

Imaginative Tales #4

MARCH 1955

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"Mr. Margate's Mermaid" copyright 1942 and 1943 by Weird Tales under titles: "Nursemaid To Nightmares" and "Black Barter."

Mike's father had been one of the pioneers who blasted into the void — never to return. Now Mike wanted to carry on, so he took a trip to —

DREAM STREET

by

Frank M. Robinson

MICHAEL Donahue lay on the cinder embankment just outside the Proviso train yards, pressing himself into the shadows cast by the small clump of discouraged looking, oil-stained weeds that grew on top, along the tracks. He sprawled spread-eagled against the slope of cinders, not moving and only breathing enough to catch the mingled odors on the chill night air—the oily, dirty smell of the cinders and the faint, stomach-wrenching scent of slow-frying ham and eggs from the shanty a scant hundred yards away.

They must really be talking about it back at the Home, he thought. Sandy and Mick and Butz and the others were probably undressing for bed now and wondering where he was, wondering if he'd ever make it as far as Roswell and the Roswell Rocket Port

He moved slightly in the shadows, turning his head to look up at the blazing stars. There was the moon, splotchy with the shadowed areas that were Mare Tranquillitatis and Mare Imbrium. And then there was the tiny red dot of Mars and the fire that was Venus . . .

He changed his position a little, trying to ease his cramped muscles. A stone, loosened by his elbow, went clattering down the embankment. He tensed, but the noise was masked by the usual night sounds of small creatures in the brush along the tracks and by the clangor of the switch engines shuttling cars through the yards a block away.

A phone rang in the shanty. A moment later, men came out with lanterns and started through the yards, searching the low-slung, talgo freight cars.

They were probably looking for



him, he thought sickly, automatically flattening himself closer to the cinders. Mr. Gilman of the Home was plenty smart — maybe he had figured that a runaway wouldn't try to leave Chicago by bus or car, that it was too easy to get picked up that way. Maybe he had figured right off that a run-

away would try the freight yards.

One of the yard workers was coming closer, swinging his lantern so it cut through the night in big arcs, lighting up the tracks and the cinder slope. Mike bit his lips and prayed and the man stopped. Far down the track another light was fingering its way over the ties. The

Diesel grew bigger and rumbled slowly by, light weight freight cars swaying behind it.

It was heading west, Mike observed, his heart suddenly beating faster, and it had a string of empties at the end. He leaped to his feet and started running beside it, not caring whether the man with the lantern saw him or not. The train was picking up speed now, the whistle an eery blast in the night. The empties rattled by, doors half-way open. He cut in towards one. His fingers touched the frame and a sudden burst of speed and a lunge and he was half in and half out, his thin cotton pants whipping about his legs in the chill wind. He hung there a moment, then snatched a chestful of air and muscled himself inside.

He hunkered down by the open door, catching his breath and watching the suburbs roll by. Then they were out of the metropolitan area and peaceful farmlands and darkened woods stretched by the track, quiet and ghostly in the bright moonlight.

“**K**INA young to be on the lam, aren’t you, kid?”

There was the sound of a match being struck in the darkness and the yellow light flickered and flared in the empty freight car. The man who held the match was big, with a bigness that was more mus-

cle than fat. Whiskers sprouted in the creases of his face and under a once-mashed nose while watery blue eyes hid under a tangled undergrowth of brows.

“I—I’m old enough,” Mike said defensively.

The ham-like hand that held the match raised it a little so the feeble light fell across Mike’s face and chest.

“Just makin’ conversation, son. You’re big for your age but I could guess it at a young fourteen and not be more’n a month off.” There was a pause while the big man looked him over. “Somebody’s probably offerin’ good money for the whereabouts of a skinny, blonde-haired kid like you. What’s your name, Slim?”

Mike hesitated. “Bill.”

The big man’s eyes narrowed. “That ain’t for real, is it? Well, it don’t matter anyways. Goin’ west?”

Mike felt a little uneasy. “Roswell.”

The match went out. The big man didn’t bother lighting another one.

“Star-struck, huh?”

Reluctantly. “I guess so.” He didn’t want to talk about it. Not even Mr. Gilman, who was a right guy every other way, knew how it felt to stare at the stars at night and feel hungry inside, a hunger that didn’t go away no matter how many of the Home’s pork chops

and baked potatoes you ate.

The big man spat on the floor. "You oughta read the statistics, Slim. You're good for a couple of years and then the piles blow up and there ain't enough of you or the ship to bury in a six inch coffin. You get your name on a hunk of brass and that's it. And believe me, I oughta know."

"You been up, Mister?"

The big man made a noise. "Yeah, I been up. I was on a freight run to Titan for a couple of years."

Titan! The freight car was suddenly the control cabin on an M class rocket, the open door the port looking out on the stars. His voice seemed to come from far away.

"What was it like?"

The big man snorted. "I'll tell you what it was like! There was nuthin' to do. You sit on your fanny and stare out the ports and play cards. And then you land at Ley Village and unload your supplies and get drunk and that's all you do because there's no women there and then you come back. And if you don't have ulcers and weak kidneys and radiation burns by this time, you're one in a million."

The freight car was just a freight car again.

"You're looking at it the wrong way, Mister," Mike protested.

"I suppose you been up?"

"My Dad took me to Crater City

once." He'd never forget it, he thought slowly. The glassite domes over the small town and the mine diggings and the dazzling sunlight glinting off the harsh crater walls of Archimedes and Aristillus and the plains of pumice dust stretching beyond . . . He felt in his pocket for the small good-luck charm made out of a hunk of genuine crater rock that his father had once given him. It was round and almost perfectly smooth now from the number of times he had fingered it.

The big man changed the subject. "It takes money to get to Roswell. Even riding the rods all the way."

"I got enough."

The big man's voice turned thoughtful. "I'm sorry to hear you say that, Slim. I kinda need money myself."

He moved quickly in the dark and Mike suddenly felt something sharp and pointed pressing against his throat.

"Just don't move, Slim, and everything will be okay." Mike sat stock still, the inside of his mouth drying up while the palms of his hands turned wet. A practiced hand slipped into his right hand pocket and drew out his wallet. The pressure on his throat relaxed. There was a faint rustle of paper and he knew the big man was feeling for the money .

They had been going up a slight grade and the car door had slid open, showing the black sky and the blazing stars beyond. The big man was to Mike's right but still in front of the door. And he was too busy taking the money out of the wallet to notice anything else. Mike suddenly kicked out with his feet and the big man *oofed* and folded up, a fleeting expression of surprise on his beefy face as he sat down on the air outside the door.

Mike was shaking and sick to his stomach. Talgo trains made a hundred or more on slight grades. The big man wasn't going to bother him or anybody else—again.

His heart gradually slowed and he realized how lucky he had been. He was safe and still headed for Roswell, even if he no longer had the fifty bucks he had saved from his Home allowance. It was going to be hard to get along without the money. But that wasn't the important thing.

The important thing was that he was on his first step to Venusport.

Or Mars Town.

Or even Crater City.

SHE was big and blonde and bosomy with a too-tight skirt slit up the side and a mouth that was a slash of scarlet. She slouched under the street lamp, watching green-overalled spacemen

wander up the street, pausing as coins clinked against closed windows. The sign on the corner said Dream Street—a narrow street with too much neon and too little light, where rotting houses fronted directly on the sidewalks.

Mike watched her for a moment from the shadows across the street, then walked over.

"Could you tell me where Goddard Boulevard is, lady?"

He was still in shadow when he asked it and she automatically arched her back against the lamp-post and let her face slip into a professional smile.

"You're not in a hurry to get there, are ya, hon?"

He stepped closer and her smile faded. A thin, blonde-haired kid—tall for his age—in white cotton ducks and a short sleeved shirt and the narrow, intent face that was as much of a trademark as the two bearded ginks on the coughdrop boxes.

The syrup vanished from her voice and left it harsh and gravelly.

"Whaddya wanna find Goddard Boulevard for? See the port?"

He managed an uneasy smile. "I'd like to."

"It's pretty hard to stow away, kid. And you'd never make it in that get-up anyways."

"I—wasn't planning to stow away," he lied, reddening.

"It's written all over your face,

kid—and you're going at it all wrong. You think all you wanna do is slip down to the port and watch but once you get there you'll try something foolish and you'll be caught and sent back to your folks."

"They'll never catch me," he said stubbornly.

"I used to know a kid like you," she mused. "A long time ago. He tried all the dodges. And then one day he made it."

For a brief moment her face softened and lost its harsh lines.

"What happened then?" Mike asked curiously.

"He never came back." She paused. "If I were you, I'd get a job down there so you got a reason for being there. Just hang around and the cops'll pick you up. You kids are an old story to them."

He started to ask her a question but she wasn't listening. A man was standing a few feet away, having trouble lighting his cigarette. She put on her smile and raised her voice a little.

"Shag it, kid. Come back when you're older."

He walked down the street past the penny arcades and the shooting galleries and the taverns that smelled of stale beer. The street was thick with green overalled men wearing the insignia of tube men or pile technicians or the crossed jets of pilots.

"... the whole planet's nothing but a goddamned swamp..."

"... place called Rose's; just down the block..."

"... for two months nothing but stars, nothing but the goddamned stars..."

"... dry, the atmosphere sucks moisture right out of you..."

"... so I says to the First Mate, you can take your GE jetman and jam..."

They were from faraway places, Mike thought dreamily. They had seen the native section of Mars Town, teeming with greenies and leathery skinned colonists, they had seen the rings of Saturn, and stood on the mountains of the moon. And maybe some day soon he would be right there with them
...

Dream Street abruptly turned into Oberth Avenue and a block more and he was standing under the chestnut trees that bordered the expressway of Goddard Boulevard. It was crowded with eager tourists and misty-eyed colonists-to-be, taking one last look at Earth.

Mike fought his way to the traffic filled street and looked down it. It was right there at the end of the boulevard, a few miles away. A bubble of light made up of search beams and the thin red flares that marked take-offs. The biggest rocket port in the world, fifty square miles of desert sand covered

with concrete landing aprons and surrounded with grassy parks so you could bring your lunch and watch the passenger liners take off for Venus or Mars and the freighters head out for the research posts on Saturn's moons.

He glanced down at his shirt and pants, rumpled with having slept in them and spotted with grease from the freight car, and realized the lady he had talked to earlier that evening was probably right. He couldn't get within a mile of the port like he was. He'd have to go at it kind of slow, and in the meantime he'd have to find a job and a place to sleep.

And something to eat.

MIKE stood in front of the window of Larry Doby's — a restaurant on Dream Street—and watched the middle-aged owner working at the griddle right in back of the glass.

Larry Doby had thick, corded arms, the beginnings of a small paunch, and a friendly face with an expression of absorbed attention. He ran a greased rag over the griddle and then poured out some batter in three small circles. They sat there a minute, little bubbles formed on top, broke and dried, and then he flipped them high in the air. They came down with the crispy brown side on top. He scooped them up when they were done,

set them on a plate with a pat of butter melting down the sides of the stack, then shoved the plate on the moving belt just behind the counter.

Mike swallowed automatically and realized there was a dull pain in the pit of his stomach. He hadn't had much to eat since leaving the Home and now he was so hungry he was almost sick. His hands explored his pockets hopefully for stray coins. There were none. He felt for his good luck piece, squeezed it affectionately, and went on in.

He took a seat at the end of the counter and pretended that he was reading the menu dial selector. You punched out your selection, a duplicate of it appeared on the board above the short-order cook working in the window, and he fixed it up and set it on the belt. You took it off when it got to your place. And you didn't like the looks of it, you just didn't claim it—the belt took it back to the cook.

Mike watched the belt nervously, hoping that nobody was watching. The pickings on the belt were slim—apparently Larry's had only satisfied customers. Finally a sweet roll came down that nobody had claimed. Mike palmed it under a paper napkin and started to walk out.

At the door, Larry set three pan-

cakes on a plate with one hand and grabbed Mike by the shirt collar with the other. "Ruby!" A thin, pale faced woman came out of the back room. "Take over, will you?"

He walked Mike over to a table at the side. "You don't eat unless you pay, sport. One roll is an eighth of a credit. How about it?"

Mike let the roll fall from his hand to the table top. "I don't have any money," he said sullenly.

Larry gave him a long, hard look that took in his rumpled shirt and dirt smeared pants. "Sit down—and don't try to beat it."

Mike sagged into one of the chairs. This was it, he thought, almost too tired to care. By tomorrow he'd be on his way back to the Home and the gang would call him a stupe—and they'd be right. The closest he'd ever get to Mars would be looking at it through his home made telescope.

A stack of cakes was shoved under his nose and he looked up to find the griddle man offering him a fork.

"Go ahead, eat 'em sport! You're hungry, ain'tcha?" He sat down in the other chair and watched Mike eat. "Where's your folks?"

Mike swallowed and wiped the syrup off his mouth with the back of his hand. "Don't have any — they're dead."

Larry leaned back in his chair and worked at his teeth with a

toothpick, "I'll buy that, though you don't look like the type to be on your own."

"I get by."

Larry's face was blank. "Yeah, I bet you do." He studied Mike carefully. "I got a proposition, sport. I need help, somebody to wait table. If I let the wife do it, too many guys make passes at her and there's trouble. You want a job, you can have it."

Mike made a production out of sopping up the syrup on his plate with a hunk of bread. It was nice of him, he thought slowly. But he'd been taking charity ever since his old man had died and he was sick of it.

"Thanks, but . . ."

Larry was belligerent. "But what? You want to hold me up for more dough? I don't pay much but I pay regular and on top of that, I'll let you sleep in back, okay?"

It didn't sound like charity, Mike admitted to himself, it looked like if he didn't take it, the griddle man would have to find somebody else. Something caught in his throat. "Gee, thanks a lot!" he blurted.

Larry got up to go, then sat down again, looking thoughtful. "Just one thing, sport. I've had kids work here before and they usually ended up trying to snag a berth on one of the rockets out at the port. The cops catch 'em and!

ship 'em back to their home town and I usually never find out until a couple of days later. If you're gonna do something foolish, let me know beforehand, will you?" He paused, looking hard at Mike again. "And think it over before you take off. I came out here fifteen years ago with big ideas, too. I guess you begin to grow up when you realize you ain't gonna set the world on fire." He wiped the table with his apron and picked up the dishes. "You can get all the adventure you want, just listening to the guys in here talk. Keep your ears open—maybe you'll hear things that'll make you change your mind."

"Yeah, I might," Mike said absently.

But he knew that nothing he heard would make him change his mind.

HE liked working at Larry's restaurant. The pay was low but the meals were good and Ruby took care of his laundry so it averaged out pretty well. He could even set some money aside for the big plan.

But the best thing about working there was that he could listen to the talk that swirled along the counter and among the tables. Talk about places he had never seen, about places he had only read about

There was an old cook on the Earth-Moon run, practically an

overnight hop, who had been working on the big ships ever since the early days when Crater City was nothing but a collection of pressurized steel bubbles huddling under the crater ledges of Archimedes. And there was Gim Wong, a tube man on the *Martian Prince*, a freighter on the regular run to the red planet. Gim was a walking history book, a man who knew more about the start of the colonization of the planets—Mike thought—than any other man living. . .

"Setting up colonies is easy now, but you should have seen it when they first started planting colonies on Mars. I remember bringing in the first load, and then the relief supplies a year later. Half the original colonists had frozen to death and the other half were fast on their way to starving. Seems their atomics man had died of the crawling sickness shortly after arrival and none of the rest knew how to run the power plant, couldn't even call for help. And then there was the time on Io when . . ."

But the best one of all was Captain Lieberman of the Cameron-Smith lines. He was a thin, wiry little man with a pencil thin waxed moustache and frigid blue eyes—real class. He and his second in command, a first mate named Schacht, stopped in at Larry's after every trip for a bowl of chili and crackers made the way that only

Larry could.

Mike brought them their orders, then found one reason or another to hang around their table, straining his ears for the cold recital of facts and figures between Lieberman and Schacht, facts and figures that were far more romantic to him than either man could have imagined.

One day Lieberman suddenly broke off in the middle of a discussion of the drawbacks of the concrete landing aprons on Mars and fixed Mike with a stony stare.

"You've got big ears, son."

Mike reddened and started to move away. "Sorry, sir,"

"Come here," Lieberman said curtly.

Mike walked over, nervously wiping his hands on the cotton towel wrapped around his waist.

"You like to listen to us talk about space,"— he waved his arms at the ceiling—"don't you?"

Mike flushed. "Yes, sir. I'd like to go out there some day."

"Why?"

There were a million reasons, Mike thought, but now that he had been pinned down, there were none that actually held water, none that would make much sense to Lieberman.

"I . . . I just want to, that's all."

Lieberman looked thoughtful. "That's the best answer I've heard yet. None of the others are worth

a damn. But it isn't everything you youngsters think it is. It's just hard work and boredom and if you've got any other ideas, forget them." His piercing eyes played coldly over Mike. "Maybe after you've seen a few ships hulled by meteors and men die trying to breathe space, some of the glamor would wear off."

Mike backed off towards the kitchen, embarrassed. "I—I got a pretty good idea of what it's like, sir."

Lieberman snorted. "All you youngsters think you do."

Mike was almost back to the kitchen when he stopped dead. The tall, thin man at the table by the kitchen door. He'd recognize him anywhere. The deep eyes and the thinning grey hair and the set of the shoulders . . . And the man had seen him.

He walked over. "Hello, Mr. Gilman."

The voice was friendly enough. "Have a seat, Mike. I want to talk to you." Mike folded quietly into the offered chair. "You want to take me back, don't you?"

"The Home isn't such a bad place, Mike. I don't see why you ran away."

Mike shrugged, his face blank. "You wouldn't understand, Mr. Gilman."

"I think I do." The voice turned persuasive. "What's wrong with

doing it our way, Mike? You'll be sent to school, you'll be taught the things you should know, rather than by learning by experience. You'll get what you want and you'll be better prepared for it. A few more years and you'll be apprenticed out to one of the regular lines."

Mike struggled to see it but it wasn't any good. His voice sounded tortured. "A few more years isn't today, Mr. Gilman!"

The tall man looked at him thoughtfully. "You can't wait, can you?" He got up. "Let's go, Mike."

"I'll have to get my things," Mike mumbled.

Mr. Gilman looked at his watch. "Give you five minutes—hurry it up."

Mike went out to the kitchen. It was empty. Larry was working in the front window, drawing in the evening customers. He wadded up his towel and threw it in the dirty clothes bin, then took down an empty pepper can from the spice shelf, opened it, and shook out his savings.

He was sorry he couldn't say goodbye to Larry. He was sorry, too, that he had to run out on Mr. Gilman.

But this was the best way.

THE gnarled little man wearing the green eye shade said: "You got the money?"

Mike placed the bills on the battered table and pushed them down to him.

The man counted it carefully, then shoved it inside a tattered wallet. "How do you know I just won't take your money and tell you to get the hell out of here, son?"

"I heard you were a pretty square guy," Mike said simply.

The man laughed. "I should be ashamed of myself when a kid tells me that. Now exactly what is it you want?"

Mike moistened his dry lips with his tongue. "I want . . . an identity. You know, cards and papers for a background, to show I have parents and live in town here."

"What do you want it for?"

Mike hesitated. He felt that he had confided in too many people and that any of them could cross him up by telling. "You don't need to know, do you?"

The man took out his wallet, spilled the money on the table, and shoved it back toward Mike. "Here's your money. Beat it."

"I want to get a job," Mike said quickly. "Down at the port."

The man took the money back. "You should have told me at the beginning," he said quietly. "How do you expect me to do my job if I don't know what the hell you want? Who do you want a job with?"

"Atlas Provisions."

The man nodded. "Good outfit. They're not too particular." He brought up a jar of india ink from the drawer, then hesitated. "It ain't for me to advise you, son, but are you sure you know what you're doing? Space isn't everything it's cracked up to be, you know. You might get a couple of days out and decide you don't like it—but then you'd be stuck."

Everybody was trying to discourage him, Mike thought stubbornly. But he was going to get to the stars. He was going to go if he had to walk every mile of the way and if it took years.

"I've thought about it for a long time. I'm sure."

The man sighed and took a few blank cards and some stationery out of the drawer, then fished around in a small cabinet for an assortment of fine lettering pens. "You'll need a work permit and a letter from your folks and maybe some recommendations and a few other items to back them up. Come back in an hour and you'll be all set."

THE sun was a blinding white off the concrete aprons and the little brass plaques set in them. Mike shielded his eyes and shifted slightly on the back of the fork lift truck that was hauling the train of pallets of concentrated food and

provisions and winding its way among the different aprons. He twisted around. A mile back he could see the green parks and the bunting and waving flags from tall flagpoles that jutted up over the trees.

The truck chugged around another apron and passed the *Empress of Mars*, a huge freighter impossibly balanced on her rear jets. Mike gasped in awe at the twenty story high ship, then let his interest wander to another, even larger ship.

His eyes lowered to the concrete. It was about here, where the old *Ashenden's* berth had been. His eyes searched the ground, found a little brass plaque that he had been shown a picture of once—a long time ago—and then the truck passed it up and it was lost in the distance, a small speck of yellow metal glaring in the sunlight. They were passing other ships now, the *Asteroid Queen*, the *Saturnia*, and the new *Lusitania*—the last a passenger liner with a double row of quartz view-ports around her mid-section.

Elmer Carter—Mike's boss—stopped the truck beneath the support fins of the *Star Quest* and stood up and stretched. He was a fat man with thin arms and even thinner legs; Mike thought he looked like a golf ball on stilts.

The loading crew showed up a minute later and started to man-

handle the crates and boxes to a sling let down from the waist of the ship.

"Okay, Mike, you got the credit sheets?"

Mike felt in the pocket of his atlas uniform and brought out the sheets. Elmer started to check them and the first sling-load went on board. "You keep count too, Mike—we don't want to miss anything."

It was a hot day and by the time they were done, sweat, had stained Elmer's shirt and was rolling down his fat cheeks. He sighed and put away his slips: the last sling load was aboard and the loading crew had gone off to another job. He started the fork lift truck when suddenly Mike said: "Hey, it looks like they forgot something!"

Elmer looked startled. "No kidding!" He got out and waddled to the third pallet back. A small crate had fallen in between the third and fourth pallet-trucks. He picked up the small crate gingerly. "We shoulda caught this, Mike. It's Bl concentrates."

Mike bit his lips. "It's my fault. I'm new on the job and . . ."

Elmer shook his head. "It ain't your fault," he said generously. "Those dumbheads of loaders overlooked it." He looked worried. "They need these, Mike—it'll be my job if they don't get them. And blastoff's only fifteen minutes

away."

It was a hot day and Elmer was already sopping wet and bone tired. He looked up the ladder that crawled up the hull to the port that opened in the waist. It was five stories up, that port. A long haul. A mighty long haul.

Mike watched the look of dismay spread over Elmer's face. It was hot and the port was quiet except for the cries of the loading crew two ships down. Things were on a tight schedule, Mike knew—they wouldn't have time to call the crews back. He tried to make his voice sound casual. "I can take it up and be back in five minutes."

Relief flooded Elmer's face, relief mixed with apprehension over what the company would do if they found out. Letting kids go in the rockets wasn't company policy. He shoved the box in Mike's arms. "Okay, kid, but shake it up. No sight seeing."

Mike tucked the box in his shirt and started up the ladder. The crew was on board and probably strapped down by now, he thought. They were all set to go. His heart started to pound. The *Star Quest* was slated for a lift to Mars and that was a good two month trip. By the end of it, if he worked hard, he could be a third class apprentice. Spacemen—good spacemen—were scarce and it didn't make a heck of a lot of difference how old

you were. The government griped but nobody made much fuss.

He was five stories up now and he turned for one last look at the port of Roswell. Elmer was a tiny figure below him, and the pallets looked like they were made out of match sticks. There were other ships around him, standing up like needles, and then—farther off—the parks and the wide streak of Goddard Boulevard. He could even see the section that was Dream Street. For a minute he thought he could make out Larry's restaurant, then realized he was too far away.

He looked down at Elmer again, hesitating a moment. It would probably mean Elmer's job. He turned back to the port. His heart was pounding and there was a roaring in his ears. He ran a moist thumb over his good luck piece and went in the air lock.

“LOOK, Mr. Gilman, I didn't know who the hell the kid was! He's assigned to work with me and I don't ask questions—nobody's paying me for asking questions! The loaders leave this crate behind and I know it'll mean my job if I don't get it aboard and the kid volunteers to take it up. Do I know he's going to stow away? Look at me, I'm an old man—I can't go climbing five stories of ladder!”

Gilman nodded tiredly. “Okay,

Carter, forget it. I'll fix it up with Atlas so you don't get fired.”

Carter left and “Gilman turned back to the rocket port. Far out on the huge expanse of concrete there was a scorched spot where the *Star Quest* had been a few moments before. He looked at it thoughtfully.

Larry Doby shook his head.

“I thought I had him pretty well talked out of it at the restaurant, Mr. Gilman. Maybe if I had notified you sooner, you could have stopped him.”

“I didn't want to stop him,” Gilman said dryly. “Every ship that leaves this port has provisions for one or two stowaways. A hundred stowaways leave Roswell every month—kids who want to see the stars. We make it difficult for stowaways, scare away those who just want a thrill, but we don't try to stop them, Doby.”

Larry looked puzzled. “I don't get you.”

“All right,” Gilman said slowly, “take Mike. He'll be a good spaceman. His father used to be on the Earth-Moon run; got killed when the pile of the *Ashenden* blew up in '97. That's why Mike was in the Home for the Children of Space. He knows a lot of the ropes already, he picked up a lot from his father. In a way, you might say that Mike was bred for space.” He paused. “And he's got something

pretty valuable, something that will make him one of the best of the lot—and Lord only knows we need them.”

“What’s that?”

“A long time ago, kids used to run away to sea. There was—well, something that called them. They wanted to go. That’s why Mike will be so good on the rockets. He isn’t in it for the money, the dangers don’t mean anything to him. He’s got something you have to have for the job—he *wants* to go.”

“I don’t know,” Larry said thoughtfully. “A lot of kids want to run away for the glamor, you know—visiting strange lands, that sort of thing. What happens when Mike finds out there isn’t any glamor, that the exotic foreign places just ain’t?”

“The glamor of anything is in the mind of the beholder,” Gilman

said slowly.

The sun had started to drop in the sky and a chill wind blew out of the east. Larry shivered. ‘

“Seems to me like the kid has the short end of the stick. The government gets men for the space-ships but what do they get in turn? What’s Mike gonna get out of this?”

Gilman turned a little into the fading sun and Larry caught the tell-tale flecks of flesh-colored tattooing that hid the radiation burns and the ultraviolet scars on Gilman’s face.

“What will he get out of this?” Gilman asked slowly, bleakly. His voice filled with frustrated puzzlement at a man who didn’t understand, who would never understand. “He’ll get the stars, Carter, the stars”

THE END