

PLANET STORIES



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COSMIC YO-YO

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

"Want an asteroid in your back-yard? We supply 'em cheap. Trouble also handled without charge." Interplanetary Hauling Company. (ADVT.)

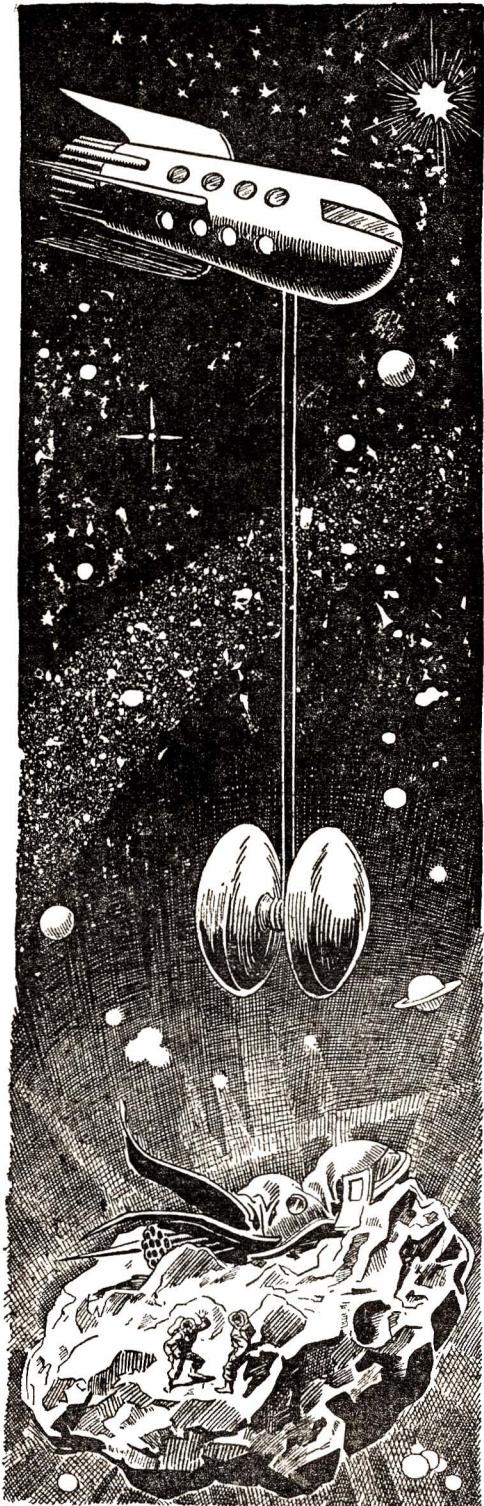


Illustration by DOOLIN

BOB PARKER, looking through the photo-amplifiers at the wedge-shaped asteroid, was plainly flabbergasted. Not in his wildest imaginings had he thought they would actually find what they were looking for.

"Cut the drive!" he yelled at Queazy. "I've got it, right on the nose. Queazy, my boy, can you imagine it? We're in the dough. Not only that, we're rich! Come here!"

Queazy discharged their tremendous inertia into the motive-tubes in such a manner that the big, powerful ship was moving at the same rate as the asteroid below—47.05 miles per second. He came slogging back excitedly, put his eyes to the eyepiece. He gasped, and his big body shook with joyful ejaculations.

"She checks down to the last dimension," Bob chortled, working with slide-rule and logarithm tables. "Now all we have to do is find out if she's made of tungsten, iron, quartz crystals, and cinnabar! But there couldn't be two asteroids of that shape anywhere else in the Belt, so this has to be it!"

He jerked a badly crumpled ethergram from his pocket, smoothed it out, and thumbed his nose at the signature.

"Whee! Mr. Andrew S. Burnside, you owe us five hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

Queazy straightened. A slow, likeable smile wreathed his tanned face. "Better take it easy," he advised, "until I land the ship and we use the atomic whirl spectroscope to determine the composition of the asteroid."

"Have it your way," Bob Parker sang, happily. He threw the ethergram to the winds and it fell gently to the deck-plates.

While Queazy—so called because his full name was Quentin Zuyler—dropped the ship straight down to the smooth surface of the asteroid, and clamped it tight with magnetic grapples, Bob flung open the lazarette, brought out two space-suits. Moments later, they were outside the ship, with star-powdered infinity spread to all sides.

In the ship, the ethergram from Andrew S. Burnside, of Philadelphia, one of the richest men in the world, still lay on the deck-plates. It was addressed to: Mr. Robert Parker, President Interplanetary Hauling & Moving Co., 777 Main Street, Satterfield City, Fontanaland, Mars. The ethergram read:

Received your advertising literature a week ago. Would like to state that yes I would like an asteroid in my back yard. Must meet following specifications: 506 feet length, long enough for wedding procession; 98 feet at base, tapering to 10 feet at apex; 9-12 feet thick; topside smooth-plane, underside rough-plane; composed of iron ore, tungsten, quartz crystals, and cinnabar. Must be in my back yard before 11:30 A.M. my time, for important wedding June 2, else order is void. Will pay \$5.00 per ton.

BOB PARKER had received that ethergram three weeks ago. And if The Interplanetary Hauling & Moving Co., hadn't been about to go on the rocks (chiefly due to the activities of Saylor & Saylor, a rival firm) neither Bob nor Queazy would have thought of sending an answering ethergram to Burnside stating that they would fill the order. It was, plainly, a hair-brained request. And yet, if by some chance there was such a rigidly specified asteroid, their financial worries would be over. That they had actually discovered the asteroid, using their mass-detectors in a weight-elimination process, seemed like an incredible stroke of luck. For there are literally millions of asteroids in the asteroid belt, and they had been out in space only three weeks.

The "asteroid in your back yard" idea had been Bob Parker's originally. Now it was a fad that was sweeping Earth, and Burnside wasn't the first rich man who had decided to hold a wedding on top of an asteroid. Unfortunately, other inter-

planetary moving companies had cashed in on that brainstorm, chiefly the firm of the Saylor brothers—which persons Bob Parker intended to punch in the nose some day. And would have before this if he hadn't been lanky and tall while they were giants. Now that he and Queazy had found the asteroid, they were desperate to get it to its destination, for fear that the Saylor brothers might get wind of what was going on, and try to beat them out of their profits. Which was not so far-fetched, because the firm of Saylor & Saylor made no pretense of being scrupulous.

Now they scuffed along the smooth-plane topside of the asteroid, the magnets in their shoes keeping them from stepping off into space. They came to the broad base of the asteroid-wedge, walked over the edge and "down" the twelve-foot thickness. Here they squatted, and Bob Parker happily clamped the atomic-whirl spectroscope to the rough surface. By the naked eye, they could see iron ore, quartz crystals, cinnabar, but he had the spectroscope and there was no reason why he shouldn't use it. He satisfied himself as to the exterior of the asteroid, and then sent the twin beams deep into its heart. The beams crossed, tore atoms from molecules, revolved them like an infinitely fine powder. The radiations from the sundered molecules traveled back up the beams to the atomic-whirl spectroscope. Bob watched a pointer which moved slowly up and up—past tungsten, past iridium, past gold—

Bob Parker said, in astonishment, "Hell! There's something screwy about this business. Look at that point—"

Neither he nor Queazy had the opportunity to observe the pointer any further. A cold, completely disagreeable feminine voice said,

"May I ask what you interlopers are doing on my asteroid?"

Bob started so badly that the spectroscope's settings were jarred and the lights in its interior died. Bob twisted his head around as far as he could inside the "aquarium"—the glass helmet, and found himself looking at a space-suited girl who was standing on the edge of the asteroid "below."

"Ma'am," said Bob, blinking, "did you say something?"

Queazy made a gulping sound and slowly

straightened. He automatically reached up as if he would take off his hat and twist it in his hands.

"I said," remarked the girl, "that you should scram off of my asteroid. And quit poking around at it with that spectroscope. I've already taken a reading. Cinnabar, iron ore, quartz crystals, tungsten. Goodbye."

BOB'S NOSE twitched as he adjusted his glasses, which he wore even inside his suit. He couldn't think of anything pertinent to say. He knew that he was slowly working up a blush. Mildly speaking, the girl was beautiful, and though only her carefully made-up face was visible—cool blue eyes, masterfully coiffed, upswept, glinting brown hair, wilful lips and chin—Bob suspected the rest of her compared nicely.

Her expression darkened as she saw the completely instinctive way he was looking at her and her radioed-voice rapped out, "Now you two boys go and play somewhere else! Else I'll let the Interplanetary Commission know you've infringed the law. G'bye!"

She turned and disappeared.

Bob awoke from his trance, shouted desperately, "Hey! Wait! You!"

He and Queazy caught up with her on the side of the asteroid they hadn't yet examined. It was a rough plane, completing the rigid qualifications Burnside had set down.

"Wait a minute," Bob Parker begged nervously. "I want to make some conversation, lady. I'm sure you don't understand the conditions—"

The girl turned and drew a gun from a holster. It was a spasticizer, and it was three times as big as her gloved hand.

"I understand conditions better than you do," she said. "You want to move this asteroid from its orbit and haul it back to Earth. Unfortunately, this is my home, by common law. Come back in a month. I don't expect to be here then."

"A month!" Parker burst the word out. He started to sweat, then his face became grim. He took two slow steps toward the girl. She blinked and lost her composure and unconsciously backed up two steps. About twenty steps away was her small dumbbell-shaped ship, so shiny and un-

scarred that it reflected starlight, in highlights from its curved surface. A rich girl's ship, Bob Parker thought angrily. A month would be too late!

He said grimly, "Don't worry. I don't intend to pull any rough stuff. I just want you to listen to reason. You've taken a whim to stay on an asteroid that doesn't mean anything to you one way or another. But to us—to me and Queazy here—it means our business. We got an order for this asteroid. Some screwball millionaire wants it for a backyard wedding see? We get five hundred and fifty thousand dollars for it! If we don't take this asteroid to Earth before June 2, we go back to Satterfield City and work the rest of our lives in the glass factories. Don't we, Queazy?"

Queazy said simply, "That's right, miss. We're in a spot. I assure you we didn't expect to find someone living here."

The girl holstered her spasticizer, but her completely inhospitable expression did not change. She put her hands on the bulging hips of her space-suit. "Okay," she said. "Now I understand the conditions. Now we both understand each other. G'bye again. I'm staying here and—" she smiled sweetly—"it may interest you to know that if I let you have the asteroid you'll save your business, but I'll meet a fate worse than death! So that's that."

Bob recognized finality when he saw it. "Come on, Queazy," he said fuming. "Let this brat have her way. But if I ever run across her without a space-suit on I'm going to give her the licking of her life, right where it'll do the most good!"

He turned angrily, but Queazy grabbed his arm, his mouth falling open. He pointed off into space, beyond the girl.

"What's that?" he whispered.

"What's wha—Oh!"

Bob Parker's stomach caved in. A few hundred feet away, floating gently toward the asteroid, came another ship—a ship a trifle bigger than their own. The girl turned, too. They heard her gasp. In another second, Bob was standing next to her. He turned the audio-switch to his headset off, and spoke to the girl by putting his helmet against hers.

"Listen to me, miss," he snapped earnestly, when she tried to draw away. "Don't talk by radio. That ship belongs to the

Saylor brothers! Oh, Lord, that this should happen! Somewhere along the line, we've been double-crossed. Those boys are after this asteroid too, and they won't hesitate to pull any rough stuff. We're in this together, understand? We got to back each other up."

The girl nodded dumbly. Suddenly she seemed to be frightened. "It's—it's very important that this—this asteroid stay right where it is," she said huskily. "What—what will they do?"

BOB PARKER didn't answer. The big ship had landed, and little blue sparks crackled between the hull and the asteroid as the magnetic clamps took hold. A few seconds later, the airlocks swung down, and five men let themselves down to the asteroid's surface and stood surveying the three who faced them.

The two men in the lead stood with their hands on their hips; their darkish, twin faces were grinning broadly.

"A pleasure," drawled Wally Saylor, looking at the girl. "What do you think of this situation Billy?"

"It's obvious," drawled Billy Saylor, rocking back and forth on his heels, "that Bob Parker and company have double-crossed us. We'll have to take steps."

The three men behind the Saylor twins broke into rough, chuckling laughter.

Bob Parker's gorge rose. "Scram," he said coldly. "We've got an ethergram direct from Andrew S. Burnside ordering this asteroid."

"So have we," Wally Saylor smiled—and his smile remained fixed, dangerous. He started moving forward, and the three men in back came abreast, forming a semi-circle which slowly closed in. Bob Parker gave back a step, as he saw their intentions.

"We got here first," he snapped harshly. "Try any funny stuff and we'll report you to the Interplanetary Commission!"

It was Bob Parker's misfortune that he didn't carry a weapon. Each of these men carried one or more, plainly visible. But he was thinking of the girl's spasticizer—a paralyzing weapon. He took a hair-brained chance, jerked the spasticizer from the girl's holster and yelled at Queazy. Queazy got the idea, urged his immense body into motion. He hurled straight at Billy Saylor, lifted him straight off the asteroid and

threw him away, into space. He yelled with triumph.

At the same time, the spasticizer Bob held was shot cleanly out of his hand by Wally Saylor. Bob roared, started toward Wally Saylor, knocked the smoking gun from his hand with a sweeping arm. Then something crushing seemed to hit him in the stomach, grabbing at his solar plexus. He doubled up, gurgling with agony. He fell over on his back, and his boots were wrenched loose from their magnetic grip. Vaguely, before the flickering points of light in his brain subsided to complete darkness, he heard the girl's scream of rage—then a scream of pain.

What had happened to Queazy he didn't know. He felt so horribly sick, he didn't care. Then—lights out.

BOB PARKER came to, the emptiness of remote starlight in his face. He opened his eyes. He was slowly revolving on an axis. Sometimes the Sun swept across his line of vision. A cold hammering began at the base of his skull, a sensation similar to that of being buried alive. There was no asteroid, no girl, no Queazy. He was alone in the vastness of space. Alone in a space-suit.

"Queazy!" he whispered. "Queazy! I'm running out of air!"

There was no answer from Queazy. With sick eyes, Bob studied the oxygen indicator. There was only five pounds pressure. Five pounds! That meant he had been floating around out here—how long? Days at least—maybe weeks! It was evident that somebody had given him a dose of spastic rays, enough to screw up every muscle in his body to the snapping point, putting him in such a condition of suspended animation that his oxygen needs were small. He closed his eyes, trying to fight against panic. He was glad he couldn't see any part of his body. He was probably scrawny. And he was hungry!

"I'll starve," he thought. "Or suffocate to death first!"

He couldn't keep himself from taking in great gulps of air. Minutes, then hours passed. He was breathing abnormally, and there wasn't enough air in the first place. He pleaded continually for Queazy, hoping that somehow Queazy could help, when probably Queazy was in the same condi-

tion. He ripped out wild curses directed at the Saylor brothers. Murderers, both of them! Up until this time, he had merely thought of them as business rivals. If he ever got out of this—

He groaned. He never would get out of it! After another hour, he was gasping weakly, and yellow spots danced in his eyes. He called Queazy's name once more, knowing that was the last time he would have strength to call it.

And this time the headset spoke back!

Bob Parker made a gurgling sound. A voice came again, washed with static, far away, burbling, but excited. Bob made a rattling sound in his throat. Then his eyes started to close, but he imagined that he saw a ship, shiny and small, driving toward him, growing in size against the backdrop of the Milky Way. He relapsed, a terrific buzzing in his ears.

He did not lose consciousness. He heard voices, Queazy's and the girl's, whoever she was. Somebody grabbed hold of his foot. His "aquarium" was unbuckled and good air washed over his streaming face. The sudden rush of oxygen to his brain dizzied him. Then he was lying on a bunk, and gradually the world beyond his sick body focussed in his clearing eyes and he knew he was alive—and going to stay that way, for awhile anyway.

"Thanks, Queazy," he said huskily.

Queazy was bending over him, his anxiety clearing away from his suddenly brightening face.

"Don't thank me," he whispered. "We'd have both been goners if it hadn't been for her. The Saylor brothers left her paralyzed like us, and when she woke up she was on a slow orbit around her ship. She unstrapped her holster and threw it away from her and it gave her enough reaction to reach the ship. She got inside and used the direction-finder on the telaudio and located me first. The Sailors scattered us far and wide." Queazy's broad, normally good-humored face twisted blackly. "The so-and-so's didn't care if we lived or died."

Bob saw the girl now, standing a little behind Queazy, looking down at him curiously, but unhappily. Her space-suit was off. She was wearing lightly striped blue slacks and blue silk blouse and she had a paper flower in her hair. Something in

Bob's stomach caved in as his eyes widened on her.

The girl said glumly, "I guess you men won't much care for me when you find out who I am and what I've done. I'm Starre Lowenthal—Andrew S. Burnside's granddaughter!"

BOB came slowly to his feet, and matched Queazy's slowly growing anger.

"Say that again?" he snapped. "This is some kind of dirty trick you and your grandfather cooked up?"

"No!" she exclaimed. "No. My grandfather didn't even know there was an asteroid like this. But I did, long before he ordered it from you—or from the Saylor brothers. You see—well, my granddad's about the stubbornest old hoot-owl in this universe! He's always had his way, and when people stand in his way, that's just a challenge to him. He's been badgering me for years to marry Mac, and so has Mac—"

"Who's Mac?" Queazy demanded.

"My fiancé, I guess," she said helplessly. "He's one of my granddad's protégés. Granddad's always financing some likely young man and giving him a start in life. Mac has become pretty famous for his Mercurian water-colors—he's an artist. Well, I couldn't hold out any longer. If you knew my grandfather, you'd know how absolutely *impossible* it is to go against him when he's got his mind set! I was just a mass of nerves. So I decided to trick him and I came out to the asteroid belt and picked out an asteroid that was shaped so a wedding could take place on it. I took the measurements and the composition, then I told my grandfather I'd marry Mac if the wedding was in the back yard on top of an asteroid with those measurements and made of iron ore, tungsten, and so forth. He agreed so fast he scared me, and just to make sure that if somebody *did* find the asteroid in time they wouldn't be able to get it back to Earth, I came out here and decided to live here. Asteroids up to a certain size belong to whoever happens to be on them, by common law. . . . So I had everything figured out—except," she added bitterly, "the Saylor brothers! I guess Granddad wanted to make sure the asteroid

was delivered, so he gave the order to several companies."

Bob swore under his breath. He went reeling across to a port, and was gratified to see his and Queazy's big interplanetary hauler floating only a few hundred feet away. He swung around, looked at Queazy.

"How long were we floating around out there?"

"Three weeks, according to the chronometer. The Saylor boys gave us a stiff shot."

"Ouch!" Bob groaned. Then he looked at Starre Lowenthal with determination. "Miss, pardon me if say that this deal you and your granddad cooked up is plain screwy! With us on the butt end. But I'm going to put this to you plainly. We can catch up with the Saylor brothers even if they are three weeks ahead of us. The Saylor ship and ours both travel on the HH drive—inertia-less. But the asteroid has plenty of inertia, and so they'll have to haul it down to Earth by a long, spiraling orbit. We can go direct and probably catch up with them a few hundred thousand miles this side of Earth. And we can have a fling at getting the asteroid back!"

Her eyes sparkled. "You mean—" she cried. Then her attractive face fell. "Oh," she said. "Oh! And when you get it back, you'll land it."

"That's right," Bob said grimly. "We're in business. For us, it's a matter of survival. If the by-product of delivering the asteroid is your marriage—sorry! But until we do get the asteroid back, we three can work as a team if you're willing. We'll fight the other problem out later. Okay?"

She smiled tremulously. "Okay, I guess."

Queazy looked from one to another of them. He waved his hand scornfully at Bob. "You're plain nuts," he complained. "How do you propose to go about convincing the Saylor brothers they ought to let us have the asteroid back? Remember, commercial ships aren't allowed to carry long-range weapons. And we couldn't ram the Saylor brothers' ship—not without damaging our own ship just as much. Go ahead and answer that."

Bob looked at Queazy dismally. "The old balance-wheel," he groaned at Starre. "He's always pulling me up short when I go off half-cocked. All I know is, that maybe we'll get a good idea as we go along.

In the meantime, Starre—ahem—none of us has eaten in three weeks . . .?"

Starre got the idea. She smiled dazzlingly and vanished toward the galley.

BOB PARKER was in love with Starre Lowenthal. He knew that after five days out, as the ship hurled itself at breakneck speed toward Earth; probably that distracting emotion was the real reason he couldn't attach any significance to Starre's dumbbell-shaped ship, which trailed astern, attached by a long cable.

Starre apparently knew he was in love with her, too, for on the fifth day Bob was teaching her the mechanics of operating the hauler, and she gently lifted his hand from a finger-switch.

"Even I know that isn't the control to the Holloway vacuum-feeder, Bob. That switch is for the—ah—the anathern tube, you told me. Right?"

"Right," he said unsteadily. "Anyway, Starre, as I was saying, this ship operates according to the reverse Fitzgerald Contraction Formula. All moving bodies contract in the line of motion. What Holloway and Hammond did was to reverse that universal law. They caused the contraction first—motion had to follow! The gravitonic field affects every atom in the ship with the same speed at the same time. We could go from zero speed to our top speed of two thousand miles a second just like that!"

He snapped his fingers. "No acceleration effects. This type of ship, necessary in our business, can stop flat, back up, ease up, move in any direction, and the passengers wouldn't have any feeling of motion at—Oh, hell!" Bob groaned, the serious glory of her eyes making him shake. He took her hand. "Starre," he said desperately, "I've got to tell you something—"

She jerked her hand away. "No," she exclaimed in an almost frightened voice. "You can't tell me. There's—there's Mac," she finished, faltering. "The asteroid—"

"You have to marry him?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "I have to live up to the bargain."

"And ruin your whole life," he ground out. Suddenly, he turned back to the control board, quartered the vision plate. He pointed savagely to the lower left quarter, which gave a rearward view of the dumbbell ship trailing astern.

"There's your ship, Starre." He jabbed his finger at it. "I've got a feeling—and I can't put the thought into concrete words—that somehow the whole solution of the problem of grabbing the asteroid back lies there. But how? *How?*"

Starre's blue eyes followed the long cable back to where it was attached around her ship's narrow midsection.

She shook her head helplessly. "It just looks like a big yo-yo to me."

"A yo-yo?"

"Yes, a yo-yo. That's all." She was belligerent.

"A yo-yo!" Bob Parker yelled the word and almost hit the ceiling, he got out of the chair so fast. "Can you imagine it! A yo-yo!"

He disappeared from the room. "Queazy!" he shouted. "Queazy, I've got it!"

IT WAS Queazy who got into his space-suit and did the welding job, fastening two huge supra-steel "eyes" onto the dumbbell-shaped ship's narrow midsection. Into these eyes cables which trailed back to two winches in the big ship's nose were inserted, welded fast, and reinforced.

The nose of the hauler was blunt, perfectly fitted for the job. Bob Parker practiced and experimented for three hours with this yo-yo of cosmic dimensions, while Starre and Queazy stood over him bursting into strange, delighted squeals of laughter whenever the yo-yo reached the end of its double cable and started rolling back up to the ship. Queazy snapped his fingers.

"It'll work!" His gray eyes showed satisfaction. "Now, if only the Saylor brothers are where we calculated!"

They weren't where Bob and Queazy had calculated, as they had discovered the next day. They had expected to pick up the asteroid on their mass-detectors a few hundred thousand miles outside of the Moon's orbit. But now they saw the giant ship attached like a leech to the still bigger asteroid—inside the Moon's orbit! A mere two hundred thousand miles from Earth!

"We have to work fast," Bob stammered, sweating. He got within naked-eye distance of the Saylor brothers' ship. Below, Earth was spread out, a huge crescent shape, part of the Eastern hemisphere

vaguely visible through impeding clouds and atmosphere. The enemy ship was two miles distant, a black shadow occulting part of the brilliant sky. It was moving along a down-spiraling path toward Earth.

Queazy's big hand gripped his shoulder. "Go to it, Bob!"

Bob nodded grimly. He backed the hauler up about thirty miles, then sent it forward again, directly toward the Saylor brothers' ship at ten miles per second. And resting on the blunt nose of the ship was the "yo-yo."

There was little doubt the Sailors' saw their approach. But, scornfully, they made no attempt to evade. There was no possible harm the oncoming ship could wreak. Or at least that was what they thought, for Bob brought the hauler's speed down to zero—and Starre Lowenthal's little ship, possessing its own inertia, kept on moving!

It spun away from the hauler's blunt nose, paying out two rigid lengths of cable behind it as it unwound, hurled itself forward like a fantastic spinning cannon ball.

"It's going to hit!"

The excited cry came from Starre. But Bob swore. The dumbbell ship reached the end of its cables, falling a bare twenty feet short of completing its mission. It didn't stop spinning, but came winding back up the cable, at the same terrific speed with which it had left.

BOB SWEATED, having only fractions of seconds in which to maneuver for the "yo-yo" could strike a fatal blow at the hauler too. It was ticklish work completely to nullify the "yo-yo's" speed. Bob used exactly the same method of catching the "yo-yo" on the blunt nose of the ship as a baseball player uses to catch a hard-driven ball in his glove—namely, by matching the ball's speed and direction almost exactly at the moment of impact. And now Bob's hours of practice paid dividends, for the "yo-yo" came to rest snugly, ready to be released again.

All this had happened in such a short space of time that the Saylor brothers must have had only a bare realization of what was going on. But by the time the "yo-yo" was flung at them again, this time with better calculations, they managed to put the firmly held asteroid between them and

the deadly missile. But it was clumsy evasion, for the asteroid was several times as massive as the ship which was towing it, and its inertia was great. And as soon as the little ship came spinning back to rest, Bob flung the hauler to a new vantage point and again the "yo-yo" snapped out.

And this time—collision! Bob yelled as he saw the stern section of the Saylor brothers' ship crumple like tissue paper crushed between the hand. The dumbbell-shaped ship, smaller, and therefore stancher due to the principle of the arch, wound up again, wobbling a little. It had received a mere dent in its starboard half.

Starre was chortling with glee. Queazy whispered, "Attaboy, Bob! This time we'll knock 'em out of the sky!"

The "yo-yo" came to rest and at the same moment a gong rang excitedly. Bob knew what that meant. The Saylor brothers were trying to establish communication.

Queazy was across the room in two running strides. He threw in the telaudio and almost immediately, Wally Saylor's big body built up in the plate. Wally Saylor's face was quivering with wrath.

"What do you damned fools think you're trying to do?" he roared. "You've crushed in our stern section. You've sliced away half of our stern jets. Air is rushing out! You'll kill us!"

"Now," Bob drawled, "you're getting the idea."

"I'll inform the Interplanetary Commission!" screamed Saylor.

"If you're alive," Bob snarled wrathfully. "And you won't be unless you release the asteroid."

"I'll see you in Hades first!"

"Hades," remarked Bob coldly, "here you come!"

He snapped the hauler into its mile-a-second speed again, stopped it at zero. And the "yo-yo" went on its lone, destructive sortie.

For a fraction of a second Wally Saylor exhibited the countenance of a doomed man. In the telaudio plate, he whirled, and diminished in size with a strangled yell.

The "yo-yo" struck again, but Bob Parker maneuvered its speed in such a manner that it struck in the same place as before, but not as heavily, then rebounded and came spinning back with perfect, spar-

pling precision. And even before it snuggled itself into its berth, it was apparent that the Saylor brothers had given up. Like a wounded terrier, their ship shook itself free of the asteroid, hung in black space for a second, then vanished with a flaming puff of released gravitons from its still-intact jets.

The battle was won!

AS SOON as the hauler had grappled itself onto the prized asteroid, Bob Parker jumped to his feet with a grin on his face as wide as the void. Queazy grabbed his arm and pounded his shoulder. Bob shook him off, losing his elation.

"Cut it," he snapped. "It's too early for the glad-hand business. We've solved one problem, but we've run into another, as we knew we would."

He crossed determinedly to Starre, tipped up her downcast face.

"Starre," he said, "I guess you know I love you. If I asked you to marry me—"

She quivered. "Are you asking me, Bob?" she breathed.

"No! Couldn't ask you to marry me unless I had money. Starre, if it was up to me I'd drop the asteroid on the Moon, and you wouldn't have to take a chance on marrying a man you don't love. But I'm in partnership with Queazy and Queazy has his due—"

Queazy intervened, his grey eyes troubled. "No," he said quietly. "Hold on. I'll willingly forego any interest in the asteroid, Bob."

Bob laughed. "Nuts to you, Queazy! Don't get gallant. We'll be so deep in debt we'll never be independent again the rest of our lives if we don't land the asteroid. Thanks, anyway."

He took a deep breath. "Starre, you'll have to trust me. Today's the last of May. We've got two more days before we have to fill the order. In those two days, I think I can evolve a procedure to put all of us in the clear—with the exception of your fiancé and your grandfather. Which, I think, is as it should be, because these days people pick out their own husbands and wives. In other words, a few minutes before your wedding, the asteroid will be delivered—on schedule!"

"I'll trust you, Bob," Starre said huskily, after a moment of quiet. "But whatever

you've got in mind, to put one over on my grandfather, it better be good. . . ."

FOR A DAY and a half, ship and attached asteroid pursued a slow, unpow-ered orbit around Earth. For a day and a half, Bob Parker hardly slept. He gave Queazy charge of the ship entirely, had him send an ethergram to Andrew S. Burn-side announcing that his asteroid would show up in time for the wedding, and that the bride would be there too.

Most of Bob's time was spent on the surface of the asteroid. He took spectroscopic readings from every possible angle, made endless notations on a pad. Sometimes, he worked in his cabin, and Queazy, ambling puzzledly into Bob's presence, could make nothing of the countless pages of calculation strewn about the room—figures which dealt with melting points, refractive indices, atmospheric velocities.

And finally, when Bob tore the ship and prisoned asteroid from their orbit, sent them into Earth's atmosphere, Queazy could make nothing of that either.

For Bob Parker apparently had a rigid schedule to follow in reference to the hour set for Starre's wedding. He hit the atmosphere at a certain second, at a certain speed. He followed a definite route through the atmosphere, slowly moving downward as he crossed the great Asiatic continents. He passed as slowly over the Atlantic, passed above New York City scarcely a dozen miles, and hovered over Philadelphia at last, a mile up.

Then he called Starre into the control room. She looked distracted, pale. She was wearing slacks and was as completely un-prepared for her marriage as she could manage. Bob grinned, took her cold hand affectionately.

"We're over Philadelphia, Starre. You can point out the general section of the city of your granddad's home and estate for me. We'll be landing at 11:15 A.M. That's in about a half-hour. Whatever you do, make certain you aren't—ah—married before 12 o'clock. Okay?"

She extracted her hand from his, nodding dumbly. She sat down at the photo-amplifiers, and for the next fifteen minutes studied the streets below and guided him south. Then Bob dropped the ship until it was only a few hundred feet from the

ground. Around them pleasure craft circled, and on the streets and fields below people ran excitedly, pointing upward at the largest asteroid ever to be brought to the planet.

The ship labored over the fields with its tremendous burden, finally hovered over a clearing bordered by leafy oak and sycamore trees, part of Burnside's tremendous "back yard." There was a man with a red flag down there. Bob followed his direc-tions, slowly brought the asteroid, rough side down, onto the carefully tended lawn. Then he lifted the hauler, placed it firmly on the opposite side of the clearing. Bob relaxed, wiped his sweating face, and felt a cool breeze as Queazy opened the air-lock.

Minutes later, Starre Lowenthal was the center of an excited, mystified group of wedding guests. Among them was her grandfather, a wrinkled, well-preserved old gentleman who alternately kissed her and flew into rages. Another man, handsome, blond, came rushing up, sweeping everybody out of his way: He took Starre in his arms, fervently. Bob Parker hated him at sight.

BURNSIDE cornered Starre and some sort of an argument ensued. Starre was insisting that she dress for the wed-ding, and finally her grandfather gave in. Starre flung a final, pleading look at Bob, and then disappeared toward the great white house with the Georgian pillars. Most of the guests trailed after her, and Burnside came stomping up to Bob. He thrust a slip of green paper into his hands.

"There's your check, young man!" he puffed. "Now you can get your greasy ship out of here. What do you mean by waiting until the last minute to bring the asteroid?"

Bob didn't answer. He said politely, "I'd like very much to stay for the wed-ding, sir."

The old man looked distastefully at his dirty coveralls. "You may," he said testily. "But please view it from a distance."

He started away, then suddenly turned back. "Would you mind telling me, young man, how it is that my granddaughter was in your ship?"

"I'll be glad to, sir," Bob said politely, "after the wedding. It's a long story."

"I've no doubt, I've no doubt," Burnside said, glaring. "But if it's anything scandalous, I don't want to hear it. This is an important wedding." He stomped away, limping.

Bob whirled toward Queazy, tensely, thrust the check into his hands. He jerked it back, hastily indorsed it and thrust it at Queazy again.

"Cash it! Quick! I'll meet you in the Somers Hotel."

Queazy asked no questions, but lifted the ship, and left.

At twenty minutes of twelve, somebody having rushed Starre into a hurried preparation for the wedding, the minister climbed a ladder to the apex of the asteroid, and the wedding march sounded out. Bob saw Starre, walking slowly on her grandfather's arm, her eyes looking straight ahead.

"Now!" Bob prayed. "Now!"

He groaned inwardly. It wasn't going to happen! He'd been a fool to think—

Then a yell, completely uninhibited, escaped his lips. The asteroid was quivering, precisely like gelatine dessert. Pieces of iron ore, tungsten, quartz and cinnabar began to fall from its sides. Little rivulets of a silvery-white liquid gushed outward in streams.

The wedding guests leapt to their feet with startled cries, starting running back toward higher ground. The wedding march ended in a clatter of discords. And Bob reached the asteroid as it went to pieces completely. He found himself ankle-deep in rivulets of liquid metal. He was swept off his feet, came up hanging onto a jagged boulder of floating iron ore. He looked around on a mad scene. Screams, yells, tangled legs.

"Bob!"

Starre's voice. Bob plunged toward her, yelling above the general tumult. For a radius of several hundred feet, there was a sluggishly moving liquid. People were floating on it, or standing in it ankle-deep, dumbfounded. Bob reached Starre, swept her up in his arms, went slushing off to the edge of the pool. Starre was laughing uncontrollably.

"There's a helicopter on the other side of the house," she cried. "We can get

away before they get organized."

THEY FOUND Queazy in a room at the Somers Hotel. He opened the door, and the worry on his face dissipated as he saw them. Behind him on a table were stacks of five-thousand-dollar bills. Before he could say anything, Starre demanded of him, "I couldn't get married on an asteroid if the asteroid wasn't there any more, could I, Queazy? One minute the asteroid was there and the next minute I was wading in a metal lake."

"Quicksilver," Bob Parker agreed happily. "The asteroid was almost entirely frozen mercury, except for an outer solid layer of iron ore, tungsten, quartz, cinnabar."

"I just took exterior readings," Starre explained, sheepishly.

"So I figured," continued Bob, "that if I took a lot of spectroscopic readings of the interior I could determine exactly how big a mass of frozen quicksilver there was. And how long it would take to thaw out once it was inside Earth's atmosphere!"

"That's the reason I had things scheduled to the dot, Queazy. I coaxed the asteroid along until the mercury was almost thawed out. When the wedding started, it melted all at once, being the same temperature all the way through. Satisfied?"

Queazy looked grave. As gravely, he moved back to the table, gestured to the money. "I hate to spoil your fun, Bob," he said slowly. "We'll have to give this back to Burnside. He didn't ask for quicksilver, you know."

"Didn't he?" Bob grinned smugly. "But he asked for cinnabar, didn't he? Whenever you find quicksilver you find cinnabar. Cinnabar is a source of quicksilver. And vice versa. Cinnabar is a sulphide of quicksilver! Nope, we earned that money, Queazy, my boy. It's ours legally. Hands off!"

He put Starre's shoe on her foot after emptying it of some more quicksilver. She stood up then, moved very close. "You can ask me now, can't you, Bob?" she whispered. She kissed him. "And if you do, that's my answer."

Which, of course, made the question totally unnecessary.