

PLANET STORIES



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Illustrated by MURPHY

Beer-Trust Busters

By A. R. STUART

"It's a hell of a note when one guy controls the beer situation — let's do Dudley dirty!" rang the war cry of Doc, Listless and Outhouse. And the intrepid trio went blearily about the business of dirtying Dudley—empty bottles marking their trail.

WE PULLED into the spaceport with the asteroid in tow. Platinum—20%. Very nice. We cleared our papers and sold the deposit

for a tidy sum. There was only one thing to do and we did it.

"Three beers," said Outhouse. Six feet four he was and built like one. The

bartender brought them over. None of those mechanical mixers for us like they have in the high class joints. We like human company. Maybe that's why I'm always fighting with Outhouse Murphy and Listless Lomack.

"Nice spotting on that asteroid, Doc," said Listless, downing his beer in a gulp and ordering three more, all for himself. "It's nice to have an astrophysicist in the crew. Sometimes you actually have a purpose."

"More than a third class navigator," I yipped. But I was feeling pretty good. We all were. Money in our pockets, a good ship to roam around in and the best of company. We sat around over more beer, discussing plans for a real bender of which this was only the beginning, as you might say. When we finally picked out what we wanted to do, we called for the bill.

Murphy picked it up and set it down.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Look," he commanded.

I added up the column and checked the total. Then I thought back over the number of drinks we'd had. Listless pulled out a pocket slipstick but I didn't need it.

"The price," I said in a hushed whisper, "has doubled."

Listless turned to the bartender.

"What's the idea?" he asked. The guy shrugged.

"That's the latest," he said. "I can't help it. I gotta pay more, I gotta charge more."

"Who's your supplier?" asked Outhouse.

"Drake," said the bartender.

Murphy turned to us.

"I got suspicions," he informed us. "I got to go chase 'em up. I'll be back in a little while."

Listless and I debated whether to order more. It was almost cheaper to drink hard liquor but we decided that discretion was the better part of hangover and stuck to beer.

We hung around for about an hour and finally the door was shadowed by Murphy's tremendous form. If an elephant can slide, Murphy slid onto a stool. He ordered a couple and turned to us.

"Well, boys, what do you think of the doings of Dirty Dudley?"

Listless and I looked at each other.

"Dudley D. Drake, young tycoon; embezzled from his father, sold short on his brother and now controls the beer situation."

"Oh," we said among other unprintables, "that is a fine, tender, sore spot with us, Outhouse. How come?"

"I'm not sure but from what I heard down at the alumni house it has something to do with the malting process. I think he's got a law passed or something like that. He had enough influence and he's nasty enough. In college we used to call him the 'Doctor of the Doublecross.'"

"You mean you know the punk?" I asked.

"Yeah. He tried to get my place on the wrestling team once. He dropped a table on me from the second floor." A dreamy smile played over the lips of an amused Outhouse.

"What happened?" asked Lomack.

"Oh, I caught it and threw it back up at him. Very messy. But he stayed away from me after that. I haven't seen him in six or seven years. And now he starts treading on my toes again. To say nothing of you two souses. I think it's time to renew an old acquaintance. Let's go."

WE FOLLOWED him out into the street and caught a 'copter to the Drake building. A beautiful job in steelite and stone, like the Drake heart, I gathered. The stone was only for effect, the steelite held it up. We settled down on the roof, got out and paid the driver. We walked up to the reception clerk. Murphy took it from there.

"Mr. Drake is too busy to receive visitors," said the clerk at the desk. "I'm sorry."

He really was, too, when Murphy leaned over and put one big hand completely around his neck.

"Look," said Murphy, "you just call him on the viewer and tell him that Outhouse is here to finish a job on a table. He'll see us."

The clerk tried to gulp but Murphy's fingers were in the way of his epiglottis. So he nodded his head. He was released with caution but there wasn't any need for that now. The clerk picked up the dial and called Drake. Dudley's face

appeared on the screen. Dark and handsome he was like a long snake, with a little trick mustache that looked like an old time toothbrush.

"What is it?" he snapped. "You know I'm busy."

"There's something about a table, sir, and an outhouse"—the receptionist started, but Drake caught sight of Murphy's features shoved in front of the screen.

"Hello, Dudley," cooed Murphy. "Think you'll be able to see me? I wouldn't refuse if I were you." Murphy picked up that poor operator and gestured with him. "Remember the table, Dudley? You wouldn't want me to do that to this poor fellow, would you? And besides, I've got a couple of geniuses with me. We want to talk to you about beer."

Drake sat back in his chair and grinned a nasty grin.

"It's all right, Harkness," he directed. "Send them down."

The clerk lay limply back in the chair and pointed voicelessly toward a private elevator. Murphy pointed a finger at him.

"Remember, please, that I am a proper noun. When you say Outhouse, don't put 'an' in front of it." We bowed courteously and stalked off.

The elevator was waiting for us. We got in, and it slipped soundlessly down to Drake's office. He was sitting waiting for us, his elbows on the desk, hands clasped together. He didn't bother to get up when we came in. Nor even offer chairs.

"Enter one Outhouse," he said, "and two crummy friends. I am delighted."

I excite easily. I started to hop up and down. But Murphy put a hand on my shoulder and I staggered to a rest. So I decided to turn on the brain, while Outhouse handled the other stuff.

"What's the dope on this beer business?" asked Murphy.

"Pretty simple," said Drake. "There has been a law passed just recently and tucked away in the files where it will not be noticed, unless, of course, there should be a need for it. The gist of it is that all malting done on the planet must be carried on under government supervision. That means strict control of course. The purest grains, the most carefully con-

trolled processes, all that sort of thing. And if any detail is overlooked or found not satisfactory, a rather large fine is incurred. I own the larger part of the malting plants as you well know, although there are some others. They won't offer much trouble however, for you see, I am the government supervisor."

I started to swear and again Murphy reached over, this time over my mouth. Then he pointed to a recorder disc. Clever guy, Dudley. If I'd said what I was going to say he could have put me up for the rest of my life and probably would.

Drake smiled and clicked off the switch.

"Now you can say what you like," he told me. "Nice of me, isn't it?"

"We will keep the conversation on friendly terms," directed Murphy, "just in case."

"Now to get down to business. It is our intention to bust your combine. Perhaps you would like to buy us off?" We hadn't thought of it till then but it sounded like a good idea. Listless and I nodded.

Drake sneered.

"How?" he asked. "I've got the Earth covered. And the other planets haven't the necessary conditions. The cloud layers on Venus keep out most of the sunlight and Mars and the rest of the outer planets are too far away. You're welcome to try Mercury."

Sure, Mercury would be swell. It's either too hot or too cold. He had us stopped all right. But—crumbs! I was sore.

"We're starting this cold," I yipped, "but we're gonna take you over the oleos and blow you out our jets. You should have bowed low when we came in. You didn't know you were talking to a group of experts." I included Murphy and Listless grandly. I'm really the smart guy in the bunch but I didn't have to tell that to Drake. I knew I was good, that was sufficient.

Drake laughed.

"Go ahead and try," he said.

"Let's go, guys," I told them. We slammed out of the office, catching a last glimpse of Drake's nasty look as the elevator door closed. We traveled to the landing level, bade the clerk a pleasant goodbye after we pulled him out from under the desk, and hailed a 'copter.

"Big talk, Doc," sighed Listless when we were seated at a quiet little midtown bar. "But how are you going to do it?"

"I dunno," I said, "but give me time."

WE WERE taking a jog around the track. It being a nice warm sunny day, Listless had decided that what we needed was to work some of the alcohol out of our systems. I objected, but was roped in anyway. Murphy merely sniffed. With his build he was immune. However he said he needed some fresh air so he would come along and hold a timer on us. Listless protested but I said swell. That's Listless for you; "Come on, Doc. Let's run off a couple of fast miles." Sure. Until somebody comes along to check up on him. Then he starts making excuses. But the two of us dragged him along.

So here we were on the city track, along with half a dozen other undeveloped individuals, pounding around a cinder path in the park, each of us trying to breathe so the other wouldn't hear and feel the jar clear up to the occiput every time a foot came down. This must be awful on Listless' toes, I thought. He likes to wiggle 'em every time he gets in the pilot seat.

On the third lap, Murphy started yelling and swinging his arm.

"Come on, Lomack, oil your oleos. Chase him, Doc. You guys are doing time."

Listless stuck out his chest and lengthened his stride but soon came back to the old stumble. I'm built pretty light so it didn't bother me much. I just stepped up the pace with him but I didn't slow down when he did. So I was looking at the timer, my head stuck under Murphy's arm when Listless broke an imaginary tape with his nose.

"How'd we do?" he panted when he got his breath.

"Swell," Outhouse enthused. "Sixty seconds less and you'd have only been a minute over the record."

"Oh," said Lomack.

"Yeah?" I said. "Oh. And what's more, Listless, you tentacle-toed ape, I got an idea running around that track. I think, I think, I really think, that we can do Dudley dirty."

"What is it?" queried Murphy.

"I'm not saying yet," I replied. "I've got to think it over for a while and examine the holes."

"Moth holes?" said Listless.

"Nuts," said I.

"Marbles," said Outhouse. "Keep it to yourself, Doc, if you want to."

"Well," said Listless slowly, "I bet one thing. I bet whatever it is, I gotta navigate."

"You not only gotta navigate," I replied, "you gotta navigate *well*."

"Now listen—"

"Now listen, nothing," I screeched. "Not only will this bust up Dear Old Dudley's beer combine but it will also be a wonderful, beautiful, perfect demonstration of—"

"Of what?" asked Outhouse enticingly.

"Never mind," I said cunningly, "we'll let that take care of itself when the time comes."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," said Listless, who got his name because he's lazy, though *he* says it's because he can hold his liquor, "he's got another half throttled idea which means I'll be back to work at the old slip-stick."

"That's the trouble with you, Listless," I said haughtily. "You're limited to the depth of an astroplex navigator. Now take the thoughts of a real scientist." Here I strutted a bit. "You never could understand anything deeper than *Arctic Nights*. But a brain—like me—" I added modestly. "People will stand and point in awe when—"

"The model scientist," sneered Lomack, "meaning of course, a small imitation of the real thing."

I let out a howl and went for him. We were all set for a nice scrap when Murphy broke it up.

"Now," he said, "if you two specimens of would-be manhood are going to shower and dress, get to it. I gotta date."

"Glass, bottle or demijohn?" I asked from my tangled position. He stalked off. Then I untangled Listless' fingers from my hair and unwrapped his legs from around my middle, thus taking the pressure off him and letting him up. He took his teeth from around my forefinger and admitted that I had him licked. That's

one thing I like about Lomack; when he's beaten he admits it.

I MADE a nifty little jog to the locker room while Listless limped along behind. We showered, got our loafer suits out of the lockers, and feeling pretty swell, sauntered out into a soft evening.

"Boy," breathed Listless, "taking a deep breath as though he hadn't had enough on the track, "this is lovely. Let's go find Murphy."

Which meant a bender of course. For, as I have mentioned, Murphy is a man with all the physical capabilities of a three-year-old gorilla on a hashish jag. And if you wonder at the strange figures of speech we sometimes use, it is because Murphy was once an archaeologist who taught languages and made a side line specialty of ancient idioms. Until he got tired of teaching college boys and associating with professors. He was always hurting someone in wrestling, boxing or social intercourse so he finally dropped the whole business and went on a tear. Lomack and I picked him up in a low orbit space dive. He found us not repugnant and we rather enjoyed his finesse in a fight so we stuck together. When he wasn't off on a bat.

"Where to?" I asked.

"You know better than that," I was admonished. "You mean where first."

"Just plain *where* is even better," I concluded.

He took from his pocket a bunch of those little plastic souvenirs they put on bottles—he had plenty of opportunity to swipe them—and picked out five with the names of bars on them.

"I'll toss 'em up," he explained, "and you grab one when they come down. That'll be a starter."

So in the soft, yellowish red rays of a late and tired sun I watched while he turned three times to the west, went through the motions of blowing a beer head and tossed up his hand. The light tinkled quietly on the crystal clear figures as they soared lazily upward against a darkening blue. Spinning and tumbling they reached the zenith of flight and slowly gained velocity as they returned to the mother of all—but I wax poetic. I reached out my hand and snatched one.

"*Benny's Barometric Beer*," it read.

"I remember that joint," mused Listless. "They adjust the gas pressure to equal outside pressure. Result—no burp."

"Even in thunderstorms?" I asked.

"Automatic pressure regulator."

So we went to Benny's. That's a nice quiet place downtown. As a rule, we don't go for the rainbow palaces and throne rooms that cater to the more exclusive and less interesting trade. All they ever have is acrobatic dancing at quarter gravity and stuff that Murphy could do at 3g's without straining anyone but me. And besides, with Dudley in control, the beer in those places would probably cost us half a credit. So we went to *Benny's* and Murphy wasn't there. Then we went to the *Sun Spot* and the only thing we recognized was the rise in price. We hit three or four more places but they were all modernized—no Outhouse. I was beginning to get sore about the rise in the cost of living. And Listless didn't seem to know what it was all about. After the fourth joint he started to argue with the bartenders. Which didn't do a bit of good because in those particular places, the bartenders were automatics. Finally we sallied into the *Solar Spin Club* and walked, stalked or clambered up to the bar. The regular customers walked, Listless stalked and I clambered.

THE CLUB was a pretty good bet because it has an old-fashioned bar in the rear for those who like to tell their trouble to a bartender who is deaf. Nobody knew that except a couple of us. Next to the bar were some tables. At one of these sat Brother Dudley and a couple of friends. Looking very disconsolate. Standing at the less brightly lit end of the bar were three lovely ladies laughing hysterically at one, broad Outhouse.

"He's telling dirty jokes again," I sniffed.

"Sometimes," sighed Listless, "I wish I had studied the more cultural subjects. It helps."

"Helps what?" I demanded. "Anybody can do Drake. And anyway, you never met anyone who could appreciate them."

He started to grin in a nasty way.

"Present company excepted," I yiped. "You know what I mean. Don't try to get high-handed with me, you swizzle. I'm over your head like a Heaviside Layer." Then I calmed down.

"This isn't going to make Dudley feel any too friendly toward us," mused Listless, giving the three solos at the table the once-over.

"Look at him," I said. "He doesn't feel good to anybody, ever. We should worry."

"Two beers," I ordered, ruefully



counting out the exorbitant amount I had learned was necessary. Drake seemed to brighten a little at that. Going right out of our pockets into his, the bum.

We stoked our holds in a hurry, ordered a couple more and gave Outhouse the high sign.

He started toward us and the bevy of beauties followed along automatically. Reminded me of a barnyard.

"Hi, folks," he greeted us. "Look what I got it." The three girls giggled. Drake and his buddies sat and brooded. I kept an eye on them just to see when things got started. Listless was aware of them

too, 'cause I saw him tenderly feel his hip pocket for his applicator. That's what he called it. But Murphy had told him about that gadget. He said it was called a brass knuckle in the old days. Listless of course, had to be high-toned and make it out of plastic on his little press.

The more we talked and laughed and the noisier we got, the glummer the other three became. I guess they wanted silence. Finally they looked at each other. I gave Murphy the nudge.

"Routine Three," I whispered. I loved that one. And we weren't feeling too frisky yet. Not that we wanted to avoid a fight, you understand, but we had two more days of healthy drinking to do if we wanted to preserve our record. Murphy nodded his agreement to my suggestion and I strolled over to the slot machine control and put a coin in the smoothest, dreamiest, slowest dance number I could pick out. The music controlled the gravity strength of the floor, and with that piece I knew there wouldn't be enough field to flatten a quart of quicksilver. Outhouse carefully detached his arm from where it was, made sure there was plenty of room then turned and thumbed his nose at the boys. They snarled and jumped for him.

Tsk, tsk, I thought, is that what Dudley learned in college? For Murphy bent his knees, stretched out his arms and gathered them in. In two steps he made the dance floor and tossed them gently up over it. While they scrambled and twisted, weightlessly, trying to get down, we grabbed the three girls. All of us charged through the door and into a 'copter.

"Now where?" asked Lomack after we had lost ourselves in a traffic level.

"Any place where we can test Drake's products," I told him. "Then the next time we meet him we'll really have something to yell about."

"C'MON, DOC. Wake up! Something's happened."

"Hrrmph, brrrp, splat, phtooey," I replied as intelligibly as was possible under the circumstances. I opened my eyes and couldn't see a thing.

"Snap out of it. Hurry up." It was Listless' voice whispering through the darkness.

I groped around and found a light switch. I pushed it. There was a tremendous flash as the world disintegrated. I jumped up, banged my head against something and flopped back half dead. I heard Lomack laughing fit to kill. The ape. The lights went on. He was doubled over alongside my berth back in the ship. I looked at the light fixture. He'd taken out the regular element and substituted a flash lamp.

"Very funny," I moaned, rubbing my head where I had hit it against the upper bunk. "Lucky you didn't blind me for life." I slipped back under the covers, turned over and was all set for another snooze when I remembered. I sat up in a hurry.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Two days later," said Listless. I relaxed. We were O. K. then. I was afraid for a moment that we had gone soft. But two days isn't so bad. That's a lot of beer and, I shivered, a hell of a lot of credits.

I staggered out of the berth, put on some clothes and went to the galley. Murphy was still eating. I reached for the bacon. No pills for us, not while they still grow pigs. There was silence while we shoveled it in. After the second cup of coffee, I sat back and gave forth with a big sigh.

"Now," I said, "it is time to consider more serious things."

"Like Dirty Dudley," put in Listless.

"My old college chum," remarked Out-house.

"And the idea you had in the park the other day," added Lomack.

"What is it?" asked Listless. "A new theory that will set the astrologers back on their ears?"

"No," I replied. "It's not a new theory. It's an old and accepted one. But nobody ever thought of testing it out. That's what I want to do. And in testing it we will beat the beer combine at their own game. This will get us much praise from the thinking population as well as all good beer drinkers."

"He means the Society of Astrophysicists," said Murphy. He turned to me. "You and that bunch. You're dead and don't know it."

"Yeah," said Listless, "moping around

a bunch of archives in dusty old halls. You oughta go there and bury yourself, Doc."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up," I yelled. To think of a grown man like me acting that way. Sometimes I get disgusted with myself. But not in this bunch. They always beat me to it.

"Lemme talk." I outlined the details of the plan without giving away the fundamental idea. When I had finished, Listless leaned back and groaned.

"I knew it," he said. "I gotta make five hauling trips before I even get started figuring orbits. Whenever you have an idea, Doc, it's just one load after another. And what are you going to do with them after you get them set up out there?"

"I'll tell you when we're ready," I said. "And don't worry about the orbits. I'll figure those. I couldn't trust you with such a delicate task."

"I always knew you went around in circles, Doc," complained Murphy, "but this is the first time I ever saw it come out literally."

"Not circles, you culture hound, ellipses as any student would know."

"And what, may I ask again, is the purpose of this little venture?" Lomack was trying to be funny.

"In addition to dishing Dudley," I replied calmly, "I'm going to demonstrate that Einstein was right."

As we walked past the striped side of the ship to set out for supplies I glanced at the bow. We were in! Childishly printed, showing that one of us had been blotto, I read: "*Beerbuster*," sprawled on the bow plate. The previous name, "*Zebra*," the remnant of a five-day drunk, had been obliterated by the simple process of smearing catsup on it. The ship was all ready to go.

So were we.

WE WERE out in free space beyond Pluto's orbit towing a third load of asteroids; four big, juicy ones, taking them to the empty region we'd picked for the job. I was doing the piloting, pretty routine once the course was picked. Listless was back in the store room checking over the equipment we had picked up on this trip and, incidentally, giving his toes a rest. He twiddles his lowest extremities

so much when he pilots that after a while he gets cramps and has to quit. Wears hell out of his socks that way. I heard him yell as he stubbed one of his darlings against a plate. We had half a dozen plates back there with specially designed foundations. They were to go on the asteroids and Listless had figured out an embedding foundation to fasten the plates to the rocky surfaces we had to deal with. We'd left Murphy out with the fifteen we'd already carted. Which might sound dangerous to Murphy, but in spite of what I say, Listless is a mighty good navigator and can find a comet in a dark nebula if he wants to.

We came up to the cluster and spotted Murphy soaring about with a plate in one hand. He saw us and tried to wave the plate but only succeeded in wiggling himself. Those big plates, with disintegration chambers attached have plenty of inertia.

Two of the rocks on which he had completed the job were separated. I surrendered the controls to Lomack who swung the ship around and sent the four we were towing swinging toward the rest of the pile. Then he jumped the ship at the right moment and they came to a stop not twenty feet from the others. Nice shooting, I thought, although I wouldn't admit it. Murphy came across to the ship and we started unloading the plates.

The machinists had done a beautiful job. To standard plates they had added the fuel chamber and encased the whole in a shell of steelite. From this shell projected the adjustable pincer clamps which would dig into the solid rock and set immovably, making a rigid base for operations. They were full-sized, liner plates and we estimated three to an asteroid in a tripod formation which would give any orbit I was likely to want.

We tied them in a convenient hollow and went on an inspection trip to see how Murphy had made out with his installations. Listless checked angles and tested foundations.

"Looks O. K., Doc," he commented. "Think you have enough mass?"

I counted. Nineteen.

"Let's make it an even twenty," I decided. "We can tie the rest of the plates on in back and we won't have to load and

unload. You go back and get them while Murphy and I fix up a couple more."

Listless hopped back to the ship and beat it for the asteroid belt. I set out with Murphy, two plates and a hand excavator. We picked out spots, bored holes for the pincers, set the points and exploded the charges that drove them home. I stepped back to look it over. It was a nice idea. Space ships to order in any conceivable size. And these little babies were going to nip Dudley right where the hair was short. We made several more trips to the stock pile and stopped once for a rest and sleep before the ship came back.

Murphy called my attention to it.

"He's coming in," he said over the space phone. I turned to look. The *Beerbuster* was starting her spin. Suddenly Murphy grabbed me.

"Out of the way," he yelled. "That slipstick expert miscalculated his stop."

I stood and stared at the load of plates aimed straight at my head. Outhouse threw me one way and jumped the other. But the bundle came to a stop about twenty-five feet over us.

THE AIR LOCK opened and Lomack stepped out, a big grin on his face. He jumped toward us with the tie line in his hand. I picked up my excavator by the wrong end and started for him.

"You did that on purpose, you undernourished breakfast," I gritted, diving for him. He stepped out of my way and I landed on a sharp-edged rock with a very tender part of my anatomy.

"Hold it, Doc, until you see what I brought back." He made the ship fast and ducked back in the air lock. He came out with a case.

"Here y'are, Doc. Catch." The box sailed through space into my waiting arms. I caught the Drake label on the side.

"And there are five more like it in the stock room."

"Well," I hesitated. "In that case, I'll excuse you," I told him. I tossed it back and jumped after it. Murphy followed. He could smell beer through that helmet. We took off our suits and had a good stretch. Then we opened up. Lovely, lovely bottles. But not half so good as

our beer was going to be we told each other.

"I thought you boys would like a little refreshment," Listless expanded under our praise. "But I didn't want to interfere with work so I held it down to half a dozen."

We went through the first two and then Outhouse and I had a good sleep in the ship's bunks while Lomack went out to look around and fiddle a bit. When we woke up we felt like a million, and it wasn't long before the three of us had the rest of the plates installed and ready to run.

We turned in for a final nap before the big day.

I woke up as nervous as a Martian juju. This was it. Listless was sitting at the control box, when I came in from breakfast, fingers ready to press the buttons tied into the plate chambers. Murphy was running around the ship putting up filters over observation ports at my suggestion. They still didn't have an inkling of what I was shooting at.

"O. K.," I choked. "Let 'er go."

Listless pressed the main contact. The box warmed up with a steadily rising hum. The little lights blinked on and the main panel showed the location of each asteroid. I read the figures off to him and his fingers ran over the board more nervously than his toes would ever go. The dots of light on the indicator panel started slowly in motion. They built up speed, flashing faster and faster around the two focal points I had calculated.

"Take an observation," I told Murphy, sweating.

He shot a glance out of the bow port, filter in his hand, ready to slap it on.

"No stuff yet," he reported.

The asteroids were revolving dizzily now.

Suddenly a tremor passed through the ship.

"There she goes!" I screamed. Murphy's eyes bugged out against the transparent plate.

"There's something out there, Doc," he yelled. "Light by all that's uncontrollable. It's getting bigger. And brighter!" Lomack was still madly balancing the orbits, speeding up the asteroids like rocks on strings. A burst of brilliance came

streaming through the forward observation. Murphy put up the filter.

I sat back with a breath of deep, deep relief.

"There you are, boys," I wheezed. "One sun as per specification. Completely under control. Lomack, if your fingers were fast enough we could use it for a blinker. All you have to do is control the speeds the right way."

LISTLESS had established equilibrium by now, and threw over the box to automatic. He went back to the store room and brought out the last case. We sat down and drank to my health. Several times. And to my brain. Often.

"How'd you figure it?" asked Murphy when the back pounding was over.

"Boys," I said in a superior tone, "it's really very simple." Murphy threw the opener at me, so I got down to business.

"You both know the rudiments of Einstein, don't you?" I asked. They nodded in agreement.

"Well, you know the theory of space, warp. Not the way the plates work but the fundamental proposition. Gravity does not exist as such. I mean there is no actual attraction between the sun and the planets. The sun is of such tremendous mass that it warps space elliptically around it in such a way that any body of a given mass and speed just has to travel a certain way. Instead of speaking of orbits, you might say, that, like marbles, the planets fall into certain grooves and there they stay."

I stopped for a long one.

"As I was saying, I thought that if the sun establishes grooves for the planets to travel in, what would happen if we establish the grooves by means of planets without a sun? Why, it follows as the noon the morning that with the conditions just right, a sun would have to come into existence. When we started those asteroids whizzing around we created a sort of 'mass vacuum' in the center, and mass just had to rush in to fill it. Or maybe it isn't even mass; just energy with an apparent mass due to an apparent attraction. Anyway, there's your sun. We can sell lots. We go to the boys and ask them how big a plant they want to build, government supervision doesn't hold in

free space you know, so we can go in, snag an asteroid of the right size and set it up in a slow orbit around our little power plant. Charges will be reasonable but sufficient. And all the free beer we want."

Listless belched hopefully.

"That's very important," put in Murphy.

"You win the brass plated bus bar, Doc," conceded Listless. "But, oh boy, if it hadn't worked."

"The thing to do now," said the ever-practical Murphy, "is to set up a couple of choice locations. Listless, how about hopping back to the Belt and picking up a nice, big, round rock to set up the first plant on?"

"It's okay with me," Listless agreed.

"I don't like to leave the set up yet," I protested. "I'm not sure of the equilibrium point. Let's take that control out to One and set it up there. Murphy and I will stick there and keep our eyes on the system until you get back. I can handle any slight variables that may show up."

So we put up a dome on the first planetoid and moved the control equipment into it. With enough food and an air supply to last a couple of days, we decided that Listless could head straight for Earth and see if he could interest one of the lesser brewers in our plan.

After Listless had gone, Murphy and I sat around lazily, telling each other what we would do after we got the beer industry running smoothly. We pattered around with our minds, taking an occasional glance at the new sun, dropping off for a cat nap when we felt like it. I was in the middle of one of those when Murphy woke me up shaking my shoulder.

"Huh?" I said sleepily.

"Get up, Doc, there's a ship coming in." I rubbed my eyes and gazed out through the dome port. It wasn't the *Buster*. There were no stripes on it. And this ship had different lines.

It seemed to be searching for something. Stopping here and there among the whirling planetoids, like a huge shark smelling for game, the pilot must have spotted the gleam of our dome, for suddenly he headed right for us.

I JUMPED into my spacealls just ahead of Murphy. We didn't know who it was, but I had a darned good idea. Something told me that our long delayed visit from Drake was about to arrive.

The ship pulled in close to headquarters, the lock opened and three figures appeared. Hooking in their lines they sailed over to us.

As they came closer I could make out Dudley's handsome features. With an expression on them I didn't like. The other two just looked familiar.

"Hello, Outhouse," he sneered. "You too, genius. I must admit you did it. It's really too bad that your sun isn't stable, isn't it?"

I started to bridle.

"Whaddayamean, not stable?" I roared. "You know damn well that I know damn well that that sun is stable as space itself."

"I said it wasn't stable, didn't I? How's a small sun like that going to stand up under the atomic bomb we're going to plant in it? Take it easy, Outhouse!"

For Murphy had started to place his feet for a spring. But he couldn't do anything against the paralyzers that suddenly appeared in the hands of Dudley's henchmen. I remembered them now. No hope in that direction. They were the two whose girls we had taken back in the *Solar Spin Club*. They must have had an interest in Drake's business 'cause I can't see knocking a guy off for stealing your girl. I guess they took that sort of thing seriously though, they got such few opportunities from the looks of them.

"Now that we have that settled, I guess we know what we can expect," said Murphy.

"That's right," said Drake silkily. "We are going to aim the bomb right at the center of your little beer plant. Where's your partner?"

We looked at each other. Then we turned back to Drake and shrugged.

"No spikka da English," we said.

Drake's voice hardened. I didn't like the sound of it.

"Where did he go? Come across or you'll be here to watch that bomb go off."

The two pleasant customers he'd brought with him didn't even bat an eye. I guess

they were pretty used to his dealings.

I was beginning to get hot. That's a habit with me. I started to jump up and down, as well as I could with no gravity for the down.

"Dirty Dudley, you dastard—" I started but that was as far as I got. He stepped forward and slapped the side of my helmet with the butt of a paralyzer he pulled out of his belt. In the close confines of the plastic casing it sounded like all the tail plates in Space Port One had dropped on me all at once. When I recovered and got up, Drake was covering Murphy carefully with the paralyzer and the other two guys were getting ready to jump back to the ship. For the bomb, I guessed. Drake turned to me.

"A couple more cracks like that and your ears won't be much good," he told me. "Better take it easy with your tongue."

I started to sputter but a glance from Outhouse silenced me. I guess he knew Drake better than I did, although I was beginning to catch up with him.

Drake cautiously started to throw his eyes around.

"Well, where is he?"

"We don't know," I popped up, sticking out my head, literally.

"I didn't ask you," said Drake, giving me a dirty look and casting a speculative eye over my helmet.

"That's the straight dope, Drake," said Murphy, backing me up. "Lomack is behind the whole thing and he wouldn't tell us what he intends to do."

"Don't kid me." Dirty Dudley was great on sneers. "You guys wouldn't put all the time and work and money in this if you didn't know what you were doing."

"Yeah, we would," said Outhouse. "That's something you wouldn't understand, Drake. We trust each other."

I thought he was going to get bad again but he only smiled.

"Go ahead," he advised, "and see where it gets you."

ALL THIS TIME I knew that Murphy was just waiting his chance to jump at Drake when suddenly the expression on his face told me that something was up. I didn't dare turn around but I shifted for comfort and managed to trip. As I picked myself up under

Drake's watchful scrutiny I cast a quick one over my shoulder. It was the *Beerbuster*, once *Zebra*, coming in with a tail of one asteroid trailing along behind. I didn't know what to do. Listless, unarmed, was going to walk right into a trap. For I wasn't too sure that Drake was going to take us off when the bomb let loose. Why should he? A nice experiment, three fine boys busted up. Don't do it again, says the government. He'd be in the clear.

But Lomack must have had his eyes peeled and his toes socked, for he shifted into an orbit instead of coming straight in.

In the meantime, Drake had spotted him, too, and had called his men on the space phone. They had the bomb all set.

"Bring that thing over here and then get back on board," yelled Drake. The two men gingerly picked up the globe and jumped daintily for us. They came to a gentle stop, set it down, and beat it hastily for the ship again. Drake called Listless.

"Hey, you space bum! This is Drake. I've got your two buddies under control down here. Leave your ship and come on in or they won't last much longer. Don't try anything funny or I'll knock them off right now."

Murphy and I listened tensely. There was silence for a moment.

"*Brrrack!*" said Listless. It was the prettiest sound.

Drake was taken aback. For the moment it took to get started he couldn't think of an adequate reply. That was all the time Listless needed. Murphy and I stood in open-mouthed admiration at what came next. I could almost see Listless' stiff toes bursting through his socks.

From traveling in a short orbit, the tail of the *Beerbuster* was standing out at right angles to the direction of flight. In a moment, Listless had flicked on the side plates, swung the ship around tail first and farther so that the asteroid followed through in a sweeping arc and headed straight for us. Drake stood in stunned astonishment; and because Drake was the brains, the two bums stood in the port of their ship and just looked. Which was their very hard luck.