to the worst we would share more than risk together. But if I did not come I should have to remain—no, not at home, for it would not be home without you—at Tlanan, and eat out

my heart with anxiety. Imagining all sorts of things, conjuring up a new fear every second, dying a new death every hour of the day and night. Can't you see"—she turned on me almost fiercely, oblivious in her emotions of the others watching us—"can you see that I would be happy with you; mad with anxiety, sick with fear and worry away from you?"

I placed my hand on her shoulder, and gently pressed her back into her seat.

"Tambard Mitaka,"¹ I said formally, "Jansca Dirka will, as my mate, take second command."

Tambard inclined his head in acknowledgment. "It is carven in stone," he said, using the phrase that to a Martian means a decree is unalterable.

Jansca gave me one look, caught my hand and pressed it in her own. Not a word did she say, yet look and action were eloquent.

"Sensible man," came in a rumble from Hume.

Accident, or chance, call it what you will, had timed it all nicely. Another second or so and the door opened and Clinigo entered. Tambard looked up, alert and businesslike again.

Clinigo came in moodily and resumed his seat. I took it from his expression that he had not been as successful as he had hoped.

"What is the result?" Tambard asked.

Clinigo made a tiny fluttering motion—curiously bird-like—with his hands.

"I went. I looked. I saw," he said, "and I confess that I am baffled. He is like no man of any of the planets I have ever seen. In height he might be a Martian, yet. . . ."

¹ Mitaka, a formal title of respect. Its nearest equivalent in English would be 'One who is most noble and most wise'.

Tambard laughed. "He is not a Martian, that much is certain," he declared. "But I interrupted you. Speak on, friend Clinigo."

Clinigo gave an odd little shiver as though the memory of the stranger had stirred unpleasant thoughts in his mind.

"A ridge of horny substance across the head, and purple eyes," he said, as though talking to himself. "No one has ever seen such a being alive."

"Nomo Kell," I said quickly. "I told you of him."

Clinigo nodded. "So you did," said Tambard. "Yet Nomo Kell was posing as a Martian."

"Of twenty years' residence," I reminded him.

"About the time we were getting used to you Earth-men and your strange divergences of racial types," Tambard said thoughtfully. "Inter-planetary travel had just become popularised then. We were astounded at the types that were coming from Earth to visit us, confused too. It would have been comparatively easy then for such a man as Nomo Kell to have taken up residence and qualified for citizenship. But perhaps if we get his prints and see where they were issued we may be able to trace back. Someone would have sponsored him, otherwise he could not have taken out papers. If we can trace that person we may get at some solution."

He stood up. "Clinigo," he said, "I think we may be needed more on our respective planets than here. I, for my part, will repair to Mars by the *Cosmos*. I do not want to detail a Guard-ship to take me back. It may be wanted here yet. And you?"

Clinigo smiled a little sadly I thought. "Your suggestion is good," he said. "I, too, will come on the *Cosmos*. It is to make Shangun on its return

trip and should get me home without undue delay. But one thing I would suggest, and that is that while the *Cosmos* is stopping over at Tlanan it should take on extra armament purely as a precautionary measure."

"I thought," I said, perhaps unwisely, "that it was intended to call in all space-ships."

"It was," Tambard answered. "But we have reconsidered that since receiving your report. You have shown us a method of combating them, whereas before we had none. Also we have decided that there is nothing to be gained by calling all ships in and starting a panic. By clearing space of traffic we might be playing into the hands of these space-visitors. Every ship between worlds now is a potential scout and news-gatherer. Besides, the Guard-ships are on the alert, and will keep the traffic lanes as well patrolled as they can. Still, it is for every captain to say for himself whether he will take the risk."

He turned to Hume.

The latter smiled wryly. "You needn't worry about me," he answered. "Speaking for myself I'm willing to sail the *Cosmos* through space till further orders."

It was characteristic of Tambard that he merely nodded.

CHAPTER XVI

THE RED PLANET

MARS glowed ahead in the void, and grew rapidly. Those of us to whom it meant the end of the voyage sighed with relief; what those others who had yet to make Shangun in Venus thought of matters I cannot say. The only one of them I really cared about, Hume himself, assured he was not worrying.

Why should he, he said. We others, who claimed to know, regarded the space-visitors as a distinct menace, perhaps a deadly foe, but so far experience had shown that they were merely an unmitigated nuisance, upsetting schedules, causing all sorts of inconvenience, yet actually to date doing no damage. Thus Hume.

Myself, I fancy he had a hope that perhaps, before it was time for him to resume his voyage, things would have advanced so far that all commercial vessels would be warned out of space, and only the fighting machines allowed to take off.

For my part, but for the serious fashion in which Tambard seemed to regard the future, I would have felt inclined to agree with Hume's summing up. Until the space-visitors committed a definitely hostile act we could hardly regard them as open enemies.

Meanwhile the *Cosmos* had become to all intents and purposes a Guard-ship. Tambard and Clinigo with my assistance had taken over control, and one

or other of us three was constantly in the transmission room. Messages were coming over thick and fast, and Harran was beginning to warm up the ether with his suggestions. If Mercury were the abode of these intelligences we had encountered, Venus and then Earth as being nearer the Sun, were likely to be dealt with in that order, Mars would come last of the three.

The main Martian space observatory, which had been established on Chimos, one of the many asteroids or minor planets in the belt between Mars and Jupiter, had received orders to concentrate all observations on Pluto, the outermost of the planets. No reports had yet come in, but somehow we all felt that nothing would be discovered in that direction. The balance of probability leaned towards Mercury being the world from which the trouble would come.

It was the business of the Venerian astronomers, however, to keep that planet under observation. As its nearest neighbour, they should be best able to obtain results. Not that we hoped for any startling, or even decisive. Mercury has always been an elusive planet as far as observation is concerned; its nearness to the sun has always rendered study of its surface by telescope a matter of considerable difficulty, and no space-ship captain has yet been found venturesome enough to conduct an exploration in person. It seems high time however, that one or other of the various planetary bureaux devoted to this sort of thing should call for volunteers. After all, what does the sacrifice of a few lives matter alongside the safety of the Universe?

Our Landing at Tlanan took place early in the morning, though already the heat in the thin Martian atmosphere, thin compared with Earth that is, was

beginning to my ideas to be almost overpowering. Yet when all is said and done it is a dry enough heat, easier to stand than the humidity of Venus, and if the air does seem attenuated to our ideas, the extra oxygen content, once one gets used to it, makes up the deficiency to a degree.

Nevertheless to prevent regrettable accidents we were all passed through air-locks and gradually accustomed to the differences in atmospheric pressure, and it was quite an hour from the time of our landing before we set foot at last on Martian soil. Tlanan I had seen many times before, and always is there something new about the city to charm the eye. Built beside one of the main canals of the planet's system, it has been so constructed and toned that it seems part of the landscape, a landscape that in many ways is reminiscent of Earth scenery in Egypt. All these Martian cities are what one might call dual-purpose constructions, for they are built to be comfortable both by night and by day, a very necessary feature when one considers the great variation of temperature one encounters there in the Martian equivalent of our twenty-four hour earth-day.

Despite the thickness of my emergency coat I have almost frozen there in the open a while before dawn, while an hour later I have been compelled to change to the thinnest of clothing to avoid being baked. Yet it must not be imagined that this big variation in temperature makes so great a difference in the long run. One adjusts one's self to it gradually, and several hundreds of years of Martian scientific invention has resulted in supplying all sorts of mitigating gadgets that not only make the climate bearable, but actually enjoyable.

I had made no particular arrangements as to where I was to go. Ordinarily I would either have remained on the *Cosmos* during her stay in port or else have taken quarters at one of the various hostels run by the Inter-planetary Tourist Bureau, and I think it was with some idea now of doing the latter that I gathered up my meagre baggage, and looked about for some means of transport. I had had no trouble with immigration section at all; as one of the Guards I was free of all such vexatious proceedings, and even had I not been, Tambard and Clinigo would have franked me through. But even the iron rules of the Customs could not be relaxed for me, and I had to suffer my personal belongings to be overhauled.

However, I did not feel umbrage at that, for the examination was not done so much from a revenue-collecting point of view as from a medical one. Each planet has its own prohibitions against substances that for one reason or other may not be brought in except under strict supervision, and each planet has its own problem to face in fighting and keeping under imported diseases. Our ship had shown a clean bill of health right through the trip, so there was no need to worry about this latter.

This examination over I had, as I have said, gathered my belongings together, and was casting about for transport when Jansca detached herself from the crowd and came towards me.

"I've been looking for you," she said, "and wondering what had happened to you. I was afraid you might have strayed off, or done something foolish."

She spoke with a glow in her eyes and a heightened colour that made her in my estimation look lovelier than ever.

"Foolish?" I echoed with a laugh. "What do you mean by that?"

She did not answer that directly. "Where are you going to stay?" she queried.

I shifted a trifle uneasily. "At one of the hostels," I told her. "My purse won't run to anything more opulent."

"You foolish person, you utterly irresponsible Earth-man!" she cried. "Don't you know that there is only one place in all Mars where you can stop?"

"No," I said with a faint touch of alarm. Just what did she mean? Was this some new regulation, only recently promulgated, of which I had not heard?

"Where . . . Jansca, where is that?"

She slipped her arm through mine.

"Where?" she echoed. "Where but with us?"

I drew back. "I don't think I should. . . . The trouble. . . ."

Her face clouded. "Our conventions are not yours, I know, Jack," she said slowly, "but if you wish to give a Sonhjon a deadly insult, refuse his offer of hospitality."

"My dear, I did not mean it that way. You know. But I did not wish to be a source of trouble and inconvenience to you."

She bent swiftly and brushed my lips with hers.

"That," she said softly, "your habit of kissing is the sweetest thing that Earth has taught to Mars. No, my dear, you will cause no trouble and no inconvenience by coming with us, nothing like as much as you would if you stayed elsewhere, and I had to seek you every day." She dropped her voice to a whisper and drew the closer to me. "Jack," she said tremulously, "time may be short for us. The

sooner we are mated the longer we will have to ourselves. Father and I have talked the matter over. It can be arranged with little or no delay."

I nodded, my heart too full for words. It was what I wanted most in life, and the one thing I was dubious of suggesting. But now she had spoken, my mind was at ease. Anyway this was a time when most conventions would have to go by the board.

"That's settled then," she said firmly, and turning, beckoned. For the first time I noticed that her father had been standing back well out of earshot, obediently waiting, great man though he was, until his masterful daughter had said her say and brought me to her way of thinking. I'm sure he guessed from the expression on our faces, what had transpired, for he asked no questions, but treated me on the assumption that I was coming with them and that the rest would follow in due course.

His and Jansca's baggage made a formidable heap beside my puny lot, and I was wondering how we would set about removing it when a robot—or, to give him his Martian name, a Toro, appeared. Much of the menial labour on the planet is done by these mechanical men, though to give them their due the average Martian is not backward in putting his shoulder to the wheel when the necessity arises.

Dirka spoke into the televox apparatus situated in the Toro's metal diaphragm, giving his orders that were picked up by an exceedingly sensitive selenium cell which in some very ingenious fashion operated the mechanism.

The Toro picked up as much of the baggage as he could conveniently carry in his metal hands, and unerringly led the way through the exit doors of the

building to the duralmac road outside. A small battery car just large enough to hold the three of us and our luggage was standing outside. I wondered at the time how it had arrived there without a driver, but I learnt later that it had been brought in on tow the previous night by one of the transport companies that arrange such matters for returning travellers.

We got in; the Toro made another trip for the rest of the baggage, packed it in the luggage boot at the rear, and then with a look of almost human enquiry on his metal face turned to Dirka. The latter spoke again into the voice box; something clicked inside the Toro and he turned and marched back into the building.

Dirka took the wheel, while Jansca nestled in between us, and soon we were speeding along the duralmac track—that wonderful road made of a combination of rubber, glass and metal, which as its name implies lasts almost for ever—at a pace that well-nigh took my breath away. In the void, curiously enough, speeds approaching that of light do not seem to matter. One has no air friction with which to contend, and nothing other than the dials by which to judge the rate at which one is being hurled forward. But here on the planet's surface, with ground and air friction as a constant reminder of speed, a hundred miles an hour or so seemed perfectly appalling.

The ride lasted only a matter of twenty minutes. We pulled up outside a pleasant little house, beautifully shaded by dilium¹ trees, and with a slope at the rear to the sparkling waters of The Great Canal. A

¹ Dilium, a Martian fruit-bearing tree with six-inch leaves of a marvellous waxen pink in colour. The fruit grows to the size of an Earth coconut and is remarkably like our peach in flavour.

few launches floated on the canal's smooth surface, pleasure-boats, the only form of water travel that the Martian knows on his now oceanless planet. Probably that explains why every Martian who can muster the fare—and there are few who cannot—makes at least one trip to Earth, where he spends as much time as he can on the sea. Indeed I have heard it said that if it were not for our inter-planetary tourists, terrestrial ocean travel—in these days of fast flying—would no longer be a paying proposition. I can well believe it.

Dirka's wife, of course, was no longer living. I would have guessed that from the first even if I had not been told so by Jansca, for no Martian of the upper classes ever travels without his family if it can possibly be avoided. There were only servants in the house, lower class people who did a good deal of the light work, while the rougher jobs were attended to by the Toros. It was a Toro who met us at the entrance and brought in our baggage, and another Toro, of a more highly specialised type, who took the car round to some sort of a garage.

Jansca disappeared as soon as we entered the house with the intimation that she would see me at nondal, the local equivalent of our lunch, leaving it to her father to conduct me to my rooms. My apartments were three in all, a bedroom, a sort of study and sitting-room combined with the walls lined with shelves containing book-machines, and a private bathroom. I learnt later that in most private houses each set of apartments has its own bathroom.

“You may want to bathe after your journey,” Dirka remarked as he showed me the bathroom. “You may use it as much as you wish, you understand,

providing you do not draw the water from the canal. That is kept solely for culinary purposes."

"Where then," I said, "on this planet, where water must be very carefully conserved, do you get enough to be so lavish in your bathrooms?"

Dirka laughed softly, that almost inaudible throaty Martian laugh that when first heard jars on one, though in time one becomes accustomed to it.

"Here," he said, pointing to two cylinders which stood side by side over the bath. "You will find all the water there you need."

They looked curiously like gas cylinders to me, and I bent forward to look at the wording on the plate on each. It was in Martian characters, however, which I have never learned to read.

"You do not know our language?" Dirka asked. "No? Well, this"—he indicated one cylinder—"is hydrogen, and that is oxygen. They are recombined to form water, and the process is automatically regulated. I had better show you how to do it."

From each cylinder a long flexible pipe protruded, and the mouth of each Dirka inserted into holes in a box-like contrivance that was clamped to one end of the bath. He turned a screw on each cylinder, and I became aware of a gentle hissing sound that presently ceased. In a very few seconds a thin stream of crystal-clear water began to pour out of a spout attached to the box-like contrivance.

"You see?" said Dirka, reversing the screws, and stopping the recombination of the elements. "You can alter the pressure, make the stream larger or smaller according to your requirements, by turning those screws little or much. Now, I shall leave you

to clean and rest after your journey. Nondal will be in six persts, that is an hour and a half of your Earth time. Then we can talk of the matters we would like to discuss.”

He left me.

I enjoyed the bath, the first naturally that I had been able to have since leaving Earth, though this artificial water seemed to lack something I was used to. Say what we will, no synthetic product, no matter how chemically correct is its method of manufacture, can quite equal the work of nature.

Nevertheless there was a freshening quality in the bath that made me feel rest was out of the question, or perhaps it was the difference in gravity here gave me a feeling of greater energy. At anyrate I found myself with time to spare on my hands, and very little inclination to pass it away in sleep. For want of something to do I strolled into the study-sitting-room combination and began to examine the book-machines. In reality they were reels of fine wire which when run through a machine specially made for the purpose told the story with voices suitable to the characters. One could too, if one wished, by pressing a button on one side of the machine set a series of synchronised pictures moving that added to the verisimilitude of the story.

I may be a little old-fashioned in some ways, but I have never taken altogether to the book-machines. A story, after all, is not all dialogue, neither is it all acting, and one misses that literary touch that flares up so often in the old print books. The march of progress has brought us many fine and wonderful things, but I think that against it must be counted the undeniable fact that it has deprived us of much that is good and beautiful.

I was feeling more or less at a loose end, and wondering—for I was not quite sure how the act would be regarded in a Martian household—whether I should light my pipe, when someone knocked on the door.

I opened it to find Jansca waiting there for me.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

FOR the moment I fancied she was the bearer of evil tidings, but one look at her smiling face drove that idea from my mind.

"I hope," she said almost breathlessly, "that you don't mind me coming to see you? You weren't resting? If I thought that. . . ."

"I wasn't," I declared. "Somehow I don't feel tired now. I was wondering how I was going to pass the time."

"Then," she breathed, "I'm glad I came. Can I come in?"

"Certainly."

She entered, shut the door behind her, and ran her eye round the room.

"So you've been looking at the book-machines," she said. Some of them must have been displaced to catch her eye like that. "You won't find much there. What a pity you don't know our language."

"I do in a way," I said. "I can understand what's being said to me, but read it I cannot. The characters puzzle me."

"Of course." She nodded. "All communications are made in a sort of common language, aren't they?"

"That's so," I agreed, smiling. I had an idea what was coming; women all the worlds over are still curious.

"What is it? What is it called?" she asked with a touch of disinterestedness in her voice.

"That, Jansca mine, is a secret that, since I am under bond, I cannot tell even to you. Some day soon when you receive your appointment I can make it plain to you, but not till then."

She looked at me with grave eyes. "I'd be the last to try and persuade you to be false to that bond," she said soberly. "I did not know, else I would not have asked. Yet it was not mere idle curiosity that prompted me. It was the wish to share in all your knowledge in the hope that I might be able to take some of the work off your shoulders."

"I know," I said gently. "I would impute no other motive to you, Jansca." A thought struck me. "Has further word of any sort come through on the news-machines?"

She shook her head slowly. "None as yet," she said in a strained voice. "But I fear that this is merely the calm before the storm. Our time grows short, we must make the most of it."

"When——?" I was beginning, then stopped, for I was not quite sure how to phrase my question. These Martians call things by other terms than we are used to.

She must have read my thoughts. "When can we be mated?" she said. "That is what you wished to know?"

"Yes, Jansca. The sooner the sweeter to my way of thinking, though I have no wish to rush you."

"Rush me?" She looked prettily puzzled for the moment, then the meaning of it dawned on her. "You mean hurry me? You could never do that in this matter. I am too unmaidenly anxious, so unlike your

Earth-girls. You must think me odd in that, more than odd."

I caught her in my arms and drew her to me. "I think you are adorable," I said. "You girl of another world, who have brought love into mine. But you have not answered the question."

"A day then, perhaps two," she said. "My father must be judge of that, and I would not run counter to his wishes, though should they differ from mine maybe I can bring him to see eye to eye with me."

"I really believe you can," I said glowingly. "And if it should fall out in that fashion, what time have your wishes set as the day?"

"No day can be too soon," she said seriously. "Shameless, am I not? Shameless for love of you, dear one. But even then it is not merely our own happiness of which I think, but the fate of worlds. Who knows but that the destiny of the Universe may be knit up with the course of our love? You and I together mayhap can work miracles."

"It is questionable," I said grimly, "whether they are the sort of miracles that might stem the tide of invasion."

"You do not know," she said softly, with a light in her eyes. "My father . . . there are things you will be told. . . . I should not tell you now. . . ." She spoke hurriedly, ending incoherently, as though she were afraid her tongue might betray her into breaking confidences.

"Yes?" I said encouragingly, if thoughtlessly.

"I cannot tell you. Don't press me," she begged breathlessly. "But there are secret matters. My father, as head of the Canal Company, of a surety knows. I guess . . . his secret and Mars'."

Somewhere in the distance a bell tinkled softly, a faint silvery note that brought us back to the immediate present with a jerk.

"Nondal hour," she exclaimed. "So soon. How time has passed."

She glanced in the mirror, woman to the last, passed herself as presentable, then took my arm. She drew me down the spacious hall to the room where the meal was served. Dirka was waiting for us, and his face lit up with smiles as he saw us coming, our arms linked, and our faces afire with happiness.

That Martian meal lingers in my memory, will linger perhaps long after most other things have faded. It was the setting and the company that made it memorable, though the course of it for the greater part followed the prescribed ritual. For that reason therefore I prefer not to describe it in detail. Though I write primarily for readers of my own planet, even for those who have not crossed the void, the ritual will by no means be novel. Travelled Earth-writers have described such similar meals *ad nauseam*.

Our conversation came round by insensible degrees to the matter uppermost in the minds of us all, the possibility of invasion. A little to my surprise Dirka was not inclined to scout the idea. He merely remarked that it had happened before, and would doubtless happen again, but that he knew of no recorded case where the invaders, even with superior science at their disposal, had managed to establish themselves for any length of time in the conquered country.

"What planet are you talking about?" I queried.

"All of them, I suppose, I had better say," he answered with a smile, "but of Venus I cannot be

sure. But both Mars and Earth have had their visitations."

"From what planets?" I queried with interest.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows?" he said. "The very fact of these invasions is buried under the litter of history. Perhaps the invaders came from some planet in inter-galactic space. It is hard to say."

"But," I persisted, "if you know so little of that side of it, how can you be sure that actually there have been invasions?"

"Legend. Folk-lore. Fairy tales even." He met my eyes with a smile in his. "Your own Earth legends are full of such things. The indications are there to a thoughtful reader, and, without boasting, I can claim to have studied them deeply. That has been my hobby these many years, the interpretations of many of your various races' so-called myths in the light of this theory. I can give you two instances at least."

"What are they?" I begged. "I'd dearly like to know."

"You have a country on your Earth in the continent you call Asia, a land sometimes referred to as the Celestial Empire, though it has been a republic for over a hundred of your years."

"China," I said. "Yes. Go on."

"Did not their old emperors call themselves the Sons of Heaven? That may or may not be of value in the last analysis; at anyrate I shall not linger on it. But the legends of that land are full of tales of dragons, monstrous flying things, breathing fire and smoke and pouring destruction on the country."

“The myths of other countries have references to them too,” I pointed out.

“I should be surprised if they had not,” he answered. “It would be odd to think that any inter-planetary invasion was confined merely to one particular country.”

“Then you think that these tales of dragons have a basis of fact?”

“A basis of remembered incident, more correctly,” Dirka said. “What could they be but space-ships?”

“Admitting that, what became of the invaders?”

“Any of a hundred things. They merely made a number of systematic raids, and took their departure. Or perhaps they attempted to settle, and were beaten at last by differing climatic conditions, or disease germs, or the various other conditions to which they were not accustomed. Some of them may even have survived, have married into an alien tribe and carried on some of their culture and attainments. Your histories are full of stories of races that have little in common with their neighbours, that still preserve strange rites and ancient customs, that seem at times as though they have lost a culture that was once theirs.”

I thought of the Basques, of the pre-Christian civilisation in Ireland, of those isolated cultures scattered throughout ancient America, and I had to admit that what he said was quite feasible.

“Again,” he went on, “scarcely a nation, scarcely a race on your planet but has mixed up in its folk-lore strange tales of bright lights in the sky, of visitations impossible to explain by the ordinary laws of Nature as known to these peoples. In the Yucatan province of the Pan-American Union you have deserted cities, thousands of years old in point of time, which look

as though their inhabitants deserted them in body, ran away from some impending catastrophe. A catastrophe that came from the skies. A rain of fire from Heaven." He quoted a familiar phrase, and I nodded.

"So much for Earth," I said. "And Mars?"

"Our recorded history goes further back than yours, but we have nothing definite. Only legends. But it is odd that in so many ways so many of our legends should agree with yours, as though they had a common origin."

It was a fascinating subject, as a matter of pure speculation we could have talked about it all day, though there was yet another matter, one closer to our hearts, that Jansca and I wished her father to discuss with us. Yet we could not break him off abruptly, but must nurse him round by imperceptible degrees until the right word slipped in at the right moment turned the conversation in the desired direction. So gradually we swung the talk from past possible invasions to a future probable one, and thus to its immediate bearing on ourselves. I think he saw through our manoeuvres, for more than once I caught the flicker of a smile as it sped across his face, until at last:

"Of course it will make a good deal of difference to everything if such things come to pass in our day," he said thoughtfully. "It will mean Jansca and you going from me, when I had hoped to keep you by me."

"We would with your permission be mated before we go," said Jansca demurely. "And, father mine, it is well to bear in mind that the call may come any day at any hour of the day."

"I have thought of that," he said. "I have been pondering on the matter since ever we left Gaudien. I see no ground for delay, since it would bring happiness to no one. As you wish, Jansca daughter and son John. The hour is yours to choose."

She rose from her seat, came to her father, put her arm about his neck and kissed him passionately. He looked startled for the moment, then smiled.

"An Earth custom," he said softly, "but a pleasing one. I could wish it had been earlier introduced to our planet."

What more we might have said no one can say, but almost at that moment, while we were still feeling our way through a rather awkward pause, the communicator wailed. Dirka took up the audiophones and clapped them to his ears, for this was a private set, where conversation and reply could both be kept secret if need be.

He fixed his identity, then listened in silence for a moment before he turned to us with consternation on his face.

"It is Tambard," he said oddly. "He wishes to come right over, as he has a matter of extreme urgency to discuss. Will that do?"

I nodded. "We are at his absolute disposal," I said with a queer tightening of the heart. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

THE STORM BREAKS

FIVE minutes later Tambard arrived.

We spent the interval in half-affrighted speculation, dreading the possibility of we knew not what. Tambard himself had given no indication to Dirka over the communicator of the nature of the trouble. Beyond the fact of its urgency we could say nothing. Yet the same sense of oppressive foreboding weighed us all down; even Dirka's ageless face seemed of a sudden to have become drawn and haggard.

Tambard was announced. He came through the doorway into the room, and we three with one accord glanced up searchingly at his face as though we could read our fates written there.

I was surprised at the change in him. He had seemed sprightly when I parted from him some hours before; now he looked as though he had spent a sleepless night, and a day of care and worry to follow.

He took the seat to which Dirka invited him, but declined all offer of food or drink. He had not long since had nondal, he explained. He did not look like it; judging by appearances he might not have touched food for days.

His bright eyes swept from one to the other of us, lingered longest, I thought, and most pityingly on Jansca, but then that may have been merely my fevered imagination suggesting that,

"All communication with Venus ceased two hours ago," he said deliberately. Out of courtesy to me, it may be recorded, he used Earth-terms wherever possible right throughout our conversation. "We have been unable to get a message through, and none of the regular calls from there have reached us. I have been in touch with Harran. Some of the Earth stations report having received weak signals, so jammed that no intelligible consecutive message could be read from them. There was something about 'attack' and 'invasion', and that was all."

We looked at each other as he ended, seeing our fears being realised, the thing we had dreaded coming to pass.

"But that, from our point of view," Tambard went on, "is not all. I wish it were. Harran and I from our respective planets called up our outermost Guard-ships, where they junction with the Venerian lines. We got a message through to the flag-ship, a general warning it was. We received a flash-back acknowledgment. We issued instructions. They were not acknowledged. There was a silence lasting half an hour, during which the headquarters of two planets frantically hurled messages into space. At the end came a reply, only it was not.

"It came, not from the flag-ship, but from a smaller scout on the edge of the fleet. I could give that message almost word for word, it has so burned into my brain. It ran, 'Can transmit, but cannot receive any messages. Receiving apparatus hopelessly damaged in fight. Invisible foe, suddenly descending, wiped out combined Guard-ships fleets before attack could be resisted. *M.10* sole survivor, transmitting and heading for Gaudien at velocity. (He meant a

speed as near to the velocity of light as it was possible to attain.) Will continue to transmit details as long as possible'."

Tambard paused, and again his eyes swept our little circle. "That," he said impressively, "was the last we heard. No further details have come through. If *M.10* does not reach Gaudien some time to-night we can only conclude that there has been no survivor at all, that that ship's escape was merely a temporary one."

"And in that case," I said startingly, "God help Gaudien!"

"God help Earth and Mars both," said Tambard solemnly.

"Then," said Dirka, "what is there to be done? Must more lives be flung uselessly away?"

"No," said Tambard. "Emphatically no. It is because I have no wish to waste a single life that I have come here. What I say goes no further than the walls of this room?"

"We are used to secret conferences here," Dirka told him, a little inaccurately, I fancied then, though I was speedily to know better.

"So? Then we will hold yet another. Dirka, it is you, through your daughter and her mate here, who may yet save us. We want water, canal water, as much as we can get, even if all Mars has to go on thirst rations."

"We'll have to live on the synthetic product if it is necessary to save the planets," Dirka said oddly.

"What is it? Atomic power, that you want?"

Tambard nodded. I was frankly puzzled.

"Am I supposed to know?" I asked. "Because if I am to handle this matter I think I should."

"It is simple," Tambard told me. "We have perfected an atomic weapon. It is a disintegrating ray obtained by breaking up the atomic structure of water. It has been known to the Council for many years, but we hoped we would never have to use it, and we kept the knowledge secret. Now we find we have made little preparation. Oh, had we Earth's water power, her oceans here—for salt water is even better than fresh—we could work wonders, but each planet must rely on its own efforts for the start. Later we can join forces, if the God of the Universe should spare us so long. Dirka, write me an order to pump your canals dry if need be."

Without hesitation the other drew a pad from the pocket of his tunic and in crabbed Martian characters wrote the necessary permission, signing his name and affixing his personal seal at the end as managing head of the Canal Company.

He handed it to Tambard with a wry face.

"It may well be Mars' death warrant," he said queerly.

"And it may not be," Tambard pointed out. "Without it we face certain annihilation. Now"—he turned to me—"I would discuss the rest with you."

Dirka made an abrupt movement. "I shall leave you," he suggested.

"Do nothing of the sort," Tambard insisted. "What we have to say concerns you. I want this young man's help—Mars needs him badly—and a man with a divided mind is of no use to anyone. He cannot leave Jansca behind since his thoughts would be on her, not on what he had to face, and he cannot take her even as his second-in-command unless they are mated."

"Yes?" said Dirka expectantly.

"They may have to go at a moment's notice," Tambard went on.

"I see. So the sooner they are mated the better then," Dirka remarked. He spoke quite easily, calmly, without the slightest trace of hesitation. I, for one, had never expected to get so easily his consent to an immediate mating, the more so as we were of different planets. At the very worst I had steeled myself—despite Jansca's assurances—to accept a counsel of delay that we might be more sure of our feelings towards each other.

But I think Dirka realised the need was desperate, and that, as Tambard said, a man with a divided mind was of no use as a fighting unit. No doubt, too, he knew his daughter well enough to rely on her judgment. Or perhaps it merely was he felt that after all youth would be served, no matter what he said or did.

"Good," said Tambard. "We will attend to the details of that in a little moment then. Meanwhile other matters await our attention."

"What," I said bluntly, in the pause that followed, "do you think should be done?"

Tambard made a fluttering movement of his hand. "We," he returned, "are entirely without plans. It is you"—he looked squarely at Jansca and myself—"who will have to do the planning. What can you suggest?"

"Before I get to the point of making suggestions," I answered, "I'd like to have some idea of what I am to command."

"The newest swiftest space-ship we can find for you," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"If it narrows down to a question of speed and novelty," I remarked, "there's nothing in the known Universe to beat the *Cosmos*. Unfortunately she's a liner."

"Embodying all the latest improvements and built with a purpose," said Tambard. "As you doubtless know, this is her trial trip, and later she was to be put on an outer-planetary schedule. That would involve all sorts of hard work, and the facing of we know not what dangers. She is the last word in space-ships. Also any vessel you took over would have to be fitted out at break-neck speed, and we can fit the *Cosmos* just as well as any other. If you're satisfied with her we'll commandeer her."

"She's an Earth vessel, registered in New York," I said dubiously.

He waved that objection aside. "The Council have power to commandeer any space-ship in an emergency, no matter what its port of registration may be. The owners already, through Harran, have offered the services of the *Cosmos*."

"Then the *Cosmos* let it be," I agreed. "Now, what surprises have we in store?"

"In the way of armament? Beyond this atomic weapon, none, and even with that I should imagine you'll find it rather difficult fighting an invisible enemy."

"Not altogether invisible," I corrected. "The locators will enable us to position them, and then, of course, the ray-tubes——"

Tambard brought his hand down on the table with such a resounding thump that the crockery jumped and rattled.

"The ray, of course!" he exclaimed. "It was

that which made them visible. We've got the rate of vibration necessary to counteract their invisibility vibrations. We can rig up projectors—no need to make them lethal—that will nullify the greatest advantage they so far possess over us."

"Can they be rigged in time?"

"You can't get away before to-morrow's sunset at the earliest. Yes, that will give ample time. We'll put every available man on to the work. Anything more you'd like to suggest?"

"Several things," I said. "I wonder can those projectors be rigged to give us a higher vibratory rate than is necessary to counteract these invisibility waves? The sort of thing I mean where we can have a scale of vibrations up and down which we can play if necessary."

"It should not be impossible," said Tambard. He made a note on a pad beside him. "What else?"

"A question of diplomacy," I said, smiling. "I'll have to have a crew of Martians, because Oxcta will play an important part in the campaign, and it will take you some time to make a solution in such a form that you won't give away the secret of its manufacture to those not entitled to know. But because of that I wonder if there will be any friction due to an Earth-man being in command."

"I see your point," he said with a smile. I think he was genuinely pleased at my suggestion about the Oxcta. It showed him at anyrate that I wished to hold inviolate a secret which had come to me by accident. "No, there will be no difficulty over that, particularly since you will have a Martian mate, which makes you Martian by adoption. Only a malcontent would think of raising such a quibble at

such a time. But you won't have the handling of malcontents. Your crew will all be picked men."

"Can I make one suggestion then? You'll be bringing the present complement of the *Cosmos* ashore for an indefinite period, but there's one man of her lot I'd sooner have with me as navigator than any other, if so he will come. That's Hume, her present commander."

Tambard nodded. "It can be arranged," he said affably. "That is, if he is willing."

He rose to go. He had said nothing further about our mating, and I thought he had forgotten it, but his next words showed me I had been too hasty in my judgment of him.

"Dirka," he said, "walk a little way with me to the door. I would discuss these young people and how best to help them in the short time left at their disposal."

Together they went out, leaving us to ourselves and our troubled thoughts.

I looked moodily across the table to my love.

"Jansca," I said, "there is yet time if you wish to change your mind."

"In what regard?" she asked with a slight frown.

"In any way," I told her. "Now is your last chance to decide whether you wish to come with me on what may well be our last journey. Also it might be well for you to think twice before you married an Earth-man, one of an alien race and with customs alien to you."

For the moment a look of blank horror showed in her eyes, then she got up and came round to me.

"Is it," she asked with a quiver in her voice, "that you no longer love me that you say that?"

"I say it, Jansca," I said unsteadily, "however much it hurts me, because I love you now more than ever."

"That," she said softly, "is all the answer I require. Know, thou foolish Earth-man, that I would rather go with you as your mate to death than live in peace, ease and security with any other."

I made the only reply possible in such circumstances. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

THE EXTRA PASSENGERS

OUR mating took place in the late afternoon of that same day. Tambard had been as good as his word, and had speeded up the slow-moving civil machinery to an incredible extent, indeed his dynamic energy seemed to have infused itself that day into more than one department of the state.

The ceremony was a quiet one, attended only by Dirka, Tambard himself and the two official witnesses—one of each sex—though it had followed the strict Martian ritual which had not been varied by a word or phrase for centuries. Our papers signed and handed us, and our prints taken for purposes of record, we were then free to go about our own affairs until Tambard advised us the *Cosmos* was ready for us.

From the nondal hour of that next day Jansca and I had been holding ourselves at the Council's disposal, nevertheless the call came sooner than we expected. All the previous night, beneath the glare and heat of the artificial suns that made the workshops around the Landing Port as warm and bright as day, the Martian mechanics must have been toiling and slaving. Even with their varied mechanical contrivances to aid them in their work the task must have been no light one, for when all was said and done they were racing time. In the end they won by a comfortable margin.

It was two hours from nondal, that is about two-thirty in the afternoon in Earth terms, when Tambard's call came over the communicator, urging us to repair at once to the Landing Port. We loaded what little luggage we were taking into the back of the car, and with Dirka accompanying us we set out along the duralmac road to headquarters. Orders must have gone forth to give us a clear way, for all traffic ahead of us had been cleared, and we came through without a stop.

At the Landing Port outer gates we showed our official passes, and the three of us were ushered in at once. The huge bulk of the *Cosmos* lay in the slips; beside her stood row on row of glassite tanks that I realised must contain water, and from them through great flexible pipes the life-blood of Mars was being pumped into the space-ship's containers.

Tambard, Clinigo and a man I did not know were standing by the entrance to the covered gangway that led to the *Cosmos*' main deck, and as they saw us the Martian chief started forward. Clinigo, I noticed, hung back. I had not seen him since we had parted when the *Cosmos* docked, and I wondered what he had been doing in the meantime. I had little respect then for the people of Venus, either individually or as a nation, and I was not above thinking that the man might be badly frightened. How little I knew of the real facts of the case!

The three of them, greetings between us and Tambard over, preceded us on to the vessel. Hume, as I had hoped, was waiting for us on the control-deck, his face a trifle paler than usual and his mouth drawn tighter at the corners.

"So it has come to this, Jack?" he murmured as

we met. "Well, in a way I'm not so sorry. You'll find I'll do what you want. I've had my work outlined already"—he gave a nod towards Tambard—"but we can go into it further later."

He stepped back, as it seemed Tambard wished to speak to me.

"I've nothing much to add," the Martian said slowly. "You'll head to Gaudien first. They haven't all the necessary apparatus there, but you may find a few ships fitted out ready to accompany you. At least you won't have to go alone. You'll get your reports as long as we can keep in touch with you, and of course you'll call us up at the prescribed intervals. Just one word more; take good care of your two passengers."

"Passengers?" I echoed in surprise. "I'm not taking any passengers. This is no pleasure trip."

"So I told them," said Tambard, "but they do not agree. Clinigo——"

I interrupted him, swinging on the Venerian. "You don't mean you're coming with us, sir?" I said.

He nodded, a mite shamefacedly. "What else is there left me to do?" he said sadly. "My planet is in greater danger than either Earth or Mars. For all I know now it may no longer be the Venus I knew, but the spoil of the alien invader. In which case"—he stiffened his thin frame and drew himself up to the last inch of his meagre height—"I would crave a chance of helping to pay a little off the score. You understand"—his eyes met mine levelly—"I sail with you, not as a member of the Council, but as one under your orders."

"I understand," I said, "and it is well. There can

be but one captain on any ship. But the other passenger? Two were mentioned."

Tambard motioned the third man forward. "This," he said to me, "is Arenack, a man not without fame. He will accompany you, and perhaps you may find a use for him."

I looked Arenack over with interest. Of course I had heard of him, as who had not? A scientist of no mean attainments in his day, but of late he seemed to have dropped out of reckoning. I had heard of his name in connection with the atomic structure. If the rumour was correct, that would explain why he had disappeared from the public eye—explain, too, why he was coming with us. Well, we would want all the help we could get, scientific and otherwise, if we were to come out of this alive, let alone with whole skins.

I may say here that I took a liking to Arenack from the first, despite his many queer little ways. He was a complex character, one hard to understand, and with gusts of anger, alternating with fits of moodiness. Perhaps in his ancestry lay the key to much that was puzzling in him. As he said himself, he was an excellent example of a cosmoplanetarian. His mother, born on Mars, had been the child of a Martian man and a Venerian woman, and his father had been a native of Earth. An odd admixture of races, yet one that gave him a peculiar genius.

Tambard had little more to say, indeed there was nothing much in the way of orders he could give me. It was a case where I must rely on my own instinct, more than on set orders.

The Martian shook hands all round, leaving me to the last.

"Go," he said as he bade me farewell, "go, and the good wishes of a planet go with you. Jansca, bring him back safe and sound."

"Or I do not come myself," she said with dignity. "That you know, Tambard."

He smiled, I could almost have sworn, with relief.

Another moment and all farewells ended, the shore-party took their leave, and went off down the gangway.

I called Hume. "See the gangway is cast off and the ports sealed," I told him. "Signal through to the control-room when that is done."

He saluted me, this friend of mine whose command I had usurped, for there was no rancour in his heart because of our changed positions. The fate of two, perhaps three worlds, might yet depend on us, and in the face of that who could harbour even momentary resentment against a fellow-being?

There seemed some delay in getting the gangway clear, but Jansca, who was watching from the little quartzite dome perched on top of the control-room, called down to me that the last of the tanks was just casting loose its pipe, and that was probably the reason of the hold-up.

Evidently she was right, for a moment later the signal came through. I gave the order to clear the slips, and three seconds after there came the advice over the televox—for we were now sealed in—that the *Cosmos* was now riding free, and ready for the ascent. A pressure on a button, the turn of a knob halfway round a graduated scale, a gentle lift, and we were rising slowly through the thin Martian atmosphere.

I watched the dials anxiously, for this business of getting the gravity screens out was always a ticklish

affair. A second or so too soon and we would heat up with the friction of the air; a second or so too late and we would begin to drop, drawn down by the planet's gravity pull. I threw on the power at the precise moment; indeed, it is seldom that one makes an error in these days when all checking is done automatically, but there never yet was a space-captain who did not breathe the freer for knowing that this part of the take-off was over and done with.

Once out in space and heading for Gaudien, a flat three-quarters of a million miles away, I could take things easier, and hand over to Hume. The first thing I did, however, was to call Jansca down from her observation post and in her company make a complete tour of the ship, for I wished to familiarise myself with all the alterations that had been made overnight. They were many and varied, and some of them I must admit I did not quite understand. Arenack, however, knew all there was to be known about them, and he would see that his helpers were well enough acquainted with the uses of each bit of machinery to be able to give a good account of themselves.

That queer little man was by no means in the best of moods. Something had not been fixed according to his desires, or an after-thought had come to him that made some alterations desirable. He outlined in highly technical terms what he wished. It was all very much over my head, but as he seemed to know what he wanted and how to get it done I gave him full permission to proceed.

"Only," I warned him, "don't go dismantling any of the apparatus, so that if we are caught unawares we'll be helpless."

He looked at me sourly. "I'm not so foolish as all that," he snapped. "Only one projector at a time will be out of action, and that not for long."

He showed me an intricate piece of mechanism that he told me was the disintegrating ray. It consisted of a long tube with a smaller tube on top of it. The small tube was made of some iridescent substance that I understood was a purely Martian invention, though Arenack corrected me later on this point, and told me the secret of its construction had been known to the Council for many years. This small tube led down to some generating apparatus underneath the gun, for such the whole thing actually was.

The larger tube ran back to a huge box-shaped arrangement that was connected up to pipes leading from the water tanks. As I understood his explanation of the process it ran something like this. A fine stream of water was shot out from the larger tube, and at the same time—for the action of both had to be synchronised perfectly—the ray was projected from the smaller tube. The angles had been so calculated that ray and water jet gradually converged, meeting at a spot twenty-five yards ahead of the point of issue. The ray, acting on the stream of water, broke up its atomic structure, and formed another ray of incalculable power that hurled itself with irresistible force against anything in its path. The radius beyond which the ray ceased to be effective had never actually been defined, but Arenack estimated it at something like a thousand miles in free space.

Of course we had actually no idea what weapons our prospective opponents possessed. We knew a little more now about that paralysing process of theirs, but it was not very helpful. I had talked loosely

about the production of a temperature of absolute zero until Arenack pulled me up and corrected me. He told me that what we had experienced was no such thing. As near as we could get to it, the lowest temperature recorded by any of the ships that had been waylaid had been something in the neighbourhood of 44 degrees below Fahrenheit scale, whereas absolute zero was supposed to be 273 degrees below Centigrade, or something that he called 0 degrees Absolute Scale. The production of absolute zero, he informed me gravely, would have resulted in some sort of transmutation of metals. In other words, every scrap of iron and steel that came in contact with the source of this temperature—or lack of it—would be turned into neutronium, an element with the astounding weight of sixty million tons to the cubic inch. The probable result would be to send the ship that generated this temperature and the one to which it was applied hurtling through space at a velocity far exceeding that of light—that is, of course, after reducing them both to the condition where the whirl of the electrons round their nucleus definitely ceased, when a single proton would unite with a single electron to form the new substance.

The explanation set my head whirling. Used as we are to wonders in this age, I could not think of it as anything else but the mad dream of a scientist. I put this as tactfully as I could.

“But after all,” I said, “that’s only a theoretical condition. There’s no such element known in the whole of the Universe.”

“Isn’t there?” said Arenack sharply. “That’s all you know. As a matter of fact, if you ever get in the neighbourhood of Sirius, you’ll probably learn

far more about neutronium than you care to know." ¹

I left it at that. After all, I was not very likely to ever voyage beyond the bounds of our present planetary system, and if I did I would take good care to avoid the neighbourhood of the star Sirius. At the same time I warned the little man not to be carried away by his passion for science and start experiments with a view to producing absolute zero. I had no wish to be reduced to a primal electron and proton and drop through the Universe in such a catastrophic fashion. We were on the kind of expedition where we could not afford to take foolish risks, even by way of experimentation.

None the less, we left Arenack with the feeling that the scientific side of expedition was in good hands, providing we could curb the man's natural inclination to adopt new and untried methods. As we went out Jansca dropped a swift remark to the man that I did not catch. His face lit up, he nodded and smiled.

"What was it you said to Arenack," I asked, as we went along, "that made him of a sudden so human?"

Jansca glanced at me roguishly. "Merely making a suggestion that was after his own heart," she said, and not all the coaxing in the worlds could induce her to say more. I sighed and let the matter be; at least I could be sure that my Jansca would do nothing foolish.

Everything on board seemingly was functioning beautifully. I could have wished for a crew of my own Earth-men naturally, for one's heart always

¹ Arenack spoke the exact truth in this. Such a material exists in a small satellite of Sirius. Probably about the size of our Earth, it weighs almost as much as our Sun.

turns in the end back to one's own planet, but these Martians were all picked men, magnificent specimens, mentally and physically, of their race. None of them seemed to resent my presence as an Earth-man or the position I occupied over them. Contact with them would have assured me of their loyalty, even had not Tambard already done so.

Messages kept coming and going all the time, but there was nothing in them of any importance. No further development seemingly had taken place. Venus was still isolated from its companion-worlds as far as communication was concerned, and the missing Guard-fleet had been given up as a total loss. Even the solitary survivor that had been silenced in the middle of transmitting a message must have been destroyed. It did not look as though it were merely a case of being unable to get word past an insulating barrage.

Jansca made two curious requests of me during the course of the next few hours. There came a lull in the messages that up till then had been streaming ceaselessly through the void, when she spoke to me.

"My dear," she said, "do you mind if I send a private code message to Tambard?"

I hesitated. By rights I should censor, or at least pass, every message that was sent out from the *Cosmos*.

"You should have no secrets from your husband," I said admonitorily, and she smiled.

"This is not a secret," she answered back. "At least it will not be when I have got my reply and done what I wish. But I would rather you did not know as yet. I have an idea that may or may not work. Until I am sure it functions I would rather say nothing

about it, since I do not wish to raise hopes too high, lest they drop too far the other way."

"Ah, well," I said, "I suppose I'll have to let you have your way. Only can you assure me that your message will contain nothing that I would censor if I saw it?"

"Of course," she answered. "You can rest assured of that."

She sent the message herself. Within ten minutes an answer came back. She took that herself, too, and judging from her smiling face it was evidently the answer for which she wished.

"Can you tell me yet?" I asked, as she turned away from making the flash-back acknowledgment of 'message received'.

She handed me the reply form on which she had scribbled the answer. It ran, "You have my permission to proceed. Tambard."

"That tells me precisely nothing," I said with chagrin.

"Have patience a little longer, dear one," she said coaxingly. Then, with a quick change of subject, "Jack," she remarked, "you have never yet had occasion to use that instrument I gave you, which you call the Crystal Eye, have you?"

"No," I said. I had practically forgotten about it, truth to tell.

"Then let me have it, please. I want it merely temporarily. You shall have it back safe and sound when I've finished with it. I would not ask, but I need two."

"Why, Jansca?"

"It is all part of this little plan—call it plot, if you like—of mine," she said softly, looking up at me with eyes aglow.

“ And that ? ”

“ You shall know by the time we reach Gaudien.”

“ Remember I am commander here,” I said with mock sternness. “ I can make you talk if I wish.”

“ But you would not wish when it might hurt me,” she said demurely, and, drawing me towards her, kissed me swiftly on the lips, then just as swiftly turned and fled from the room.

For one frantic moment I doubted the wisdom that had prompted me to bring her on the trip.

CHAPTER XX

BETWEEN WORLDS

BUT I did not learn the details of Jansca's plan before we reached the Gaudien base. Something, I imagine, must have gone wrong with it, for whenever I twitted her about the matter she fell very glum, and avoided giving me a direct answer.

We were slow in making the base. In such a short distance, regarding it in terms of space, we could not make great speed. Gaudien, comparatively speaking, was so close to its parent planet that we were not able to reach the limits of our acceleration with any hope of slowing down in time. Had we attempted to keep at velocity—that is, our highest point of acceleration—we would almost certainly have overshot our mark, and wasted even more valuable time in bringing round in a circle of a few thousand miles in diameter. No, all things considered, chafe us though it did, our slow progress to Gaudien was in the end the quickest course we could have taken. For this, to the uninitiated, is one of the mysteries of space-travelling, and it is surprising how few civilians can be made to realise that the greater the distance in free space between any two given points the quicker one can pass from one to the other. It is merely a case of reaching velocity early and maintaining it over an appreciable period. Theoretically in free space there is no limit to the pace at which we can travel, actually we find

it wiser to keep our acceleration down much below its apparent maximum.

The glare of the artificial suns from the base picked us up a few thousand miles out ; we clicked on to the directional beam, and headed for the Earthward side. This, as we learnt on contact, was where the Guard-ship fleet was being gathered. Work here, too, had been speeded up, and I was agreeably surprised to find that half a dozen ships were ready to proceed with us. Others would follow on later.

Harran had not been idle either. London and New York were mustering a fleet, which it was planned should junction with us somewhere in mid-space. Practically all the fleet was being drawn from the Pan-American Union and the British Commonwealth. The other two confederations of Earth, the United States of Europe and the Asiatic Alliance, were too busy squabbling amongst themselves about foolish and idle racial prejudices to give thought to a matter of such minor importance as the possible invasion of the planet.

The Gaudien people had done one thing that met with my hearty approval from a strategical point of view, though I was rather loth to let brave men take such terrible risks. They had fixed up a fast flyer with the latest thing in locators, put in special power communicator apparatus, and sent it off into the void in the direction from which our last warning had come. Her commander had orders not to attempt to engage in combat, and even if it looked like being forced on him to turn tail and run away. It was his job to make contact of some sort with any of the invading vessels, and as soon as he managed to locate one to give the position on a general call.

In space where one has no fixed objects to work by it is a difficult matter to plot an exact position, but the Martian officials at Gaudien had seen this and provided for it. The flyer was to accelerate to peak at progressive rates of speed, and her course would be plotted hourly as her reports came in. The moment she made contact and transmitted the news the Gaudien officials would be able from their knowledge of her speed to plot as reliably as possible the exact spot in the void where she encountered the invaders. The calculations necessary for the remainder of the fleet to come into line could then be worked out with comparative ease from such data.

To give the scout, for such she was, a greater margin of safety her locators had been arranged in a new fashion. Usually they are concentrated in the nose of the space craft and are operative over an angle ranging from forty-five to ninety degrees according to the size of the vessel, but the scout—*M.2* was her designation—had had them fitted at intervals all round her shell, so that she was able to sweep the full circumference of a circle. Thus no other craft could approach her from any direction without her people being warned. Their extreme range, too, had by a diversion of power from other uses on board been increased considerably.

Had I known before that such a ship was being hurled into space as a bait and possibly as a sacrifice I do not think I would have countenanced the proceeding. However, when I heard of it, it was too late to do anything but hope that her people would at least have a fighting chance.

I got her angle of flight, however, took a copy of the chart that showed her calculated position, and

seeing that half a dozen supporting ships were already awaiting my orders, I decided to set off after her. The base officials took an affecting farewell of us, too affecting, I thought, for there was that in their manner that suggested they did not expect to see us again. One could not blame them very much, for if we failed to stem the tide their turn would indubitably come next.

At first I thought we would have to sheer close into Earth on our way to Venus, but a close study of the orbits showed me that the three planets formed in effect a triangle of which Earth was the apex, while Mars and Venus formed the extreme points of the base. Earth then was ahead of us in the yearly race round the sun, and perhaps that explained why no concerted attack seemed yet to have been made on her. In one way, too, she was the least pregnable of the three planets, and it might be that she was to be taken last. With Mars and Venus powerless to come to her assistance, and an alien base on each planet, she could slowly be encircled and subdued more or less at leisure. A pleasant prospect surely.

The third day out a faint message trickled through to us. The *M.2* had run into a nest of the invaders. So terrific was her speed that she had shot past them before they could recover from the surprise of her advent. She had picked them up first with her locators, and almost immediately had sighted them, tremendous cigar-shaped ships of a type hitherto unknown. Apparently they had been lounging along with their invisibility apparatus at rest, but the moment they mutually located each other the enemy ships disappeared as completely as one wipes chalk-marks from a wall with a wet sponge.

Whether they turned in pursuit of *M.2* may never be known, but it is certain that they immediately put up a power barrage that gradually overcame the strength of our craft's signals. The last transmission we caught was that the power behind the signals was being weakened, and the chances were that no further messages could get through. We tried to call up *M.2* and waited the ten minutes necessary for a reply to come, but none reached us.

I was stretching out my hand with the idea of operating the call once more when Jansca caught me by the wrist.

"You mustn't," she said fiercely. "Do you want them to get our position? They may have locators of the kind we've never heard of."

"They'll locate us quickly enough," I said wearily. "Why, we'll be plain enough for them to see the moment they're near enough."

She smiled mischievously at me. "I think not," she said steadily.

Something in her eyes made me look at her a second time. "Is this the secret then?" I asked, and she nodded.

"Part of it, lover-mate, part of it. What think you Arenack and I have been working on these last days if not some sort of a surprise such as this?"

"Tell me," I said quickly. "I think it is time now that I should know."

"I think that, too," she said. "This, in the main, is what we have done. Instead of utilising the projectors for neutralising rays we have turned their strength on to making the *Cosmos* invisible."

"Very nice," I commented, "but if they are invisible, too, how much better off are we?"

"None," she said, "if they should be invisible, but they won't. We have provided for that, but that I think I should prefer to keep a secret a little while longer. Dear one, don't ask me to show all my surprises at once. Arenack's surprises, rather, for, though the idea was mine, it was his brains that translated them into fact. But, believe me, the invaders won't know we're coming until we're in their midst and begin to deal out destruction."

"They'll surely have locators," I objected.

"Most certainly. But you are forgetting our repeller rays. We are strengthening them up so that they will make the locator vibrations ineffective."

"Can it be done?" I said dubiously.

"It can be done. Arenack says so. Even a better answer is that he has done it."

"A rather marvellous man, this Arenack," I said with a touch of bitterness in my tone, "so wonderful indeed, that he is admitted to secrets I am not allowed to share."

"No, no!" she cried. "Not that, dear one! We have worked together, he and I; we have met with failures, and in some instances we have had to begin all over again. At times we knew the sickening fear that our efforts might be wasted and that we could not succeed, however hard we tried. We—I—have spared you all that. You have been free from the worry and suspense, free to attend to your work without distraction."

"I see that," I said. "Yes, I see that, Jansca, and I thank you for it. And I will not press you now to tell me this last surprise of all. Trusting you as I do I will—at least I'll try to be—content to wait till the moment comes to reveal it."

She laughed happily. "I knew you would see it in that light once we talked it over," she said. "I knew you would not deprive me of the joy revelation at the right moment will give me."

Like a child with a new toy—as the old Earth phrase goes—was she; eager to tell me all she had done, yet even more eager that the knowledge of it should come crashingly, with a sense of dramatic surprise. Well, it would not harm to let her have her way, and reap her little harvest of joy. God knows, it might be the last we'd ever have to give each other.

A gong clanged in the control-room, an urgent signal from Arenack that something was afoot.

"Hume," I said, "you'll have to take charge here. We're wanted in the projection-room. I don't know what it is, but you'd better be prepared to take orders from there."

"Is there any possibility of an engagement?" he queried anxiously, anxiously since he was a fighting man who did not like to be hit without a chance of hitting back.

"Every possibility, I'm afraid," I said, and left him to think out for himself the reason of my fear.

Jansca came running forward as I hurried to the projection-room right in the nose of the craft. She, too, had heard the gong, and guessed what it signified. She said no word, but caught me by the arm, and smiled at me. Perhaps after all this was the chance for which she and Arenack had been waiting.

The scientist looked up alertly as we entered the room. He and his assistants were surrounded by all

sorts of spinning and humming apparatus, machines whose very purpose was beyond me.

"We've sighted something," he snapped. "I don't know what it is, but I'd suggest that space-suits be kept in readiness to don at a moment's notice."

"They're kept in readiness night and day," I told him. "Then is it as bad as that? I mean, what is it you've sighted?"

He pointed to an ordinary view-tube connected with the ship's eye. I may mention in this regard that part of the alterations that had been made in the *Cosmos* consisted in running duplicate connections to the projecting-room. In other words, apparatus ordinarily operated from the control-room could, if the necessity arose, be cut out from that control, and worked from the projecting-room. The ship's eye, however, being merely a recording apparatus when all was said and done, could be used from both places simultaneously.

I bent down and looked at the vision plate on which the picture was reflected. At first I thought I could see nothing, only the blackness of space with the constellations gleaming brightly against it. Then abruptly one constellation was momentarily obscured as though some opaque thing had passed between it and me. Had I not been on the alert for some such thing I would most certainly have missed it.

Jansca was staring over my shoulder, and she gave an exclamation as the opacity moved across the stars, blotted out their light, passed and merged into the obscurity of space.

"You saw it?" said Arenack. "Or rather you saw its effect. An artificial eclipse, so to speak."

"But how could that happen?" I queried. "I

thought the thing—space-ship, I suppose it is—was invisible. The light should have been bent round it, and the stars should not have been obscured.”

“Theoretically, yes,” he answered. “But that space-ship is invisible, not transparent. Also you’re looking at what the ship’s eye picks up and reflects on the vision-plate; you’re not seeing the actual thing itself with your own two eyes. In other words, you lose the stereoscope effect. Your own two eyes focussing on a point somewhere beyond your nose actually see to an extent round a body, fill in the background as it were, and bring it into three dimensional space. Close one eye, you lose that effect of a background, transpose the object to a two dimensional space—in other words a flat surface. If you care to put it another way, make it a little clearer perhaps, the vibrations that bend the light-rays and induce invisibility can apparently make no allowance for what we might call the shifting of the focal point, due to looking at the object with one eye open instead of two. You follow that?”

I nodded. I quite understood. It was merely a simple problem in optics, whose exact application I realised as soon as it was pointed out to me. There was one big objection, however, and I voiced it.

“It’s rather risky relying on anything like that,” I said. “Only sheer luck enabled us to pick up that object the way we did. Double luck, yours and mine.”

“I haven’t seen it yet in that fashion,” Arenack answered. “As you say, this vision-plate attached to the ship’s ‘eye’ leaves too much to chance. No, I picked it up in a more reliable apparatus. Come here.”

He moved from his seat, motioning me to take his

place. In front of where he had been sitting, at the level of his eyes, was something like a pair of elongated binoculars, except that it had a hood arrangement that fitted like a mask to one's face.

Arenack leaned over me and adjusted it. Some automatic mechanism, I learnt later, on the lines of the clockwork that moves telescopes in the observatories, kept it constantly on the object to be viewed, though in the case of a travelling body alterations had to be made when necessary to allow for varying rates of speed.

I stared ahead, blinked, and then I saw. What I saw was a space-ship modelled on the lines of that craft Jansca and I had been instrumental in destroying not so long before, only, somehow, it did not seem so large.

"You saw it, then?" said Arenack at my gasp of surprise. "One moment, please."

He made some minor adjustments. The space-ship seemed to leap towards me; its walls shimmered and vanished, and it was as though I were looking through glass into its interior. Everything, however, was on a reduced scale, and I could see nothing with any clearness of detail. Machinery, men, pigmy figures, dressed oddly. That was about all I could make out.

I slipped the hood from my face. "That's it, then, is it?" I said, with a touch of amazement in my voice at the miracle I had witnessed.

"It's too far away yet for us to see details, of course," Arenack said, "but you see we've a means to overcome their invisibility."

"But how?" I queried.

"The——" He said something that sounded like

'dalifon', but before I could ask him what that meant, Jansca interposed.

"What you call the Crystal Eye," she explained. "That's why I borrowed yours, to make this. We needed two, to get the stereoscopic effect. To be successful, it had to be made in pairs like the human eye. At least so we thought at the beginning; but now we've learnt that the ship's eye can pick up such an object, we may be able to make further alterations."

"If we have the time and the opportunity," Arenack said softly. "That little fellow is cutting across our line now, but at any moment he may change direction and veer round towards us. Perhaps they have some mechanism for detecting our neighbourhood, even though we are at present invisible. We must not under-rate them, their intelligence, or their ability."

I realised that. I had no intention of doing any such thing. But I fancied I saw one defect in the apparatus of detection.

"This is good," I said, "excellent in fact, but does it not mean that you must keep someone with eyes constantly glued to the peep-holes here?"

Smilingly Arenack shook his head. "That is not necessary," he told me. "Of course, now and again one likes to make solo observations, but it is not wise owing to the strain on one's eyes to sit there for long. Instead. . . ."

He gestured towards a white plaque on the wall in a direct line with the Crystal Eye, as I must call the apparatus for want of a better name. He touched a button on the desk beside him, and as I watched the milky surface of the plaque changed. It went black; the stars came out on it, and the tiny silver ship

showed up quite clearly. Relative to the immensity of space that formed its background, it was moving so slowly that it seemed to be standing still, though actually it must have been cutting along at a tremendous rate. Its motion was like that of the hands of a clock, only perceptible after an interval.

As we stared, its appearance changed. It became smaller; from a cigar-shape it altered to a disc, then abruptly with a great leap the disc increased in size.

Arenack exclaimed. Jansca caught at my arm.

"It's changed direction!" she cried. "It's coming towards us now, and it's moving at a terrific rate."

"Do you think they've managed to locate us somehow?" I asked Arenack quickly.

"Impossible to say," he answered. "Try altering our course."

I got Hume on the open communicator. "Three points west of our present direction," I told him. "Hold her on that for fifteen minutes."

Again we turned our eyes towards the plaque. The angle of the space-ship seemed to have altered slightly. It was no longer a disc, rather an ellipse than anything. But even as we watched with bated breath it slowly swung back again into its former position.

There was no doubt about it now. She was aware of our presence in space. By some mechanical device, protected by invisibility vibrations though we were, she had learnt of our alteration of course and had adjusted her direction accordingly. Whether she intended to attack or not remained to be seen.

I sprang to the general communicator, and rang

the alarm that would sound through every part of the ship.

“Action-stations,” I ordered. “Space-suit rig, and Oxcta solution for every man.”

My voice was taken up by relays that trembled and reverberated through every fibre of the *Cosmos*.

CHAPTER XXI

AT GRIPS

OUR own space-suits were kept in readiness in the projection-room, and beside them a ready solution of Oxcta put up in tiny phials. We broke ours, drank the highly concentrated contents, and proceeded to don the suits.

They were strongly constructed of a light yet durable alloy, and were heavily insulated against the cold of outer space. On the belt of each suit hung a reaction pistol, a thing with a vast mouth like an old-fashioned blunderbuss. Should the worst occur, the ship be destroyed and ourselves projected into the void, one possessed at least a fighting chance of life, such a chance as one tossing in a tiny canoe on a wide ocean might hope for. The reaction pistols furnished a means of propulsion through space. A man might live in such suit, moving about in free space, for a matter of two or three days. After that he would almost certainly begin to starve to death, for there was no way once one was buttoned in of partaking of food or drink.

The suits had originally been designed to preserve the lives of passengers wrecked in space; the supposition was that any such wreck would almost certainly take place either in or near one of the traffic lanes, and rescue would be at most a matter of hours. No one had ever thought of the possibility of them

being used to save survivors from a ship stricken in war far off the beaten track, for war we fancied had long been banished from the planets. It seemed now, though, that we were to learn differently, and the suits might well yet be our coffins. One could only hope for the best and trust to luck.

I had no time to think of the remaining ships of the fleet. Probably they were a couple of thousand miles away to the rear, and so safe for the time being. Their locators would no doubt have warned them of our altered course, and in due time the same means would give them notice of the presence of a stranger ship. But now we had been discovered I did not think it wise to communicate with them. That would merely be making their position plain for anyone who wished to know, for I did not lose sight of the fact that the invaders were almost certain to have some means of listening in on our signals. The ships were invisible like ourselves, and that and their distance away would have to be their safeguard until something better could be devised.

Not unlikely their rate of progress would bring them close soon enough to distinguish the stranger, as she would become visible as soon as our neutralising rays played on her. Not all the projectors had been turned from their original purpose to that of weaving an invisible web round us. Wisely enough, I had suggested we leave one to be used, as we had intended from the first.

Now—the moment we were screwed in our space-suits and the signal came through from the other departments that all was clear—I had the projector I have just mentioned aligned on the stranger. I wasn't quite sure that she was near enough yet for

the vibrations to be effective, but it could do no harm to try.

I swung over the little lever that set the power going. For a space nothing happened. Then suddenly against the background of the void there leaped to life a lovely golden shape, the space-ship sheering round to veer in at an angle to us.

It looked as though her intentions were purely exploratory, and that she meant to get close enough to us to treat us to a doze of that paralysing cold, whatever its precise nature might be. My own instinct, coupled with what I had already seen of its effects, however, convinced me that it was not a weapon that could be used at any great range. One must sheer in dangerously close to an opponent to bring it into play. It was hardly likely that her people could have known that we had a means of combating its effects, though they must have guessed that something was wrong from the fact that we were invisible ourselves. I doubted very much whether they would have any apparatus on board—unless they were years ahead of us in scientific progress—that would warn them their own cloak had been ripped aside and the ship revealed to any eyes that cared to see.

An idea struck me. Granted that they knew no more than that an invisible space-ship was somewhere in the same arc as they, it was not altogether impossible that they might have mistaken us for one of their own craft.

I was just about to put the idea to test when a call came through from the transmitting-room. I answered it. It was the operator on duty speaking.

“A series of strange signals have been coming through for some minutes,” he informed me. “I

can't make head or tail of them. They're in no code I know anything about."

"How's the recorder transcribing them?" I asked. If the automatic recorder was registering them there must be some arbitrary arrangement about them that might yet yield a clue to their nature.

"As a series of impulses," the operator told me. "They're coming over with irregular frequency, and the recorder is putting them down as lines and dots. If it wasn't that it's never used nowadays I'd think it was someone trying to transmit in the archaic Morse code."

"Morse!" I ejaculated. "Do you happen to know anything about *that*?"

The operator chuckled. "Not much. Nobody does nowadays. But I know enough to be able to say that this isn't Morse. Here, sir, something's coming through again. I've got a group combination that came several times before. It looks a 'message begins' sign. It's clattering."

"Throw your communicator open so that I can hear what's going on," I commanded.

The screen immediately lit up, showing me the interior of the transmitting-room, and the sounds of the instruments working came plainly to my ears. The automatic recorder was throwing out sheet after sheet of the prepared paper, each sheet covered with irregularly spaced dots and dashes, the latter the 'lines' the operator had mentioned.

I listened to the clack of the machine as it worked. It was going at a fearful rate, a sort of urgent 'click-click-click', then a long 'click', and so on. Something in the pace at which the signals came over made me think that the operator at the other end was

fast losing patience. Even these automatic recorders can respond to and register the emotions of the distant operators whose signals wake them to life.

"Losing patience," I commented to myself. "Now, he's getting angry."

The clicks came with a sharp rattle, a perfect hail-storm of them. There was a pause, possibly while the operator waited for a reply. Then when none came our machine began to chatter again over an octave, and ended on a final note that expanded into one sharp explosion. Anger, irritation and finally utter disgust. I read as plainly as day that those were the emotions behind those sounds.

Though I waited a full minute nothing more came through.

"Good," I said to the operator, "you can cut the general circuit out now. But keep those records. We may like to try our hands at deciphering them yet."

I cut out, and spoke to Jansca.

"How's that stranger ship been behaving while I've been at the communicator?" I asked her.

"Maintaining distance," she said. "It's made no attempt to get closer. It looks as though it did not want to—yet."

"Wanted to make sure who we were first," I commented, and I told her something of what I had seen and heard.

"Ah," she said, "doubtful of us then. Perhaps that's a good sign. I wonder what Arenack thinks of it."

"Thinks of what?" he said, looking up from his work on the projector.

I told him,

"That's it then," he said. "They're trying to chat us. Think we must be a sister craft, and have lost patience because we haven't answered. But you see that means they don't yet know our ships have discovered an invisibility process. When they find out . . ." He finished the sentence with a soft whistle.

I looked towards the plaque where he had pointed. The golden shape was moving again; the distance between us was lessening rapidly.

"It's coming," said Arenack. "The planets know what surprises they may have in store for us."

"Surprises be eclipsed!" I said irritably. "Don't let us talk of what they can do. Do something ourselves instead."

"The atomic discharge?" he suggested, stretching his hand towards the nearest tube.

"No, not that . . . not yet!" I cried. God knows I did not want to hurl anyone into utter dissolution if it could be avoided.

"Then what?" he queried.

"The ray projector," I said. "You've taken the kick out of it, and are merely using its vibratory scale."

"I'm not," he said calmly. "What I'm doing is using a wave with a lesser number of vibrations. If I quicken up the vibrations I can send the heat ray over again."

"That's quite certain?" I said. "Because, if it is, you should be able to vary the intensity."

"I can." He chuckled. "Is there anything you'd like me to do in that line?"

I nodded. "I don't want to destroy that craft utterly. It's rather like shooting him sitting. You

see, he hasn't opened up hostilities. But something has to be done. Heat him up a bit, will you?"

"I'll try. Stand aside all of you. There may be a flash-back when I change over from one scale to the other."

We stood on one side, watching him curiously. In his space-suit, though he had the visor down, as we all had, so we could see and hear, he looked an odd machine-like being, someone not quite human. Over the flexible metal fingers that covered his own flesh and blood ones he drew thick yet pliable rubber gloves, flung a glance at the plaque behind him, adjusted a vernier scale-screw on the edge of the tube, and pulled over a lever. We watched the growing bulk of the space-ship as it showed in the plaque. For a minute or so nothing happened. Then the golden shape seemed to dull a little, just for an instant. It shone out again, gleaming rather brighter than before, I thought.

I was sure of it a little later. It was beginning to glow; from gold it passed to a deeper orange, and gradually a faint tinge of red crept over it.

"Better hold it at that, Arenack," I said warningly. "You've got the outer shell red-hot. I don't want to roast them. I'd rather get them to surrender if I can. We'd like to know something more about their tribe, you know."

"I'll notch it a shade higher," he said. "That heat will radiate off quickly into space. Unless, of course," he added, "they've got something to counteract it."

I didn't think they had. I could have sworn we had them helpless, we held them so long. I was even beginning to think there was a chance of capturing

the ship, and perhaps the crew, intact when the thing itself happened.

The red-hot shell of a sudden began to lose its colour. It wavered fitfully down to orange, but somehow Arenack managed to hold it at that, though I saw out of one corner of my eye that he had to apply an extra notch or so to do it. One force, it seemed, was struggling against the other ; neither strong enough to win, they were locking in neutral.

I have never made a bigger mistake.

Of a sudden the orange dimmed right down. I don't quite know what happened next. To this day I am not quite sure. Jansca, however—perhaps, fancifully—says it looked as though someone had rolled up the edges of space and hurled it like a ball into the nothingness between us.

But what I do know was what happened in the projection-room. There came a vivid sheet of blue light ; the room seemed to grow chokingly cold as though one were breathing—or trying to breathe—liquid air. I can give no better description of it than that. Arenack made an abrupt movement, and a startled oath fell from his lips—all this you must understand, happened simultaneously—and with his gloved hand he dragged over the lever that cut out the power.

The air of the room cleared on the instant ; the blue light vanished, and I became aware of Arenack crouching over his machine as though he had been struck and thrown there.

I made a swift movement and caught him by the shoulder, and at my touch he slipped to his knees.

“Jansca,” I called, and between the two of us we

raised him to his feet. His assistants came to our aid.

He opened his eyes, blinked, and pushed the visor of his space-suit helmet further back from his face.

"I'm all right now," he said. "That was a near thing, though. Gave me a bit of a shaking. If I hadn't cut off power when I did . . ."

"Are you sure you feel better?" I said insistently.

"Yes. I'll be over it in a minute or so at worst. It's just the shock of it. I thought for the moment we were gone."

"So did I," I said grimly. "Have you any idea what happened?"

"A glimmer," he said. "They've got something to beat our heat-ray. Some sort of a repelling force. But the nerve of it! They used our ray as a path for it, hurled it back on it and into the machine. If I hadn't been wearing insulated gloves, I wouldn't have been able to pull that lever over, and if I hadn't pulled the lever over—the stars confound them!—we'd have gone out in a blue flare."

I think we were all a little shaken. It is no nice thing to escape by the veriest margin such a death as this. We had no illusions at all about the narrowness of our avoidance of it.

Arenack raised himself to his feet. "Can't afford to take our senses off the job for a moment," he said warningly. "That craft's notched the first score. Thinking he's taught us a lesson, he may try to push it home. Jupiter! but if he has any more samples of that sort we'll be lucky to get out with our lives."

"If it's a case of lives, ours mustn't be lost," Jansca declared. "If we go the barriers are down, and there'll be none to hold them. At any cost we have to keep

alive long enough to learn who these people are and where they come from, and give our knowledge to the worlds."

She turned to Arenack. "That's your work, my friend," she said steadily. "Keep us alive, no matter who is destroyed. The *Cosmos* must come through."

Arenack smiled cheerfully. "I'll do my best, Jansca," he said. "If the chief gives me a free hand I'll clean up the void."

"You can have that free hand," I said. "Ah, he's swinging again."

The gleaming space-ship had indeed swung round. He was rising at an angle too. I caught a glimpse of the under-side of the ship, saw it on a slant, as it were, and at once the meaning of the manoeuvre dawned on me.

"He's climbing, trying to get above us," I cried. "We mustn't let that happen. We can't defend ourselves if he starts hovering over us."

I sprang to the control-room communicator, and snapped a quick order or so. We could hardly rise on the course we were taking. Before we got high enough the other would be well over us. The only thing left to do with any hope of success was to make the nearest thing possible to a right-angle turn, and rise from that. It was not the sort of manoeuvre I would have countenanced ordinarily—the great strain imposed on the engines might easily tear them from their beds; also certain considerations of weight, or want of it, due to the absence of real gravity in free space, entered into the matter—but it was the one desperate chance left us to try.

The abrupt veering of the ship threw us off our balance and flung us against each other, the contact

of our space-suits filling the room with clatter. Some glass thing, a retort, or test-tube or something of that nature, fell to the floor, and crashed into fragments.¹

The instant we recovered ourselves I swung my eyes round to the plaque on the wall. The space-ship had wavered out of our line of vision, but Arenack bent over the Crystal Eye, made several adjustments, and presently it swam back, a little distorted and out of focus. Another adjustment or so and the sights were trained on it, bringing it back into the dead centre of the plaque.

We seemed to be now at much the same altitude, hovering, circling like two hawks, each watching the chance to strike. How long this fighting for place lasted I can't say. To us waiting there it seemed hours, but it must have been no more than minutes.

Then abruptly the stranger veered; a dazzling white glow flickered about her nose, and I waited for what terrible thing I knew not. But nothing happened to us. Why, I saw in the very next instant.

One of our half-dozen supporting ships must have somehow blundered into our orbit, and been located by the stranger. The white glow flickering about her nose seemed to roll up into a ball and bounce across the void. It spread, taking on the outlines of one of our ships. For the space between breaths it remained thus. Then the ship broke, smashed up, dissolved into a myriad fragments that went floating and drifting away. . . .

¹ There would be no such thing as actual gravity in free space, but each space-ship, for convenience' sake, would create its own artificial gravity.

"The atomic gun, Arenack," I said between my teeth.

I do not think the stranger ship's people could have known what struck them. One instant they were there, the next they had been exploded into ultimate nothingness.

CHAPTER XXII

VANDALS OF THE VOID

THE explosion set up such an ether-wave that for the moment I thought that we too were going to be blown out of existence. The ship heeled over, bounced, rocked and swayed, and the air was filled with the clatter of fragile articles breaking as they were hurled to the floor. Had I not experienced it myself I could not have believed it possible that so much vibration could be set loose in free space.

But the worst was speedily over, in this instance at least, and we could now sit back and count our gains and losses. We ourselves had suffered no damage beyond the buffeting, but I had no idea how the five remaining ships had fared. None of them was as structurally strong as we.

My first act was to call the transmission-room to get in touch with them, and presently the heartening news came back that they were all safe. Only the one we had seen destroyed before our eyes had met with any disaster.

From now on, however, it behove us to go warily. We had met one enemy craft, and the chances were that she was probably only one of many scouting about. Whether she had had the opportunity—and taken it—of communicating with her friends we could not say. I considered it safer to proceed on the assumption that she had done so.

The most irritating feature of our two encounters, however, was their utter conclusiveness. One side or the other was definitely wiped out of existence, and because of that we were no nearer to learning the things we wished to know. Had we been able to make some captives, or at the worst capture a ship, we would almost certainly have discovered something to indicate who these vandals of the void were and from what planet they hailed.

It was a great relief to climb at last out of our heavy and, to an extent, cumbersome space-suits, and feel that they could temporarily be discarded. Nevertheless I issued a general warning that they must be kept ready to don again at a moment's notice.

After the strenuous time of the last hour or so we were all more or less exhausted—I fancy there must be something in the play of these giant forces that saps the strength and spirits of a man if he keeps too long in contact with them—so I sent Arenack off to rest, and told Jansca I thought she had better turn in. She asked me what I intended doing, as if that mattered, and when she found I meant to relieve Hume at control :

“ I think it's you who need rest more than any of us,” she said.

“ Don't be foolish, Jansca,” I said wearily, for I had no mind to argue. “ Actually I've done no more than stand by and watch while you and Arenack and his assistants did the work.”

“ Yours was the harder part then,” she said. “ We had our work to keep us occupied. You, with your responsibilities, the knowledge that you were in command and that the lives and safety of all on board lay at your door, had no such anodyne.”

"Enough," I said sharply. "Jansca, you've just reminded me I'm in command. Carry out my orders, please."

She made a wry mouth, but she went off.

I took over from Hume. Though he said nothing I thought from the look of him that he was glad to be relieved. He had got the *Cosmos* back on her original course, so that part of it need not trouble me for a while yet. I gave the control into the hands of the Martian second officer with orders to hold her, and turned to the work of plotting out further direction.

The chart on which our evolutions had been automatically recorded was a mass of amazingly intricate geometrical figures, the mere sight of which set my brain in a whirl; but the work had to be done, and I set to work to tackle it at once. All the same, it was some time before I managed to orient myself. Then with the planet chart in front of me I ruled the course I wished to take, plotted the figures, and gave the altered direction to the Martian second.

He frowned over them a moment, then flung a glance up at the moving chart that showed our progress from stage to stage.

"That will take us direct to Venus," he said. "You're heading for Shangun?"

"Yes," I said. Our eyes met. I read in his the feeling that I was running the ship headlong into danger.

"I'm asking the company to take no risks that I don't take myself," I said steadily, for I understood only too well what was passing through his mind. "If we have to make a sacrifice of ourselves, it can't be helped. But of one thing you can rest assured, and

that is that I won't take risks if I can get what I want in other ways."

"I know that," he said in that throaty voice the Martian uses when he is holding his feelings in leash. "I do not query the wisdom of your orders, Mitaka, but I am human. Still, the thing most feared least often happens."

He turned away to put my instructions into operation, but he left me thoughtful. He had voiced the idea in my own heart, the unspoken dread that the risks we were taking, the sacrifices we were making, might at the last be all in vain. Yet—heartening enough thought—we had already—if one cared to count our previous adventure—dealt with and beaten two of the enemy ships.

Clinigo came in a moment later, an angry little man. He had been resting when the trouble began and had awakened to find himself virtually a prisoner in his own part of the ship, one where I believed he was least likely to come to harm.

He stood and eyed me for a moment, his whole body quivering. Then:

"It was you," he said with an odd harsh note in his voice, "who ordered that I be kept to the rear of the ship?" And when I nodded, "Why was that?" he demanded.

"Because," I said steadily, "you were in what was the safest place. Even if we were blown up you would have had a fighting chance of life there in your space-suit. We others . . ." I signified with a comprehensive gesture what would be our fate in such circumstances.

For the moment I thought he himself was going to explode, but he conquered his wrath by an effort.

“By what right did you give such an order?” he said bluntly.

“The right I acquired when you and Tambard sent me on this expedition. You may remember you came on as a passenger, and the point was made that your power as a Councillor was not to be operative on board.”

He smiled at that, the first faint flicker of a smile I had seen on his face that day.

“I’m not cavilling at being under your orders,” he said in a softer voice. “Do not think that for one moment I question the authority delegated to you. No such thing. But I deprecate the policy that considers my life of such value that special precautions should be taken to preserve it. I am an old man, and of all on this ship I am probably the one who could best be spared.”

“Sire,” I said conventionally, “your knowledge and your wisdom cannot be duplicated.”

“There is no member of the Council present, Sanders, only an extra passenger, so, please, don’t talk rot. But as an extra passenger, and one who would share in any danger that arises, please don’t treat me as a child in future.”

“Well, if you look at it that way . . .” I mumbled.

“I do,” he interrupted. “It is the only way in which a sensible man could possibly regard it.” He slewed one eye round to the space-chart with the red line of our plotted course pointing like a lance at the heart of Venus. I saw him start, then his eyes came slowly round to rest on me.

“Man,” he said with a note of credulity in his voice, “are you actually making for Venus?”

“Yes,” I informed him. “Why not?”

"But it's cut off from the rest of the worlds. There's been no communication for days."

"The more reason for going there."

"We don't know what may have happened. The entire planet may be in the hands of these Vandals of the Void," he pointed out.

"Still more reason for going there," I assured him. "Until we know exactly what has happened to Venus, we're in the dark. The sooner we tear the veil away the better."

He looked doubtful, not—I know now—that he did not wish to see his home planet again, but he had no liking that lives should be sacrificed idly, as he seemed to think I might do.

"Well, I suppose you know best," he said at length. "We're in your hands now. You've pulled us through one encounter successfully, so you may do so to the end."

"That's rather optimistic," I smiled. "You heard what happened? We had to wipe the stranger out—there was nothing else for it, particularly as she's already got the little *M.6*. And, by the way, the thanks are not due to me, but to Arenack and Jansca, and their assistants. It was science that won the victory, not generalship."

"So I believe. What's your acceleration?"

"I'm increasing velocity up to peak," I told him.

We were already far out in space, far beyond the furthest point our scouting guard-ships had penetrated to, when they were silenced, perhaps for ever, by the stranger space-craft. The tremendous pace at which we were travelling was indeed nearly our undoing, on one occasion. Our locator alarms rang frantically, I remember, and I jumped to it, thinking

that we had made contact with the stranger-ships again. But our tests showed the neighbourhood of a body of vast size—vast, that is, compared with what we had expected.

Luckily we managed to swerve a few thousand miles out necessary to clear the body, but even then we felt an extraordinary gravity pull, and we began to drop.

“I’d say it was a minor planet,” said Arenack, “only there’s none charted here.” He looked frankly puzzled. “I can’t see anything either,” he went on, “and none of our sight instruments record any pictures.”

At the first pull downward we had got our gravity screens out, and they were now working sufficiently well to counteract the attraction. Actually the pulls were just about levelling each other.

“We’d better not pass until we’ve discovered what it is,” I suggested. “Any unknown body demands investigation these days. For all we know it may have something to do with the enemy.”

We backed on our course, cautiously approaching nearer to the body. Presently a great section of the background of stars was blotted out, and we gasped. The thing with which we had so nearly collided was a dead world, a coal-black world of darkness and desolation, about, as we found later from our tests, a quarter size that of Earth’s Moon. How it had died, what cosmic catastrophe had brought it to this state, a huge cinder whirling along on its orbit, we had not then time to decide. Nevertheless I made up my mind that if the Fates spared us, some day I would come back and investigate the past history of this other Vandal of the Void.

I could not understand at first why it had not been discovered before, but Arenack gave me a reason that seemed sufficient. Because of its very deadness, he told me, it could not reflect light. It could have been noticed in the ordinary way only by it passing across and obscuring some other star that was being kept under observation, and the chances of this happening were about one in a million. But as I was to learn later from many astronomers with whom I talked about it, this was by no means the only dull, lifeless world floating free in space. There were many others, gradually being charted. . . .

We passed it by. All our tests were purely negative. There was no life of any sort on it, not even an extremely low form, as far as we could gather. That however, did not mean that its discovery might be without value. No heavenly body is altogether useless. Rolgar we first got from the dead world of our own moon, and there are others, minor planets, asteroids and so on—all utterly unfit for human habitation—which, however, yield valuable ores, some of them unknown in the three worlds otherwise.

We passed it by, this dead world, and again took up our running. Venus was a little bigger now, growing slowly, yet perceptibly. The days passed uneventfully, so much so that we began to wonder if the invaders had vanished as suddenly and as mysteriously as they had appeared. We were destined to be disillusioned in the simplest manner possible.

Once again our locators warned us of alien bodies, and warned by our previous encounter I ordered Action stations at once. The stranger was coming right towards us, whacking up a tremendous pace. Presently we managed to pick him up, both by the

ship's eye and by the reflection from the Crystals on to the plaque. Then . . . then he was not travelling invisibly. He was still too far off for us to see him yet, save as a silver streak moving athwart the blackness of space, but even in that view I sensed a certain familiarity.

For a split second my mind wavered, then :

"Operator," I called through the transmission communicator, "stand by to transmit."

I heard his startled gasp, saw his face in the vision-plate register surprise and curiosity. I gave him a plain call in the international code.

"Leave the general communicator open," I said when he took it. "I want to see and hear what transpires."

He did so. Back in a very few seconds came a startled, "Who the planets are you? Where are you anyway?"

"Give them our call sign," I told the operator. "Not our name. Get his name, however."

It was slow work, this questioning and answering in the code. It always is, and I must say I much prefer working in atmosphere where one can use the televox and save both time and trouble. Still, I should not growl, for as the messages came off from the recorder they were thrown on my screen and I could read them with ease.

"Got yours," came the answer. "*M.10* here. But where are you? Our locators register your presence, but we can't see you."

"Throw off the vibrations," I said over my shoulder to Jansca. "We won't hurt to be visible for a while now."

I could imagine their vision men on the *M.10* blinking

as we suddenly appeared out of nothingness, blinking, staggering, perhaps gasping with amaze at the apparent miracle of it. But they wasted no time once they were sure of us.

"We've escaped," ran their next message. Our operator had told them we thought they had been wiped out of existence. "It's a long story," went on the continuation. "Can't tell it all over the power. But we think we're being pursued."

"Not unlikely," I heard Jansca beside me say under her breath. "Most probable, in fact."

"Tell them they'll have to sheer in, connect with our ports and send a man across," I said to the operator. "We want to know all they can tell us and more. Better send their best man, the commander if he can rely on anyone to carry on in his absence. He'll have to be prepared to remain on board with us. Get action. We haven't time to spare."

"Coming across at once," I read on the screen two seconds later. "Stand by to connect up."

It was ticklish work, making that connection, but I must say it was done in a masterly fashion and in record time. I went down to the port myself to meet the commander. One of his assistants came to the edge of the connecting tube with him, a piece of foresight that was very welcome. It gave the chance of instructing the man verbally—much the quicker way—and impressing on him the necessity of losing no time.

Everything went like clockwork. We closed our port, disconnected, and *M.10* sped off, heading for the Gaudien base and Mars beyond. The moment she had begun to move, our vibratory apparatus was got to work, and we vanished once more.

"Now," I said to the commander of *M.10*, Balena his name was, "come to the projection-room with me, and you can tell your tale there while we watch. I have an idea that our time will be short."

"What are you doing?" he asked curiously. "I mean, why are you making for Venus?"

"Because," I said, a trifle mischievously, I'm afraid, "we want to go there."

He looked at me as though he was not quite sure that I was in my right senses. The Martians as a whole are almost lacking in humour, though now and again one strikes one who can appreciate a joke with the best of them. But it wasn't what I had said that made him stare, so much as what it implied.

"And to think," he murmured, "that that's just where I got away from. I never thought when I took my chance with the others that they'd get me back there dead or alive. But I suppose I'd better start at the beginning and tell you, or you won't know what I'm talking about."

"First," I said, though I was burning to hear his tale, "let us make the projection-room. Here is the door. There are others who may wish to hear your story and to whom the knowledge of what you've discovered may be helpful."

I opened the door, ushered him into the room and made him known to Jansca, Clinigo and Arenack. He saluted them, then turned to me as his conductor.

"Now," I said, "what is it you have to tell us? What has happened to Venus? Why has the planet been cut out of communication?"

"Because they've got one, if not more bases there," he answered, "and it's only a matter of time—short

at that—till they subjugate the whole planet. Then they'll turn their attention to our worlds."

"You think there is no hope?" said Clinigo brokenly.

The other hesitated. "For Venus?" he said, and Clinigo nodded.

"I'm sorry," said the other, "but I don't see how there can be."

Clinigo turned away. He seemed to be studying the growing image of Venus reflected on the plaque on the wall, but I think in reality he had turned to hide the tears in his eyes, and I could have sworn I caught the murmured words, "My poor planet."

He came round suddenly, another Clinigo than the one I had got to know.

"Will you please tell us," he said in a voice from which all emotion had been wrung, as one wrings water from a wet cloth, "as concisely as possible everything of importance that has occurred to you since we lost touch with you?"

Clinigo had forgotten he was a passenger and remembered only that he was one of The Three.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE EVENING STAR

IN precise, dry, formal tones Balena told his story. I can only give the gist of it here. When the fleet sent out from Gaudien had been attacked by the invisible foe, the *M.10* had been saved by the fact that, due to the necessity of repairing a temporary defect in her propulsive machinery, she had lagged behind. Her observers had witnessed the disposal practically *en masse* of the whole of the Martian fleet, and realising that there was nothing to be gained by lingering near the scene of the disaster, Balena turned tail, transmitting to Gaudien as he went.

Something had gone wrong with the locators, and they had no means of knowing, even if they had been able to rig them to cover their rear, whether the foe was following or not. An odd ray too must have sheered close to the *M.10*, for in some way the receiver apparatus got damaged and failed to function. In the midst of transmitting, the whole ship's company began to feel a paralysing cold creeping over them, and one by one they dropped at their posts.

"Why wasn't Oxcta served out to the men?" I broke in to ask. "That would have saved you all."

"Might have caused our deaths, you mean," Balena said, and I had to agree that possibly he was right. But it seemed that, when the fleet was being fitted out at Gaudien, Oxcta supplies ran short; as time was pressing they could not wait for them to come from

Mars, but decided to take the risk and send the fleet without them. The bulk of what there was, was concentrated on the flag-ship, but, even then, Balena pointed out, that hadn't helped. Oxcta might neutralise the paralysing cold, but it had no effect where the other weapons of the strangers were concerned.

They came back to consciousness to find themselves prisoners, and their ship in charge of strange beings, taller even than the Martians, whose most distinctive features were their deep purple eyes and the ridge of horn on each man's head. They spoke a strange language, but a marvellously simple one in construction, it seems, for Balena himself managed to pick it up under instruction in a little over five days. That is, he learnt it well enough to be able to talk it haltingly.

My original guess, or rather Parey's information, had been correct. The strangers came from the planet Mercury, and were portion of an expedition, partly exploratory and partly predatory, sent out with the view of finding a more congenial home somewhere among the other habitable planets. They seemed of a rather high order of intelligence, ruthless in their ways, yet their civilisation had moved along a line divergent from ours. Apparently they had made a number of discoveries we knew nothing about, while in many ways we had the advantage of them.

However. . . . They had established a base on Venus in one of the uninhabited districts, and there they had gradually accumulated a space-navy. Venus, it seemed, suited them as a base, but they wanted a world with an atmosphere not so cloudy and heavy as a place of permanent settlement.

Apparently they would have been content to keep their presence on Venus a strict secret, secure in the knowledge that their comings and goings in their invisible fliers were unknown had they not somehow discovered that Venus was one of the constituent bodies in the confederation of three worlds. How they made this discovery is not quite clear, neither is what they hoped to gain by their holding up of inter-stellar traffic. Possibly they examined the various vessels in a spirit of scientific curiosity as well as to learn what new and formidable weapons they might have to face when they at last launched the armada that was to bring the three new planets into their net.

Luckily, or unluckily for the Mercurians, in every instance they held up space-liners, from whose apparatus, of course, they were able to learn but little of the planets' possibilities of defence. They might have added more to their small quota of knowledge from their brief survey of the *Cosmos*, had not Jansca and I, by the most miraculous piece of luck, been able to prevent them getting away with it.

Once, however, that they discovered the worlds were beginning to wake up to the menace they embodied, the Mercurians drew a communication barrage round Venus, and set to work to trawl space with the deliberate idea on the one hand of striking terror into the hearts of their opponents before they had time to concentrate their forces, and on the other of capturing intact a ship and its crew, whom they could study, and from whom they could learn something of the conditions they would have to overcome. Perhaps they had a feeling that somewhere they might strike a traitor. How little they knew of the men of the

Guard-ships, no matter from what planet the crews were drawn.

Balena and his men identified the place to which they were taken as being somewhere on the Southern edge of the Venerian tropics, one of the waste lands of that planet. The temperature there was a bit on the high side—Venus has a greater humidity than Mars—and they suffered considerably, but the Mercurians appeared to relish it. But the fact that the heat from the Martians' point of view was very trying gave Balena an idea, and after thinking round it for a time he formed a plan, which, gradually, he communicated to the crew.

They began by dropping one by one, as though overcome by the—to them—excessive humidity. Probably it was not all acting, either. At least one man died from the stresses of that time. The Mercurians became alarmed. They were not anxious to lose the Martians before they had had opportunity of forcing all the information from them that they could. They took Balena apart, and their leader closely questioned him as to the cause of this condition, and any possible method of alleviating it. Balena after some hesitation admitted that they had a preparation on his own space-ship that would aid in counteracting the trouble.

The Mercurian sent to the space-ship for it. It was a semi-liquid preparation, bromine,¹ used extensively to form bromides and bromates, and as such the two cylinders containing it were labelled in Martian characters. Some of the Mercurians, who had made good progress in Tlananian from the various text-

¹ Because of the above dangers attending the handling of raw bromine many workmen employed in its transport in London in 1930 refused to cart it. *Vide Daily Press*, October 3rd (*sic*).

books they had taken from space-liners they had raided, were able to read the labels and satisfy themselves that the stuff was quite innocuous from their point of view. Bromine, however, was an entirely new substance to them, and naturally they were unaware of its peculiar properties. They did not know that it had to be used with amazing care, and before it could be employed medicinally it had to go through a number of processes, all very simple but none the less necessary. As a matter of fact the Martians carried it in crude form in cylinders, simply because the base had run out of the manufactured article; the space-ship people could not wait for new supplies to be made, but had taken the raw product with them to distil as the need arose. In graduated doses and mixed with certain other chemicals the Martians employed it extensively to relieve the reaction from the strain of intensive watching when on patrol duty. The Martian temperament was such that it demanded a bromide rather than a phosphorene tonic, a sedative rather than an energiser.

It is certain of course that the Mercurians would not have allowed their captives to handle the stuff had they realised that in its raw state, it was capable, if liberated in sufficient quantities, of causing considerable distress, most probably pneumonia, and not unlikely death to any who came in contact with it without taking reasonable precautions¹.

The Martians, of course, were fully aware of this and prepared to act on it the moment the time was ripe. Balena, it may be recorded, had selected for his coup a period when all the Mercurian space-ships were away from the base, and only the leader of the

¹ *Ibid.*

party and a small but reliable guard had been left in charge.

To make a long story short, Balena, instead of releasing the bromine by means of the graduated scale on the tap of the cylinder, turned it suddenly full on with the nozzle pointed towards the Mercurian group, who were standing idly watching them. The liquid had been packed under the atmospheric pressure of Mars and for use only in such atmosphere conditions. The denser atmosphere of Venus, with its heavier pressure coming in contact with the bromine through the air-holes the moment they were opened, forced it out through the nozzle in a thin stream of amazing force.

The Mercurians staggered, coughed, gulped and were seized with paroxysms of coughing that rendered them absolutely helpless for the time being. At the first sign that the stuff was taking effect the Martians began to run back to their space-ship. Balena threw the hissing cylinder into the midst of the squirming Mercurians, released the pressure in the second cylinder and threw it after its mate. The cylinders themselves were only small things—the men could carry one apiece quite comfortably—and it would not take long for the bromine to exhaust itself. Also some of the Mercurians might have escaped the full effects of the blast. In view of this Balena was sure that the sooner they made off the better.

They reached the space-ship, wrenched open the door, piled inside, closed the door, and started to ascend just about the time the first of the Mercurians, those who had not been badly affected, came running towards them and began to shoot with their rays. It would have gone hard with the Martians, no doubt, had

they had to contend with a guard on the ship, but though one was kept over it during the night, none was considered necessary in the day when the captives were kept in the camp and were in full sight of everyone.

Even as it was, however, the first flash of one of the ray tubes came dangerously close to the *M.10*; also, for some unaccountable reason, the engines refused to function properly. Balena did the only thing left him to do, swung the gravity screens, out at once. Of course he was taking a fearful risk, and for a moment it looked as though the ship would ascend so quickly that the friction of the air would heat her up to the point of combustion, but, somehow, by a frantic manipulation of the screens, Balena and his men prevented the worst from happening. The outer shell indeed was quite red-hot by the time they passed beyond the atmosphere, but in the cold of space it radiated it away rapidly, and presently, as the engines began to respond to treatment, they were able to get the necessary kick-off from them.

“And then, of course, your locators picked us up,” I said as he ended. “Well done, Balena. I’ll see you’re recommended for this.”

“If I might ask, sir,” he said, “just what are you proposing to do?”

“We’re running for Venus,” I told him. “Rather hard lines on you since you’ve just managed to escape, but then, duty is duty.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that aspect of it altogether,” he said with a wry face. “But they must have lifted the barrage, temporarily at anyrate. Not so long after we got into free space I heard signals, not from

any of our ships. I think they must have been recalling their fleet."

"Probably," I said grimly. "I believe that was the first of them we dealt with a while back. But it will take days before the last of them straggle back from the void." There was one other possibility that struck me, though now was not the time to make it public. It was quite as likely that the Mercurians, besides signalling the ships back to the Venerian base, had also sent out a call for help to their own planet. We might not only have to face a few isolated flyers; we ran the risk of being overwhelmed by an armada dropping suddenly out of the void. Well, it was a risk we had to take, one we had been prepared to face when we signed on.

I got Balena to give us the location of the base, and altered our course, so we would strike Venus in mid-tropics. I had in mind the desperate throw of striking at the heart of their power-plant in the hope of throwing that vital point out of action before the sky ripped open and a fleet that hopelessly outnumbered and probably would out-weapon us swept down to wipe us out of existence.

At the best we could only hope to delay and hamper them. The concentration of the fleets of Earth and Mars was no doubt taking place now; they had to guide them the knowledge we had acquired and had transmitted back, and that in the end might make them invincible: but in no circumstances that I could envisage could they possibly reach Venus in time to snatch us from the maw of destruction. We were the sacrifice that the three worlds must make if they were to secure their future safety.

All that day the ether was thick with strange signals

passing in a code none of us knew. Even Balena, with the knowledge he had acquired of the Mercurians' language, was unable to decipher them for us. Suggestions, warnings, entreaties, appeals for aid—they might be any or all of these for aught we could say.

The one thing we could do with regard to them was to locate their point of origin, and on that I kept the assistant-operators working overtime. Some of the signals were coming from the void behind us, but in the main they were streaming out from Venus, and presently too we began to catch other signals in the inter-planetary code. The Mercurians had had to lift the barrage to send their own messages through, and the Venerian authorities were frantically trying to get in touch with the Universe. They must have wondered why no answers came.

For my part I did not think it wise even to warn them that the folk responsible for their plight were located on their own world—our advent would be discovered all too soon for us, apart from that—and Earth and Mars would not take the risk of having their signals intercepted and, for all they knew, their code deciphered to their own ultimate undoing.

There remained but one way in which we could help, and my constant cry was for speed, more speed, and still more speed. Our reaction engines, worked by that wonderful fuel, rolgar, reached the peak of velocity, indeed I think at one period we were moving at the same rate as the electrons in a Coolidge tube, thirty-six thousand miles a second less than the speed of light.

We could not keep that rate up for long, however—if indeed we ever actually reached it, which I am not prepared to swear, since our instruments were

not geared to record such tremendous speeds—but presently dropped down to something more moderate. The old saw, 'the more haste the less speed' carries weight nowhere more than in inter-planetary travel.

All the while the blue disc of Venus grew, and grew, became silver, filled out and out until it covered almost the entire vision surface of the white plaque in the projection-room. As time passed and the planet swung nearer, Clinigo became more restless than ever. That calm which should have characterised one of The Three utterly deserted him. He knew not what lay ahead, and because he could not see a little way into the future he felt afraid. Not fear for himself—I think he was past caring whether he lived or died—but fear for Venus, fear of what might even then be happening to his beloved planet.

Came a day when Venus no longer filled the vision-plate. It had flowed over, if one may use the phrase, until the whole band of the tropics, for which we were heading, occupied all the space. We were not yet able to see the configurations of the continents, however; not until we pierced the veil of perpetual cloud that masks the surface of the planet would we see their outlines.

One day, when we were a hundred and fifty thousand miles above the planet, I called a halt. The time had come to drop down through the floor of cloud into the atmospheric envelope. Only the God of the Universe knew what we might find below; only He could say whether we would land alive. Even now the Mercurian armada might have made contact with the Venerian base.

I called Jansca to my side. "Dear one," I said,

“keep with me. What there is before us I cannot say, but I fear the worst. It is only right to let you know that we may never live to see another dawn.”

Her face paled. I think for the first time she visioned the possibility of us being disrupted into our original atoms as one breaks up a mound of dust with the jet from a hose. But worse than the fear of dissolution in that fashion was the dread of parting from me.

She came a little closer, caught me by both arms—we were alone for the moment in the room—and drew me towards her.

“If I have to die, I shall at least die like one of Sonjhon blood,” she said tremulously, “but even in death I would not be parted from you, my heart. If we must go, we will go together.”

I caught her to my heart, and kissed her dear lips, then gently thrust her from me.

My finger wavered over a button on the button-studded plate before me, then with a sudden resolution I pressed it. I had given the signal that was to send us dropping through the floor of cloud to whatever fate awaited us below.

CHAPTER XXIV

AN ARMAGEDDON OF THE VOID

SLOWLY the cloud-murk parted, slowly the mists lifted, and the land below stood plainly revealed in the light of the hothouse day. A land of strange things, strange colours, and strange plants, Venus, the planet I had planned to reach as the last point of my pleasure trip on my way back to Earth.

Well, I had had my wish, but not in the way I had intended. A pleasure trip had become a honeymoon, and the honeymoon might well be a voyage to death. . . .

We were flying invisible, keeping level by rapid and tricky manipulation of our gravity plates—some call them screens—for I dare not use the engines. In atmosphere they make a drone that carries a surprising distance.

Balena touched my arm. "That," he said, "should be the place, but I can't see any lights, no reflections of any sort."

"I shouldn't think we could," I told him. "Probably they've masked the camp now. They mightn't even care to run the risk of a Venerian coast-wise air craft sighting them. They want to work undisturbed until their Armada arrives. However, we've the means to uncover them."

"Arenack"—I turned to him—"any results yet?"
He was trying to get a focus on the instrument I had

called The Crystal Eye, and was finding it, perhaps because of some subtle difference in the atmosphere of Venus, a matter of difficulty. But as I addressed him, he jerked his finger back over his shoulder, gave an exclamation and went on twisting screws.

I glanced at the plaque towards which he had pointed. Something misty showed where a moment before had been only ill-defined nothingness. I fancied I saw buildings ; I looked again, and was surer. Then abruptly, as Arenack hit the right vibration in the scale, the scene sprang into light and things became plain. I saw buildings ; I saw men, the odd figures of the Mercurians, and rising gigantic over men and buildings both a mast of some sort that was a spider-web of metal trceries. At its very apex something that I would have called a mirror, had it not been egg-shaped, wobbled and spun, throwing gleams of light from it as it moved.

It was something I had never seen before, but that it was a power-station of some sort I had no doubt. I could not be sure whether it was merely a transmitting plant or something far more dangerous, but whatever it was the sooner it was obliterated the better.

I think they must have had some device that warned them of our presence, invisible though we were, for I saw some of the figures abruptly look upwards, and I could almost swear—to such a pitch was my imagination keyed—that I heard them cry out. One look from each of them, the abrupt white splash of an upturned face, then the figures disappeared inside the buildings and the egg-shaped mirror on the mast began to wobble more furiously than ever.

The very look of the thing was sinister, so much so that I jumped like a man shocked by electricity.

"Arenack, let them have the heat-ray, and stand by for the atomic jet for use at a moment's notice," I ordered.

The words had hardly left my mouth before the long yellow ray jetted from our bow projector. Some of the buildings glowed in outline for an instant, then collapsed into their own ashes. But that infernal mirror still wobbled; the mast itself seemed intact, and even as I looked a pale-blue light glowed in its centre, then suddenly shot up towards us.

Remembering our invisibility, I think they must have aimed at random, for no doubt their locators had been destroyed by our heat-ray. Nevertheless they shot amazingly straight. The deadly blue beam came so close that we felt the shock of it as it cut the air above us, then like an avenging sword it cut the arc of sky into dripping segments. The *Cosmos* staggered as though buffeted by a force titanic beyond all conception, and for an instant I thought she was going to heel over. Then I saw through our vision-plate one of our supporting ships glowing like a blue sun. The vision lasted no longer than one would take to count five; the ships seemed to lose shape, passed into a molten stream, a metallic rain that dropped upon the humid earth beneath.

"Give them the atomic gun, Arenack," I snarled. We must risk it now, take the chance of what might hap.

But I should have known I could rely on Arenack, that he knew what he was doing. A hissing sound as the water leaped out, a trembling as the disintegrating vibrations rushed to join it in mid-air, then a rushing stream of fury like the dust molecules in a beam of sunlight. The kick of the explosion flung us back,

and when we looked again there was no longer any mast or mirror or even anything that we could identify as land, only a scorched and disrupted wilderness, torn, scarred and ripped open by the heel of the atomic jet. At the cost of one of our ships we had destroyed the one known base, but now the question arose, were there any others of which we had not known? We could not say: I would not have been surprised to learn there were.

Still, since we could not scour a planet ourselves, I decided the best thing to do was head for Shangun, and warn the authorities of what they might have to expect. I gathered that they might not be altogether defenceless, and since I wished to run no unnecessary risks I decided after talking the matter over with Clinigo and Jansca that we had better start transmitting so they would know we were coming.

After being so long isolated from the rest of the Universe, Shangun went mad when the communication was once more restored, and the infection no doubt spread right round the planet. They could but believe that the menace itself had been removed for ever. Even the guarded warnings that came through did little to dampen their wild enthusiasm. In extenuation it must be remembered that though their planet was the only one so far invaded, none of the Venerians had had any encounters with the Mercurians; they possessed no first-hand knowledge of the powers wielded by the aggressors, and the only base so far located had been established at a point remote from civilisation. Indeed, until the advent of the *Cosmos* the Venerians themselves did not know such a base existed.

Yet, when we began transmitting, telling in detail the story of our efforts and how they had culminated,

even that was taken as proof that we had conquered finally. If we had not, how was it, they reasoned, that we were sailing calmly towards the capital of the confederation, victorious and unharmed?

Shangun, a city of soft twilight tones, of lights subdued and eye-entrancing after the glare of the Martian red lands, had for once outdone itself. It was alive with lights and flags; it was shouting joyously, the incarnate voice of a planet snatched from worse than death. The very loveliness of it, the wild abandon of its people, cut me to the quick. How could we convince such ones that this was no conclusive victory, merely a skirmish by the way, with the red, riper scenes of carnage yet to come? Clinigo was our last hope. If he could not bring his people to a realisation of what yet still lay ahead of them no one could, and as I looked at his face I seemed to read in his eyes doubt of his own ability to do any such thing. A troubled man was Clinigo that day, torn between love of his planet and anger at the folly of the people. A pleasant bird-like people, I have said before, sweet and charming to know, but broken reeds on which to lean in a crisis. Yet the end showed how little one can judge another's qualities until the need calls them into action.

We dropped the *Cosmos* until she floated a hundred feet above the ground and let her drift gently along to the landing slips. I would not let them close the grips over her hull, however, for I had an ugly foreboding that the worst had still to come, and we might yet have to rise at a moment's notice.

Clinigo descended, leaving the rest of us in the ship. We refused all invitations to land, nevertheless the Venerians clustered round the departure

platforms—they could not come nearer, for I would not have any gangways run out—cheered us, called to us, chattered, laughed, threw us flowers and congratulations.

It was as if fate had been thrown the gage and taken up the challenge without delay. While Clinigo was still wrangling with the local authorities, trying to convince them from his own experiences of the danger hanging over them, and finding it no easy task ; while the laughing, loving people about us were singing their delight of our presence that was going on that was presently to become manifest.

The first intimation came in a startling fashion. We had been transmitting—to where I am not quite sure—and the televox machines on the landing stage were shouting some news of the hour when of a sudden everything went still and dead. All communication stopped in mid-note, as though temporarily paralysed. Alarmed, we swung our eyes skywards.

For a time we could see nothing, only our four remaining colleagues manoeuvring against the ceiling of cloud. Then—it was as though someone had ripped the sky open with a bright steel blade—the cloud-wrack parted, and through the opening, one by one, brazenly disdaining concealment, came the eighty ships or so of what we learnt later was the Mercurian armada. They had been closer than we thought.

Glistening golden shapes, the smallest of them the size of the *Cosmos*, they slowly settled down, secure in their own overwhelming power. Had we remained inactive it is hard to say what might or might not have happened, but as always nervousness precipitated the conflict. One of our four ships, the closest to the descending host, suddenly whirled,

flashing its heat-ray as it moved. The ray landed on the nose of the foremost space-ship; there came a red glow, and almost instantly an explosion that set the air rocking. What it was I cannot say; perhaps the Mercurian ship was carrying some explosive material there; at anyrate for the second time our puny heat-ray, almost by accident it seemed, was the spark to touch off the powder and blow the ship to fragments.

It touched more than that off with a vengeance! The air-blast that set the fleet rocking had hardly died away; the fragments of the broken craft were still falling even when its fellows, like hawks suddenly disturbed, wheeled and almost in the twinkling of an eye had formed a golden circle in the centre of which floated our supporting guard-ships. One moment we were dazzled by that whirling circle of gold, the next the whole visible round of the cloud-wrapped sky had turned that unearthly electric blue, and the very heavens seemed to be raining molten metal on us.

The instant the first blue ray leaped out I had swung over the levers that sealed our hull, almost in the same motion I pushed the button that rang the control-room to activity. We rose so quickly that we were nearly swung off our feet, and Jansca was thrown against me heavily. I caught her to save her from plunging to the floor. . . .

I have often wondered since if that action was the means of our salvation. The roof above us seemed to split asunder, a searing blue ray passed so close to us that we could feel the thrill and shock of it, and then somehow we seemed to be tipped out into free air, and to be dropping, dropping. Jansca I still held close to me, and it was that that saved her life I really believe.

Coming out of the void we had laid aside our space-suits, but I had donned instead my service uniform—put it down to that same uneasy feeling that would not permit the *Cosmos* to be made fast—and tucked in a roll at the back of the collar was that tiny, light yet strong parachute that every Guard wears as a matter of course when manoeuvring in the air. Its weight does not incommode one, for it weighs little more than a silk pocket handkerchief, but it is built of material that will take the strain of a normal man without ripping.

As we dropped I felt the tug about my waist as the light cords tightened, and we floated instead of falling. We landed in a tumbled heap, the breath shaken out of our bodies, and for a space we did not move. At last I struggled to my feet, found my knife in its sheath and cut the cords away. Jansca lay very still on the ground, and a wild fear that she was dead seized on me. But she moved, took a deep breath, and :

“Dear God, you’re safe !” she gasped.

“But you . . . are you hurt ?”

She shook her head. “No, only had the breath knocked out of me. But what happened . . . ?”

I could not say. I could only look about me. The *Cosmos* lay some distance away from us, all that was left of her. Her rear half had been fused so that it must have run like molten butter, and her forward part had pitched down nose first and now lay half buried in the soft soil. Fumes and smoke rose from it.

We had fallen some distance outside the city, but our fall had been marked, and now people came running to our assistance. With their help we searched, sick at heart, knowing from the beginning that we would find no living soul amongst the wreckage. By some

unaccountable working of the laws of chance we had been standing in the one spot in the ship that spelt safety. A foot one way and the ray would have fused us, a foot the other and we would have been tumbled into the shattered forward part, and been incinerated with the others. As it was, when the two halves separated, we were tumbled out into the air in the same way that a housewife will crack an egg-shell and tumble its contents into the pan. What miracle, what blind working of fate it was that threw us clear of the blazing forward end I cannot say even to this day.

Sick and weary, trembling with the horror of it all, we stood and looked at each other, our faces wan and ghastly in the light of destruction. High above us the golden fleet of the Mercurian invaders still wheeled and dipped, but now the blue rays were sweeping over Shangun, and that city of wonder and beauty was dissolving like ice in the sunlight.

Soon, if this went on, there would be nowhere in the whole round of the planet where a man could lie with his roof above his head and know the night would bring him rest and peace, or the dawn the pleasures of a new day.

CHAPTER XXV

A D A S T R A

THE little group of people—ourselves and the Venerians who had run to our aid—remained staring like men frozen. The stupendous malignity of it all had temporarily paralysed us, and left us without power of speech or movement. We could only stand gazing in awe-struck horror, with eyes round with apprehension, at each other's blue-lit faces and the scene of stormy devastation beyond.

How long we stood thus I cannot say. It was probably no more than a matter of seconds, though it seemed ages. The ruin of the *Cosmos* close by to us was still glowing and the vegetation it had crushed in its fall smoked fitfully. A red-hot girder from the shell rested across the trunk of one of those enormous tree ferns that are such a prominent feature of the Venerian landscape. The soggy mass of the bole resisted for a time the passage of the girder as the bursts of steam eloquently witnessed. But presently the heat of the metal forced it through the trunk and it fell with a clang on another girder, already prone upon the ground.

The clatter roused me. It seemed, too, to have released the shackles from the others. A babble of voices came to us. Most of what was said, being in Venerian, was unintelligible to us, but presently I found a man who could speak Earth English—he

had made one or two trips to our planet—and through him I was able to communicate.

The salvation of our little group was for the moment the thought uppermost in my mind. Cosmic destinies could wait until later. For a time we were out of the arena, through no fault of our own, and in the meanwhile it remained to be seen how we could best keep life in us.

How extensive the damage done in Shangun was we could not say, but Jansca and I and our Venerian friend—Gallivog, he said his name was—all agreed that we would only diminish our chances by making for there. The populated centres were almost certain to be dealt with first by the Mercurian armada.

But back of the city was a fern jungle, trees as thick round as six earth feet, and it was possible that in its depths we might find food and shelter of a sort. I learnt from our guide that vegetable life was prolific on the planet, and only the constant vigilance of the Venerians kept it from inundating their towns and cities. Abandoned sites, indeed, had been known to disappear completely beneath a profusion of tropical growths in as short a period as three months.

Well, there was nothing for it but to take refuge in the jungle depths, and trust to the fates to find a way out for us. The Venerians themselves were more or less at home here, but Jansca, and I to a lesser extent, found the climate terribly trying. She was used to dry air and the warm plains of Mars, and this dank, dripping heat sapped her vitality to an incredible degree. Fortunately we each carried our own private supply of Oxcta, otherwise I don't think we would have lived through it.

Most of the vegetable growths were edible, and we

did not want for water, but what we missed most was flesh meats. True, most of the pools and lakes we came across were swarming with fish, but they were of a kind alien to us. The Venerians seemed to relish them, but somehow we could never adjust our palates to them.

The days crawled by. We managed to build a shelter of sorts in the jungle, and once that was erected Jansca showed signs of improvement, though she never quite became her old self. And all the time, day and night, the Mercurian flyers passed to and fro overhead, the sky dripping with the light of that blue ray of theirs. They no longer troubled to conceal themselves. With a brazen impudence they flew openly, satisfied they had the planet at their mercy. I had an idea, though I could not be sure, that they were looking for fugitives, perhaps searching for some hidden arsenal in the jungle fastnesses, but if so they never troubled us.

From the moment we had first decided what we were to do I had put the little group under discipline; Jansca, Gallivog and I had organised the camp and apportioned to each one the work that he or she must do, and I think it was partly due to this strictness of mine and partly to the way we camouflaged the camp that we were left so long undisturbed. One day Gallivog went on a scouting expedition to Shangun. When he returned he reported that many of the buildings were still standing intact, but the Mercurians seemed to have landed, and were beginning to occupy the place. Such Venerians as had remained in the city and escaped with their lives were being mustered and put to slave tasks for their masters.

His report, however, gave me an idea. I did not

think it likely that the invaders had yet found it practicable to conduct a house-to-house search, and acting on that presumption I assumed the possibility that there might be weapons or food or other useful articles about that we would do well to acquire. I would have gone myself, but I knew nothing of the layout of the city, and so quite likely I might easily blunder and bring down the attention of the invaders on us. Gallivog and a couple of his friends, however, volunteered for the job as soon as I mentioned the matter to them, and knowing they were more likely to be successful I cheerfully gave them permission to go.

I was glad afterwards that I did. They brought back quite a number of things that were useful, ray-tubes and charges for them, compressed foods and tinned liquids that could be warmed up mechanically. Gallivog, in a moment of acquisitiveness, had taken possession of a portable communicator set he had found.

That, on the face of it, was the least useful of anything. It had only a local range; its impulses would not penetrate beyond the planet's atmospheric envelope, and even if they would we dare not take the risk of broadcasting signals through space. The Mercurians would almost certainly locate their source and through them us, to our undoing. We could only use the instrument in safety if a ship chanced to be passing overhead and we could swing a directional beam straight on her. Yet, if I had but known it, Gallivog's apparent foolishness was to prove invaluable to us.

For some days now we had seen nothing of the Mercurian ships, though we knew parties had landed, and were even now in Shangun. The ships themselves,

I had no doubt, had drawn off to a base somewhere on the planet and were probably refitting. I was beginning to wonder just how much longer we could hold out before sickness and, sooner or later, the lack of proper food and comfort began to thin out our little party when the thing itself happened.

. . . A thin thread of a whisper brought me out of sleep, a voice close to my ear. For the moment I thought it was Jansca speaking to me, the next instant I changed my mind. It was her voice without a doubt, but it was not me she was addressing.

"Ship of Earth," she was murmuring. "We are here in the jungle, Jansca Sanders, who is speaking, and her mate, the sole survivors of the Earth-ship *Cosmos*, brought down by the Mercurian invaders."

The wild thought hit me like a blow between the eyes. The jungle fever I had dreaded had got its hold on my mate. She was dreaming . . . delirious. Jansca delirious, the first stage in that awful Venerian jungle fever to which we Outlanders—Martians and Earth-men—seem peculiarly susceptible and for which we have not as yet found any cure! The horror of it, piled on the other horrors we had already undergone, brought me wideawake.

I reached out my hand. Jansca should have been beside me, within touch, but I struck only empty air. She had moved, was wandering not only in mind, but in body. The second dangerous stage. Stay!

Her voice went on. "Do not answer. You will only betray your presence. But our directional beam shows you exactly overhead, high in the clouds. I caught one glimpse of you, the steel ship of Earth, so different from the golden ones of the invader. Can you rescue us? I shall cut out now and soon flash

a light from our position, that you may know exactly where we are."

I saw her now, a dim shape kneeling before something in the far corner of our rude shelter. I strode across to her and caught her by the shoulder. She gave a little cry that choked off as she realised it was only I.

"Jansca," I said in a quick whisper, "whatever are you doing?" I still fancied that her delirium might have created wild fancies in her brain; her face in the dim light as she swung round to look at me served only to strengthen this opinion.

Her answer was a woman's; yes, this girl of another world differed little from the rest of her sex, whatever planet they come from. She dropped her head on my shoulder and began to cry softly.

"I—I can't believe it even now," she sobbed.

"Can't believe what?" I demanded, almost roughly.

"That I looked out the door . . . stared up to the sky, and saw a ship, an Earth-ship, just showing through a break in the cloud ceiling."

"An Earth-ship? If you saw such a thing, what makes you so sure it wasn't a Mercurian craft?"

"The colour . . . the polish of cobalt steel . . . the lines of an Earth Guard-ship."

"You're mad, dreaming. . . . The fever."

"No. No. Dear one, it may have been a dream that woke me, that prompted me to creep from your side and look out the door, but what I saw was no vision, though it last only the tenth of a second perhaps."

There was that in her manner which convinced even me, galvanised me into action.

"You took a fearful risk," I said. "But never

mind that now. Wake the others . . . quickly. I'll signal."

"But the light, Jack?"

"My ray tube. If I discharge it into the ground it will give flash enough for them to see . . . if they are watching."

"God pray they are, that my message reached them. I trained the communicator beam directly overhead, just where I imagined the ship to be. I made it selective. It might have missed them."

"We'll know that soon enough. Hurry now."

She turned into the next shelter, which was really a separate compartment of ours. I took the ray tube from my torn and muddy jacket, turned it on the ground at such an angle that the discharge would splash a safe distance away. I pressed the button.

There came a blinding flash of light, and I heard the hiss of steam as the ray struck and volatised the water content of some soggy Venerian plant.

For the space of a heart-beat nothing happened. Then abruptly it seemed to me that the clouds overhead were a little thicker than they were a minute ago. A second later and I knew it was not a cloud I saw but the dim bulk of a space-ship dropping straight as a plummet towards us.

She came to rest on an even keel a stone's throw away; lights suddenly flooded from her, and a port was thrown hastily open. A voice called, "Quick, whoever you are! We must make altitude at once."

I bundled Jansca and the others in unceremoniously. The port closed behind me with a clang, and I was nearly thrown off my feet by the rapid acceleration of the ship's rise. For a space I could not speak, could

do nothing but gasp and blink in the unaccustomed light.

Out of the dazzling glare came a hand seeking mine, and a voice that cried, "Wonder of wonders, to think it's you I've pulled off, Jack, old man."

Miracle of miracles! The voice, that of Glenn Vance, my relief! The ship, my own Guard-ship, the old *E.22*! I think I could have cried with joy at that instant, instead I gulped; then:

"But how the devil did you get here?" I asked.

"Harran's orders, Jack. That man must have worked like the devil. He called in every available Earth Guard-ship, made us junction just beyond the Moon and sent out a supply fleet to intercept us there. We fitted out and mounted our weapons as we came along. There's not an Earth Guard-ship left between Earth and Mars, and half the Martian fleet is only an hour or so behind us. The rest's following with Tambard. We've orders to clean up this mess, no matter what the cost. Oh, but you're the man we want, the one who can tell us everything. The one person in the worlds I'm glad to have on board."

"There's a better with me," I said. "Jansca, a Dirka once, a Sanders now."

He flung a merry smile at Jansca. "Better and better," he cried. "Now . . . what?"

"You'll have to look out for the Mercurians," I said, and told him as briefly as I could of the weapons he'd have to face. By the end—he and I and Jansca were in the power-room then—he turned a grave face to us.

"I didn't think it was as bad as that," he said. "Eighty ships you say they have. We've nearer two hundred, counting the Martians."

"You may swamp them by weight of numbers," I said, "providing you keep out of range of their rays. You've the atomic ray rigged? Good. What's its range?"

"We haven't tried it yet," he told me. "We——" What more he meant to say I do not know. The alarm bell from the locators cut him short, and on the heels of that came a call from the observer.

"They're awake to us," Vance cried. "We can't see them, however." He was peering at the vision-plate in front of him. "We'll simply have to trust to luck and the locators."

"Good," I said. "They can't use the ray while they have the invisibility force turned on. You've got that much on them. What about your other ships?"

He jerked a thumb towards the ceiling. "They're all right. They'll follow our lead."

Something flashed in the vision-plate, a gout of blue flame. The ship reeled, and for the moment I thought we were done for. But it must have been merely a blind shot, unless, of course, one of our ships had incautiously ventured too low.

The men in the power-room, however, must have had their orders, for I saw one of them glance swiftly down his sights, then jerk the lever of his gun back quickly.

The blue flame in the vision-plate vanished abruptly in an explosion of red-hot cosmic dust. That seemed to be a general signal to join battle. The Mercurians, confident in their superior science, came on disdaining all concealment. Our ships, though smaller, were lighter and swifter, being more easily manoeuvred in the denser atmosphere of the planet, and this to an

extent made up for their deficiencies in other directions.

One could no longer look at the vision-plate to see how things were going. It was a wild riot of hot colours that seared the eyeballs, light that crackled like a living thing and that filled the sky with terror and death. Back and forth the battle raged, a storm of blue rays and atomic jets. The ships were kicked and buffeted, and the power-room of our vessel was full of smashed and broken things.

For a time I thought the tide was turning in our favour, but gradually I began to realise with a sinking of the heart that our fleet was being forced higher and higher until we were struggling out in free space. Ever and anon one of the Guard-ships went dripping down in a torrent of blue rain, gleaming and molten, and the Mercurians grew more and more venturesome until it became evident that we were fighting a losing fight.

I felt sick with apprehension, for it looked as if all this wealth of brave ships and brave men was to be expended uselessly, the only result of the sacrifice of all our lives the providing of a vast pyrotechnic display on the verge of space.

Jansca, close to me, looked into my eyes, and I saw my fears mirrored in hers. Once again we were facing the prospect of dissolution together, and a very few minutes must see the end. A succession of miracles had saved the ship so far, but any click of the clock now the blow would fall.

Abruptly I became aware that the vortex of the battle seemed to have receded. It was dropping below us, nearer to the planet's surface. Then, too, there seemed more Guard-ships ; space was filled with them ; they were dropping like hawks out of the void.

“The Martians! the Martians are coming!” Jansca cried with a note of joy in her voice.

It was true. The Martian fleet Vance had mentioned as being a few hours in our rear had overtaken us. We were saved, and the Mercurian fleet by sheer weight of numbers was being beaten back into the mud from which we could wish it had never risen.

CHAPTER XXVI

P E N D A N T

THERE is little more to tell.

Crippled and broken, the Mercurian fleet was chased and destroyed to the last ship, and the bruised and battered planet left to recover from its wounds. Aid, offers of all sorts of help in the period of rehabilitation, poured in from Mars and Earth, and with the arrival of the rest of the fleets and the supply ships that followed in their train it was believed that there was no longer any danger to be feared from the hosts of Mercury.

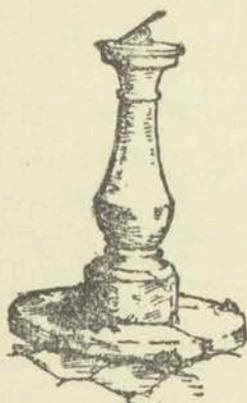
But for my own part I am not so sure. It may be that we have merely postponed the evil day, for after all the invaders seemed to be our superiors in many branches of science. The secret of their blue ray, or rather the manner in which they generated it, for instance, still eludes us. Neither have we ever learnt how men like Nomo Kell—for it is certain he was not the only spy moving about in inter-planetary circles—managed to reach our worlds and establish their citizenship there. If there were any traitors amongst our people—a thing I do not care to believe—the germ of an explanation might lie in that. Myself, I do not think that we shall ever be free from the possibility of invasion or solve these other mysteries until the day when we feel we are far enough advanced to send our own expeditions out against this world which has once threatened the security of the inner planets, and may yet do so again.

Meanwhile I have Jansca to occupy my thoughts and fill my heart to the exclusion of all else. She is the best of wives and mates, as proud of me as I am of her, though perhaps the proudest moment of our lives was when she was given her badge, and made a member of the Inter-planetary Guard with the same rank as I hold myself. She values that little silver emblem more than anything else the planets can give her. In idle mood I sometimes tell her she cares for it even more than she does for me. But that I know she does not, for has she not again and again given me ample proof of the depth of her love?

And I? Well, I have told my story, and I would rather not repeat here what the Council said of me. It was flattering, all too flattering and totally undeserved. I had little or nothing to do with bringing about that final crushing defeat of the Mercurians; anything to the contrary I deprecate and most strenuously deny as far as courtesy to my superiors and the etiquette of the Service will allow. There is no credit due to me. Of those living, the greater share should go to Jansca.

But I shall always maintain, and Jansca agrees with me to the last least letter, that the real saviours of our planets were the men who died the night the blue ray of the Mercurians sliced the *Cosmos* as a hot knife will slice through butter. Arenack, Hume and my wonderful crew of gallant Martians, I salute your shades. May the God of the Planets balance the manner of your passing against whatever faults you had in life, and bring you to that ultimate Elysium—by whatever style we care to call it—where weary heroes find rest and peace at last.

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