

STARTLING STORIES

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A Complete Novel

THE STARMEN OF LLYRDIS

BY LEIGH BRACKETT

Michael Trehearne sensed his difference from other men, but didn't know he was a changeling of the only race able to conquer the stars! 9

Two Complete Novelets

EARTHMEN NO MORE.....Edmond Hamilton 76

When Curt Newton and the Futuremen revived John Carey from his deep freeze, he wanted to go home—but where in space was home?

THE TWO SHADOWS.....William F. Temple 106

A poet, a pragmatist and a girl—they were all that was left of humanity after Earth became a second Sun!

Short Stories

THEN FLY OUR GREETINGS.....Margaret St. Clair 95

Science discovers the secret of mutual repulsion

MEN OF THE TEN BOOKS.....Jack Vance 122

The folk on the strange planet spoke the language of Earth

SHORT ORDER.....Sam Merwin, Jr. 135

Enoch Jones had been everywhere—but was always in the same spot

Features

THE ETHER VIBRATES.....The Editor 6

A science fiction department featuring "Ethergrams" from our readers

CURRENT FAN PUBLICATIONS.....A Review 153

SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF.....A Department 157

LOOKING AHEAD.....Coming Features 161

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Earthmen No More

A Captain Future Novelet

By EDMOND HAMILTON

CHAPTER I

The Awakening

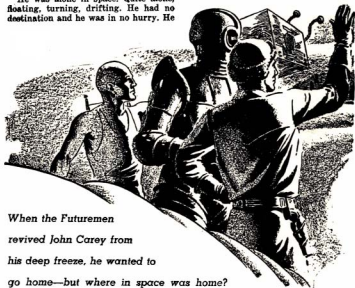
S *STILL and cold in its lightless vault of bone, the brain stirred feebly. Slowly, slowly, it began to wake and remember—timeless memories, flowing across it in a dark inchoate tide from nowhere into nothingness.*

He was alone in space. Quite alone, floating, turning, drifting. He had no destination and he was in no hurry. He

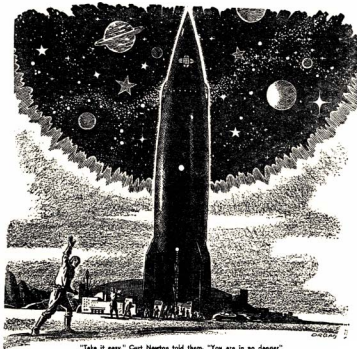
had lost the Sun and the planets. There were not even any stars.

He did not worry. The dead do not insist on stars. He had forgotten how he came to die and he was glad.

After a long while, far distant in the



When the Futuremen revived John Carey from his deep freeze, he wanted to go home—but where in space was home?



"Take it easy," Curt Newton told them. "You are in no danger"

infinite night, he saw a tiny gleam. He regarded it without curiosity or fear and then he realized that some inexorable current had caught him and was sweeping him toward the light, hurling him at it in a swift relentless rush. He knew that he did not want to go to it—but there was no escape.

The little point of light leaped and spread into a sun, a nova, a shattering glare. Terror overcame him. He clawed at the comforting darkness as it fled past but he could not hold onto it and it seemed to him that he could hear the

small thin shrieking of his body against the void as it was sucked into the devouring brilliance.

There was a face between him and the light, huge and awesome. He cried out but no sound came and then it was gone, the light, the face, even himself, swallowed up in the quiet night.

Memories—the aloneness, the remembering, the timeless drift. A sound like the rustle of far-off surf that booped louder and louder and became a voice speaking out of the heavens, saying, "Wake up, John Carey! Wake up!"

And he thought he answered, "But I am dead."

How had he come to die?

MEMORIES, groping, uncertain, coming faster, clearer, clothed in vivid color. A girl's face, a girl's red mouth saying, "Don't go. Don't go if you love me. You'll never come back."

Men and a ship—a little ship, a frail and tiny craft, it seemed, for the long way it was going and the high dreams it had. Hard-faced iron-handed men, braver than angels and more hungry than they were brave, hungry for new worlds and the unknown things that lay beyond the mountains of the Moon, beyond the still canals of Mars, beyond the glittering deadly Belt.

He remembered now the men and the ship, how they had gambled their lives against glory and lost. "We shot the Asteroids," he muttered, in the silence of his mind. "Jupiter was there ahead of us, a big golden apple almost in our hands. I remember how the moons looked, swarming like bees around it. I remember . . ."

The meteor—the tearing agony of metal, the last glimpse of horror in the ship before the air-burst took him with it into space, through the riven pilot-dome. The brief, bitter knowledge that this was death.

"Dead," he said again. "I'm dead."

The strange voice answered, "If you want to you can live again."

He thought about that. He thought about it for a long time in the darkness. To live again—the light and the warmth, the hunger and pain and hope, the wanting, the being able to want. He thought and he was not sure and then at last he whispered, "How? Tell me *how!*"

"Open your eyes and come back, back where the light is. You were here before, don't you remember? Open your eyes, John Carey!"

He did or thought he did and there was nothing but mist, heavy darkling clouds of it. Far, far away he saw the gleam of light beyond him and he tried to grope toward it but the mists were very thick.

"I can't," he moaned. "I'm lost."

Lost forever, in darkness and cold.

"Come back!" cried the voice strongly. "Come back and live!"

He heard the sound of a hand striking smartly against flesh. After a while he felt it. That little sharp pain somehow managed to bridge a colossal gulf and make him aware that he had a body.

His brain oriented itself with a dizzying lunge. The mists tore away. He woke.

It was a full awakening. The exploding nova resolved itself into a light-tube, glowing against a low ceiling of metal. The countenance that had loomed so hugely above him became the face of a man. A lean face, deeply bronzed with the unmistakable burn of space, topped with red hair and set with two level grey eyes that looked straight into Carey's and made him feel somehow safe and unafraid.

"Lie still," said the red-haired man. "Get your breath. There's no hurry." He turned aside and his hands, very strong but delicate of touch, busied themselves with a vial and a gleaming needle.

Carey lay still. For the moment he had not the strength to do anything else. The room was small. It was fitted as a laboratory, incredibly compact, and many of the objects that his wandering gaze passed over were strange to him.

One of these objects was a small cubical case of semi-translucent metal, resting on a table. The surface nearest Carey was fitted with twin lenses and a disc, so that it bore an unsettling resemblance to a face. Carey thought vaguely that it must be some sort of a communicator.

Suddenly he said, "I'm in a ship."

The red-haired man smiled. "How can you tell? We're in free fall."

"I can tell." Carey tried to struggle up. "But there are no ships beyond the Belt! How . . ." Then he began to tremble violently. "Listen," he said to the stranger. "Listen, I was killed, trying to reach Jupiter. A meteor hit us and I was blown clear, out into space with no armor. I'm dead. I'm a dead man. I . . ."

"Steady on," said the red-haired man.

"Easy." He set the needle into a place already swabbed on Carey's naked arm. Carey flinched. He sobbed a little and then the trembling quieted.

"I was dead," he whispered, again.

"No," said the red-haired stranger. "Not really dead. What we call the space-death isn't true death but cold shock—an instantaneous stoppage of all life processes. There's no time for deterioration or cellular damage, no pos-

It was only then that it penetrated Carey's stunned mind, the phrase that had been used so casually a moment before.

"You said, 'In my time,'" he repeated. "How long . . ." He stopped. His mouth was dry. He tried again, forcing out the words that did not wish to be spoken. "How long was I asleep out there?"

The man who called himself Curt Newton hesitated, then asked, "What



CAPTAIN FUTURE

sibility of decay. The organism stops short. It can, by certain means, be started going again."

He looked thoughtfully down at Carey and added, "Many lives are restored that way, lives that would have been considered ended in your time."

Carey said numbly, "Then you found me, floating in space, in frozen sleep? You—revived me?"

"Yes. Space law requires that any ship-wreckage encountered on radar must be investigated. That's how we found you." The stranger smiled. "Welcome back to life, Carey. My name is Curt Newton."

year was it when you met disaster, Carey?"

"It was nineteen ninety-one. It was June, nineteen ninety-one, when we left Earth."

Newton reached for a calendar pad, held it up. He did not speak and there was pity in his eyes.

Carey saw the date on it, and at first it was too incredible to touch him. "Oh, no," he said. "Not all that time, all those generations. No, it's not true."

"It is."

"But it can't be . . ." His voice trailed off. The numbers on the pad, the awful sum of years, blurred and darkened be-

fore him. Once more he began to tremble and this time it was for fear of life, not of death. "Why did you bring me back?" he whispered. "I have no place here. I'm still a dead man."

ABRUPTLY, from beyond the closed bulkhead door, there came the sound of footsteps. Strange steps, ponderous and clanking, as though someone enormously heavy walked in metal boots. Curt Newton turned his head sharply.

"Grag!" he called. "Hold on there. Wait!"

The footsteps hesitated and a voice from beyond the door said mockingly, "I told you so. What do you want to do, frighten the poor chap out of his wits?" The voice had a peculiar soft sibilance of tone.

It was answered by a rumbling metallic growl, an utterly unhuman sound, that seemed to have words in it. Carey got up. He clung to the edge of the surgeon's table, fighting the weakness that was on him, his eyes fixed on the bulkhead door.

"Carey," said Curt Newton, "things have changed and science has come a long way. There are three others aboard this ship besides myself. They're not—well, not quite human, as men of your day understood the term. Even now, in our time, they're unique, created by techniques far beyond the general knowledge. But you must not be afraid of them. They're my friends and will be yours."

A chill came over Carey, creeping into his bones. He continued to stare at the door. What waited behind it, what monstrous things—not quite human, not quite human. The words repeated themselves in his brain, scuttling across it like spiders spinning icy webs, tightening until he could barely hear Newton's voice talking on.

"Robot . . ." Faintly the voice came and Carey stared at the door. The drops of sweat ran slowly down his face. "Robot, human in intelligence, created by scientific genius . . ."

There were sounds behind the door. There were presences not of the flesh.

Carey's mouth was dry with the taste of fear.

". . . android, human in all respects but created also in the laboratory . . ."

Carey began to move toward the door. What dreadful facet of the future had he been cast into? What uncanny children of this undreamed-of age were lurking there behind that panel? He could not bear to know but somehow not knowing was worse. Not knowing and wondering and thinking . . .

". . . the brain of a great scientist, a human, kept alive for many years in a special case . . ."

Robot, android, living brain. A red-haired man and a date on a calendar. A ship where there are no ships, a life where there is no living. A dream, Carey—a dream you're dreaming, drifting along with the endless tides, the dark night tides beyond the Belt. Open the door, Carey. What difference in a dream?

A human figure, lithe and graceful, whose face had the unhappy beauty of a faun, green-eyed and mocking. And beside it a shape, a towering gigantic manlike form built all of gleaming metal. A shape that bent toward him, reaching out its dreadful arms, glaring at him with two round, flashing eyes.

A harsh, toneless voice spoke close behind Carey, saying, "Catch him, Curtis."

Carey looked for the source of the strange voice. The cubical box that he had taken for a communicator had risen from its shelf, hovering upon tenuous beams. And he saw that the surface with the twin lenses and the disc was indeed a face.

"No," said Carey. "Don't touch me. Don't any of you touch me."

He made his way back into the little laboratory. The room had closed in on him. The darkening air pressed against him like water. He was conscious that his hands were cold, that his feet were very heavy, treading on a surface he could no longer feel.

"I tried to soften the shock for him," Curt Newton was saying somewhere across the universe.

And the harsh voice of the cubical metal case replied without inflection, "Poor fellow, he has many shocks in store."

Carey sat down. He put his face between his cold palms, and the knowledge came to him, the truth that he had not quite believed before but from which now there was no escape.

He had bridged the gulf of time. He had left his own past in the dust of centuries behind him and he stood face to face with a future that was beyond his knowing. He was brother to Lazarus, come forth into an alien world.

CHAPTER II

Return from Space

HE could hear them talking. He did not want to hear them. He did not want to lift his head and see them again. He did not even want to be alive. But he could not help hearing.

Grag's booming voice, the thunderous voice of the robot. "I didn't know, when I fished him out of that wreckage, that he had been floating there so long!"

The harsh inflexible voice of the metal box, of the brain who had once been Simon Wright, a scientist of Earth. "A long time indeed," said Simon Wright and added slowly, "He is old, this man—almost as old as space-flight."

The soft sibilance of the android, at once cruel and compassionate. "It was no kindness to bring this one back, Curt. He's as much alone in the world as we are."

There was something in the attitude of these three unhuman strangers that struck Carey suddenly. It was a strange thing, for one who had for all his life been merely a man named John Carey, of no particular importance to anyone but himself. It was awe. And that realization brought another with it—that John Carey was a creature as queer and unreal to these beings of the future as they were to him.



GRAG

Curt Newton said to the android, "I think you're wrong, Otho. I think any man with guts enough to buck the Belt in those old tin skyrockets would rather live, even in an unknown time, than sleep eternity away."

Carey did not answer that. He did not know the answer.

"He creates a problem for us, Curtis," said Simon Wright. "And at a time when we have a grave problem of our own. You understand that?"

"Yes." Curt Newton went and stood in front of Carey and spoke his name. Carey looked up.

"I want you to know one thing," said Newton. "You're not alone, not without friends. You'll stay with us until you're oriented. After that—well, we have a certain amount of influence and we'll see that you get a start on whatever sort of life you may choose."

Still Carey did not answer.

"Listen," said Newton. "You were a pioneer. Why you were or what you wanted out of it I don't know. But whatever it was you were trying to push the frontiers back so you could get it. Well, you succeeded, you and others like you. Even in failure, you succeeded."

"There are colonies on the farthest

moons. Men have even begun to reach out to the worlds of other stars. You helped to make all that possible, Carey, and you're alive to see it. Isn't that enough to make you want to live? Aren't you curious to see the civilization you helped to build?"

Carey smiled faintly. "Psychotherapy," he said. "We had it in my day and it wasn't any more subtle. All right, Newton. I'll be curious as hell when I have time to think about it. Meanwhile I'm alive—so I don't really have any choice, do I?"

He got up. Deliberately he forced himself to look at Grag and Otho and Simon Wright.

"All right," he said to them all, to no one. "I'll get used to it in time. A man can get used to anything if he has time."

"Quite," said the voice of Simon Wright. "All of us have learned the truth of that—even Curtis."

Carey tried in the period that followed. But it was a hard thing to do. To his own time-sense the great gap between yesterday and today was only an instant of sleep. He caught himself often thinking of Earth as he knew it, of the men and women who would be there just as he had left them, of the songs and the streets and the faces of buildings, the uncountable small details that make up the sum of an epoch.

It was hard to teach himself that they were there no more. But one or another of his shipmates was always near him and never let things get too bad. So gradually, from constant association, Grag and Otho and Simon Wright became familiar to Carey and he no longer felt that uncanny twinge when he was near them.

Simon remained enigmatic and remote, an intelligence keen and brilliant far beyond Carey's power to understand, wrapped in his own thoughts, his own researches. Knowledge was Simon's thirst and his existence and it seemed to Carey that, although Simon Wright had been a man of Earth before his brain was taken from his dying body and preserved by the magic of a future

science, Simon had become the least human of them all.

Grag and Otho were easier. The android was so nearly human that only now and again did a flicker of something other-worldly in his green eyes remind Carey that Otho was not as other men. Even then it was impossible to feel any horror of him. Carey had known a lot of mothers' sons but seldom one that he liked as much as the sharp-tongued ironic Otho, whose most pointed barbs were tempered with pity.

As for Grag, once Carey had got used to his seven-foot clanking bulk and enormous strength, he became fond of the great robot, whose only faults were over-enthusiasm and a certain lack of judgment. It was, however, constantly upsetting to Carey to realize that this lumbering metal giant had quite as much intelligence as he and a good deal more knowledge.

The man Curt Newton, the man many called Captain Future, remained paradoxically the most difficult to understand of all the four. It was only bit by bit from the others that Carey picked up Newton's story—his strange birth and stranger upbringing in a lonely laboratory hidden under the surface of the Moon, an orphan with no other companions than the three who were called the Futuremen.

NO wonder, Carey thought, that with such a background Newton was withdrawn and guarded in his approach to the ordinary relationships of men. He, like his companions—and like Carey too in this new incarnation of his—was set apart forever from the normal world. Carey sensed that the easy casual manner of the red-haired man had been painfully acquired, that beneath it lay a dark and solitary creature, much better not aroused.

Carey soon discovered something else about Curt Newton. He was angry and it was no mere passing rage. It was a cold black fury that rode him all across the spatial gulf that plunged between Saturn, whence he had come, and Earth, where he was going. And the cause of it

was a message he had received from a man named Ezra Gurney about another man named Lowther.

There was something about a monopoly on a certain kind of fuel, which was going to put Lowther in control of all shipping to and from the distant star-colonies, which were not much at present but would grow. It seemed that the star-ships took on their high-potential fuel for the long jump at Pluto, where the radioactive ore was mined and refined.

And now, by devious manipulations of hidden stock, Lowther had got control of the refining companies and raised the price out of reach. There were ships stranded at Pluto and men in an ugly mood and Newton was heading fast for Earth to see what he could do about it.

It sounded a dirty enough deal and Carey hoped that Newton would bring Lowther to time. But this talk of star-colonies and star-ships was beyond him. His mind was still thinking of Jupiter as the unattained and well-nigh unattainable. Any problems of star-ships or the men who flew them were distant and unreal. Furthermore he was too deeply immured in his own fears and loneliness, in the strangeness of being alive.

He began to think more and more of Earth. He was hungry to see it, to feel it under his feet again, to look up into a blue sky at the familiar Sun. He had been long away from Earth when he fell asleep—an eternity, it had seemed, shut up in an iron coffin outbound for Jupiter.

He remembered now how they had talked about Earth, crouching within the narrow walls that hid them from the black negation of space. The voices still rang in his ears, the faces were as clear as though he had only turned his head away for a moment or two.

Craddock and Szandor, Miles and Delaporte, Gaines, Coletti, Fenner—the red-headed, the black and the fair—the different particular tricks of phrase and expression, the kindness and cruelty and courage and fear—the wisdom and the folly, moulded together into the separate forms of men. And they had talked of Earth.

They had planned what they would do when they got back, with the wealth of a new world in their hands. They had talked of the women who would be waiting for them, of the parades and the speeches, the fame that would be theirs around the globe. They had talked and all the time the darkness that was just beyond the hull had been listening with a silent mirth and John Carey was the only one who would ever come back again.

As the ship rushed nearer to the orbit of Earth Carey's eagerness increased until it was like a fever in him. He talked of home as those other men had talked and Curt Newton listened with a kind of pity in his eyes.

"Don't expect too much," he said. "It's changed—but it's still Earth, not Paradise."

The forward jets were cut in and the ship quivered to the brake-blasts—not the anguished uncertain shuddering of the ships Carey had known but a controlled lessening of speed. The green remembered world came gleaming across the forward port and Carey stared at it, sitting motionless and absorbed, urging the misty continents into shape, watching the oceans spread into blueness and the mountains rise and become real.

Suddenly he was afraid. He covered his face with his hands, and said, "I can't. I can't walk like a ghost through streets I never saw, looking for people who have been dead for generations."

"It won't be easy," said Curt Newton. "But you'll have to. Until you do you'll be living and thinking in the past." He looked at Carey, half smiling. "After all, you came into this world a stranger once before."

"What will they say to me?" whispered Carey. "How do people talk to a dead man?"

"As rudely as they do to everyone else. And how will they know unless you tell them? Come on, Carey, stiffen up. Forget the past. Start thinking about the future."

"Future!" said Carey and the word had a strange hollow sound to him.

"Give me time. I haven't caught up with the present yet."

He was silent after that. Newton asked for and got clearance for a landing. The ship picked up her pattern and spiraled in.

Nothing was clear to Carey. Confused vistas reeled and spun beneath him, a huge monster of a city, the many-colored patchwork of a spaceport, strange and unknown, yet with a haunting familiarity, like a language learned in childhood and long forgotten. His heart pounded fiercely. It was hard to breathe.

The ship touched ground. And John Carey had come home from space.

He remained as he was, sitting still, his fingers sunk deep into the padded arms of the recoil-chair. Curt's Newton's voice was faint and far away. "Simon and I are going to Government Center. Grag will stay with the ship. But Otho can go along with you if you like."

"No," said Carey. "No thanks—I . . ." There was more he wanted to say but he could not form the words. He got up and went past the others, seeing them only as shadows. The airlock was open. He went out.

THE blaze of a summer sun smote hard upon him. He looked up at white clouds piling slowly in the sky and thought out of some dim coign of memory, *Later there will be a storm.* He began to walk across the concrete apron, scarred with many flames.

This was the same spaceport. It had to be for there was the city before him and behind him was the sea. Here, from a little field that had looked so big and grand, the *Victrix* had taken flight for Jupiter. Here a girl had said goodbye and kissed him with the bitterness of tears.

But it was not the same. The little field was swallowed up and gone, drowned in the mighty rows of docks. Where the administration building had stood a white pylon towered up into the clouds. The air was filled with the thunderous roar of ships, landing, taking off, jets flaming, lean hulls flashing in the sun.

Great cranes clanked and rumbled. Strings of lorries snorted back and forth between the freight docks and the warehouses and from beyond them spoke the anvil voices of the foundries. Atomic welders blazed like little suns and the huge red tenders rolled ponderously among the ships with their loads of fuel.

Carey walked slowly. He was listening to the music, the titan song of the ships and the men who served them. Good music to one who had first helped to write it long ago. He listened and was proud—not just for himself but for Gaines and Coletti, Fenner and Miles and Szador, the men of his crew and all the other crews who had christened this port in their blood and flame.

And suddenly the song was drowned in the chattering voices of women. People surged around him, caught him up and carried him on toward a great sleek craft of silvery metal, with a name and an unknown flag on her bow—*Empress of Mars*. Trim young men in natty uniforms stood by her gangplank. High heels clicked against the curving metal with a sound as brittle as the voices.

"Such a wretched cruise the last time! I was simply bored to tears. . . ."

"Well, Mars isn't what it used to be, so overrun with tourists. I went last to Ganymede for a change and you have no idea. . . ."

A young girl, giggling—"It's my first trip and I'm just thrilled to death. Janet said they have a simply heavenly orchestra on this ship!"

Under the shrill incessant chatter lay the heavier intermittent voices of men. Rich men, stuffed with the tallow of good living, men with big sweating bellies sheathed in silk, comparing the food and service on the *Empress* with the *Morning Star*, that flew the luxury run to Venus, and the *Royal Jose*. And here and there among them an anxious younger man with a red-mouthed woman on his arm, underlings stripped to their last nickel for the privilege of rubbing shoulders with the elite on a trip across space.

A sickness came over Carey. He felt

smothered in perfume and smug sophistication. He looked at the trim young officers and hated them.

Over the chatter and the cries an annunciator spoke with firm politeness. "Last warning for *Empress of Mars* passengers! The gangways close in six minutes. Last warning. . . ."

Carey stood, a silent unnoticed figure in the crowd, thinking of other ships and other men who had left Earth long ago, and the sickness in him deepened. Caught in the press of soft comfortable flesh he heard gongs clanging and a surge of voices and then the sibilant roar that became a purring thunder as a glistening fabric of shining metal lifted skyward. Then he was swept away in the backwash of people from the empty dock.

"She really earned a nice vacation. . . ."

". . . and those cruise-ships are so much more fun than ordinary space-trips. They have hostesses and games and always something to do!"

Carey stumbled out of the stream at last into a little deserted backwater around a tall pillar that stood at the edge of the spaceport.

There was gold lettering on it, only a little dingy from the back-blast of many ships. Carey saw a name he knew.

He looked closer. It was a tall pillar and he had to look high to see the legend that read, TO THE PIONEERS OF SPACE.

Now he saw. Underneath that legend were names, and dates. First the names of the great trail-blazers.

Gorham Johnson—Mark Carew—Jan Wenzl—

Wenzl . . . Once a small boy had watched with worshipping eyes as a grizzled one-armed man stumped toward a ridiculous rocket-ship.

A little farther down, not much. *Lane Fenner—Etienne Delaporte—William Gaines—*yes, all the *Victrix* crew including John Carey, all with the golden stars beside them that meant *Lost in Space*.

Names—names and men, his friends, his shipmates, his rivals. Jim Hardee, the kid who had sat drinking with him

the night before he hit for Jupiter. While he had lain dead in space young Hardee had gone on, doing the big things he dreamed of. And now, like the others, he was only a dingy gold-letter name on a forgotten monument.

The voice of the annunciator pleaded monotonously, "Will *Pallas* passengers please report at once to Dock Forty-four? Will *Pallas* passengers . . ."

Old Wenzl and Jim Hardee and young Szandor and Red Miles—yes, and he himself, bucking the black emptiness and the cold death to push the frontiers out . . .

"Attention, please," said the mechanical voice. "The liner *Star of Venus* will land at Dock Fourteen at exactly sixteen. Those wishing to greet incoming passengers . . ."

Carey sat down on the steps of the monument. Otho found him there, staring at the bright crowds going back and forth, listening to the voices and the laughter, the swift proud thunder of the ships.

Otho touched his shoulder and after a while Carey asked him tonelessly, "Did we die for this?"

CHAPTER III

Men of Earth

FOR the better part of two days Curt Newton was busy carrying his fight against Lowther into one Government office after another. And during that time, with Otho determinedly sticking to him to keep him out of trouble, Carey wandered about in the city.

It was very large. It had always been so—the largest city on the world of Earth. Now it was no longer merely large but monstrous, bloated, towering, spreading, gorged with humanity and wealth. Yet it seemed less crowded than Carey remembered.

The buildings were taller now, frighteningly tall, and there were covered walks of chrome and glassite spanning

the dizzy canyons in between, so that a man might go across the city and never touch the ground. Traffic ran on many levels underneath. The streets were quiet and clean and Carey missed the brawling taxicabs, the surge and hum of crowds.

He watched the people who passed him. The tempo had slowed since the days he knew. Men and women strolled now, where before they had almost run. Their faces were a little different too, more relaxed and satisfied. He did not think that they were much happier or wiser, certainly no more kind.

Men and women, well fed, well dressed, making money, spending it. Palaces of entertainment, offering elaborate amusements to suit every taste. Travel bureaus displaying their three-dimensional *living posters*, urging people no longer to visit Quaint Brittany or the Romantic Caribbean but luring them instead with the ancient Martian cities and the pleasure-domes of tropical Venus.

Shop windows, full of marvels. Tenuous spider-silks from Venus, necklaces of Martian rubies like drops of blood to glow against white flesh, jugs of curious wines from the moons of Jupiter, the splendid furs of beasts that hunt across the frozen polar seas of Neptune.

We opened the way, Carey thought. *We died and they grow fat.*

Stone and steel and plastic and rare metals to make the giant towers splendid. Soft colors, soft sounds of music from garden terraces far above, where the sea wind tempered the heat and set the fronds of other-worldly shrubs to rustling.

Terraces where people sat feeding on delicacies brought across space in fleets of special ships, watching languidly the musicians and the dancers who were as alien as the exotic plants. Everywhere was the pervading softness, the silk-wrapped cushioned luxury, the certain ease of men who have never had to fight.

"You might as well see it all," said Otho. And so Carey visited the places of amusement, the parks and the pleasure gardens, and sat upon the perfumed

terraces, a dark and sombre shadow among the butterfly crowds. And often the women turned and looked at him as though perhaps they saw in his face a thing that was lost out of the men they knew.

Every landmark was gone, every place he knew was changed. There was no single street that he remembered. And the names were gone too and the faces, gone and utterly forgotten.

Suddenly Carey glanced up at the overtopping spires that leaned against the sky and said, "I hate this place. I'm going back to the ship."

Otho smiled a little wryly and they returned to the port.

Curt Newton came back almost as soon as they. Simon was with him and a grizzled leathery-faced man in uniform who was introduced to Carey as Ezra Gurney.

Otho studied Newton's face. "I was going to ask you how it went," he said, "but I see—it didn't go at all."

Newton shook his head. "No." He flung himself down, retreating into a brooding silence. Carey saw his hard dangerous anger.

"What happened?" demanded Grag. "You don't mean to say they're going to let Lowther get away with it?"

"There doesn't seem to be any way they can stop him," said Ezra Gurney. He had a hard honest space-worn look about him that Carey liked. He too was angry.

"The trouble is," he explained, "that Curt has no proof against Lowther. There's a half dozen refining companies on Pluto and they've all raised their fuel-prices together. Lowther only owns one of them outright and in the open.

"He says and they all say that mining and refinery costs have gone up so that they have to charge more for the fuel, which is legal enough. All right. Now we know that Lowther has used dummy corporations and juggled stock and so on until he actually controls the other five companies. But we can't prove it!

"Curt went to everybody at Government Center. They all said the same thing. Such a charge would require hear-

ings, committees, investigation, all that rubbish—weeks, months, maybe years, because Lowther is smart enough and rich enough to stall indefinitely and the chances of nailing him are mighty slim.”

“And in the meantime,” said Curt Newton slowly, “the starmen are forced either to sell out to Lowther for fuel or to stay here in the System while their wives and families and the communities they’ve worked so hard to build go without the supplies they need.

“They’ll give in, of course, because they have to go back—and Lowther will gain a stranglehold on all the trade between the System and the colonies. In twenty years he’ll be rich enough to buy and sell the Sun.”

Grag held out his two great metal hands and looked at them, flexing the fingers with an ominous small clanking of the joints. “I vote,” he said, “that we pay this Lowther a visit.”

“What form of execution would you prefer?” Otho asked him. “Being melted down for scrap or converted into a nice useful boiler? There’s a law against killing people, even for bucket-headed robots.”

“Who said anything about killing?” boomed Grag. “He could have an accident, couldn’t he?”

“Preferably a bad one,” grunted Ezra. “But I’m afraid that approach won’t do.”

“No,” said Curt slowly, “but I think Grag has the right idea at that. I think we ought to go and talk to Mr. Lowther.” He sprang up. “Come on, Carey, this will interest you as a commentary on the brave new world you helped to build!”

“I think I’ve seen enough of it,” Carey said. “I don’t want to see any more.”

BUT he went with them. Only Simon Wright stayed in the ship. They took a car from the spaceport. Except that it had wheels and seats it bore little resemblance to the cars Carey had known. Propulsion units sent it rushing smoothly along the underground highways.

By the time they came out onto the

great elevated boulevards that led across suburb and country the long summer dusk was falling. Carey turned and looked back. Outlined against the deep blue the enormous bulk of the city blazed with many-colored light. Even at this distance it had an alien look to his eyes.

The sleek suburban areas fled by. Beyond them the country still pretended to be as it had been. But Carey’s more primitive eyes detected the deception. Artful hands had arranged the trees and changed the courses of the brooks and pruned the wild hedgerows into pleasing vistas.

The car left the highway and proceeded along a private road. Presently, upon a slope ahead, Carey saw a graceful structure of metal and glass, shaped by a master hand to fit like a huge synthetic jewel into its setting of terraced gardens.

The translucent walls gleamed softly and strains of music drifted on the evening air. The gardens were full of fairy lights. As they came closer Carey made out the flutter of women’s skirts among the flowers, heard the sounds of laughter.

“Looks like a party,” said Otho. “A big one.”

“We’ll give him a party,” rumbled Grag and cracked his metal knuckles.

They came to the gates, which were artistic but highly functional. Curt Newton got out. He went to the small viewer that was housed at one side and pressed the communicator stud. After a moment Carey saw him returning to the car.

“Mr. Lowther is engaged and can see no one,” he quoted and then added, “Particularly us.” He surveyed the gates. “An electronic locking device, operated by remote control or with a light-key—neither of which helps us. Grag, would you care to see what you can do about it?”

Grag’s photo-electric eyes gleamed as he heaved himself out of the car and strode toward the gates. For a minute his enormous bulk was motionless, leaning forward a little with his hands on the bars, testing the resistance. Then he

moved. There was a groaning and snapping and a metallic squeal and the gates were open.

The car drove on into the grounds. "There was an alarm on the gate, of course," said Newton. "They'll be waiting for us and I don't want any trouble. We had better get out here and go 'round through the gardens."

The air was heavy with the scent of flowers. It was warm and on the terraces the white shoulders of women turned back the moonbeams. The music ran slow and lilting and there was laughter under the colored lights. Curt Newton walked through the gardens and after him came Grag and Otho and John Carey, who was moving in an unreal dream.

One by one the dancing couples saw them and the laughter stopped. The swirling skirts were still and the faces watched them, not with fear but with an amazement, as children might look at sombre strangers invading their nursery. The music continued, soft and sweet.

Along the paths between the drooping jasmine and the great pale blooms of Venus, across the terraces, through a sliding wall wide open to the night, and into a pastel room with a vast expanse of mirror-like floor surrounded by graceful colonnades—and here too the dancers drew back from the intruders.

Then, from one of the archways, came a group of men headed by a tall man no older than Curt Newton. He wore a dress tunic of black silk and his hair was black and his face had a clear healthy pallor. Carey thought that it was the sort of skin a woman might have, shaped smooth over handsome bones and set with wide dark eyes. Only there was nothing womanish about Lowther's face if by womanish you meant weak or pitying or possessing any softness of heart.

The men with him were of a type Carey knew and detested. They were the kind who are always somewhere around a man like Lowther.

The two groups came to a halt and eyed each other. Lowther said, "If you

came to say something, say it and get out."

Newton put one hand on Carey's shoulder and pointed with the other to Lowther. "There he is, Carey—the most important man in the Solar System. Oh, the System doesn't know it yet but he is. And he's modest too. He owns all the refineries on Pluto but you'd never know it to look at the records."

He had raised his voice a bit so that it could be heard clearly above the music. A considerable crowd had collected, drawn in from the gardens, and there were plenty to hear.

LOWTHER came closer to Newton. He started to speak and Newton went on smoothly, politely, drowning him out. "My friend has been away from Earth for a long time, Mr. Lowther. I wanted him to meet you, so that he could see the type of man we produce now, the successful man. I thought it might teach him a lesson while he's still young enough to profit by it.

"You see where you made your mistake, Carey? You went pioneering, and got nothing out of it but hardship and danger and sudden death. You should have stayed at home like Mr. Lowther here, using your wits and letting others do the dirty work of opening up new worlds. See what you'd have had—a fine house, a host of friends, a good steady business with no competition?

"After awhile, with patience and good judgment, you'd have owned the shipping-lines to which at first you only sold fuel. Doesn't it make you ashamed, Carey, to think of how you wasted your youth—just as the starmen stranded out there on Pluto are wasting theirs?"

Lowther's face was even whiter than before except for two streaks of dull red along his cheekbones. "Listen," he said, "if you're so worried about the starmen, you'd better get word to them to watch their step or they'll be in real trouble.

"They're threatening to resort to violence and I'm leaving for Pluto in the morning to see that my property is protected. I don't know exactly what you're

trying to do, Newton, but even you can't buck the law—and neither can your friends."

Newton's face was tight and dark but his voice was soft. "There are laws and laws," he said. "Some of them are so basic they haven't even been written down. Perhaps someday soon we'll have a longer talk about laws."

He turned abruptly and went back down the long room with the glassy floor and the others went with him. Lowther followed them at a distance, looking after them as they left the grounds.

In the car, speeding back toward the city, Grag said regretfully, "Why didn't you let me wring his neck?"

"He may get it wrung yet out on Pluto," answered Curt. "When the star-men there find out that I couldn't do anything for them they'll try to do something for themselves." He turned suddenly to Carey. There was a hard reckless glint in his eyes.

"Carey," he said, "do you want to come with us out to Pluto and see a fight?"

Carey shrugged heavily. "Pluto, Antares—what difference does it make where I am? Yes, I'll go. I'll go anywhere that isn't Earth."

He was sick with Earth and opulence and the greedy faces of men. The old horizons were gone and even Pluto, that distant stepchild of the Sun, was the seat of monopoly and all the ugly things that had plagued mankind since the beginning. But it would be a change from Earth.

Otho said to Curt, "You're not really going to egg them on to fight?" He said it not with reproach but with hope.

Curt answered grimly, "No. They'd only get themselves killed without accomplishing anything. Lowther was right. As of now the law is all on his side."

He was silent and then he said, "No, it was another kind of fight I had in mind."

He said nothing more, until they reached the spaceport. Then he grinned at Carey, a grin without much humor

in it. "I know what you need," he said. "Grag, go on back to the ship and keep Simon company. Otho and I will help Carey drown his sorrows."

Grag went off. Newton and Otho took Carey some distance around the periphery of the port. There was an endless number of joints along the fringe, some of them fashionable, some catering to ordinary spacehands. They entered one of the latter. There were a bar and booths and tables and Carey thought dully that this at least had not changed.

They sat down. Through the window, which looked out on the flash and thunder of the port, Carey could see the rows of docks and the long sheds with the names on them of this and that line or company. One of them said LOWTHER MINING CORPORATION and there was a sleek ship in its dock with an endless conveyor taking cases of supplies up its gangway.

"Lowther's ship, getting ready to take him off to Pluto tomorrow," said Newton harshly.

Otho raised his glass toward it. "Confusion to it," he said.

Newton moodily watched the distant ship. Carey felt the unfamiliar liquor explode in him like liquid fire. Otho signaled and presently there was another glass in Carey's hand.

He was in no mood to refuse it. He had been a long, long time in space, his awakening had been hard, his homecoming bitter. The future was a cold and formless presence, crouched behind a dark curtain.

Carey drank.

There was an interval wherein he knew that he talked but was not sure what he said. Then he found himself in cool night air and Otho's arm was helping him into a ship.

Even through his haze, Carey knew Simon Wright's toneless voice by now. "Where is Curtis?" it demanded.

"He'll be along," Otho said easily. "This way, Carey—you need sleep."

It was later—how much later he could not guess—when Carey half-roused to voices, Simon's inflectionless voice and Curt's.

"—and you won't tell me what you've been up to?" Simon was saying.

"There's nothing to tell, Simon. We got nowhere with Lowther so we came back. Now we've got to go out to Pluto and see if we can stop him there."

"Curtis, I know you and I know that you have done something. Well, we shall see. But one thing I am sure of and that is that someday your anger will outrun your wisdom and bring you to disaster.

Carey drifted into sleep again. He did not even rouse to the shock of take-off. When he woke, the ship was on its way to Pluto.

CHAPTER IV

Earthmen No More

THEY made the long sweeping curve to escape the pull of Neptune and ranged in toward the dim speck that was Pluto. The jumping-off place of the Solar System, with nothing beyond it but interstellar space, riding its dark cold orbit around a Sun so distant that it seemed no greater than the other stars.

Yet even here, if wealth was hidden away, man would find it. Carey thought that undoubtedly a few shrewd souls would have set up concessions for mining coal in Hell.

He had watched all the way out from Earth but with only a flicker of the excitement he would once have known. He was interested, of course, because it was his first trip beyond the orbit of Jupiter. But the thrill was gone. People talked of going out to Saturn or Uranus now as they had once talked of going out to California. It gave Carey, somehow, a feeling of having been cheated. In his day going to Mars had been a big thing and fraught with danger.

From a featureless fleck of reflected light almost too faint to be seen Pluto grew into a recognizable world—a dark world with black wild mountains shooting up against the stars and eerie seas

of ice. There was something so cruel and ghostlike in the look of it that Carey could not repress a shudder.

It seemed rather like an invader from outer space than a member of the familiar System, the more so since in bulk and mass and composition it bore a ghastly resemblance to Earth as though alien demons might have made it as a joke.

They were a little ahead of Lowther. They had not had much start on him but they had a faster ship.

"We'll have a little time," said Curt. "Even a few hours might be enough to talk some sense into Burke and the others."

Burke, Carey gathered, was captain of one of the two star-ships fighting the battle over fuel, was more or less the leader of both crews.

"They counted on help from the Government," said Otho. "When they find out what's happened they're going to be hard to hold."

"We've got to hold them," Curt answered grimly. "They'll blow their only chance if they start fighting."

Simon said nothing but his lens-like eyes followed Curt intently. The forward jets began to thunder and the Comet, still curving, entered its long arc of deceleration.

As they swept closer Carey saw that the frozen plains were pocked with craters, and that some of the mountain-peaks had been shattered by caroming meteors. The lunar desolation of the world was hideous. Carey thought what it must be like to live and work here.

"The refinery men get relief at regular intervals," Curt told him. "And there are a couple of small domed cities around on the other side."

Carey nodded. "Even so Pluto seems a stiff place for them."

"It is," said Curt. "You'll see."

The televisior buzzed. They had been coming in on the automatic beam but now somebody wanted to talk to them. Curt opened the switch.

A man's face appeared on the little screen. It wore the expression of one who has been handed a hot wire and

doesn't know how to let go of it. "Lowther Mines speaking," it said. "Identify yourself."

Newton did and the man's face grew more unhappy. "We can't very well stop you from landing," he said. "But keep your distance from the domes—no closer than a hundred yards. There's a charged barrier." He added, "We're well armed."

The screen went dark. Curt shook his head. "They're all set for trouble. Let's hope it hasn't already started."

Curt set the Comet down at last, on the edge of a vast white plain where it struck against a mountain wall. Carey saw two great dark hulls looming near them with only their mooring lights showing. Well over a hundred yards away, sunk into the living rock of the cliffs so that only the outer bulwarks showed, was a series of steel-and-concrete domes.

Northward along the plain, in a sector marked off by beacons to warn away incoming ships, were other domes. Here there were rifts and gouges in the barren rock of Pluto, hulks of strange machinery and structures of various sorts whose uses Carey could not be sure of.

Occasional lights gleamed but nothing moved. The diggers and the ocean-carriers were still and no clouds of vapor came from the buried stacks of the refineries.

"They're shut down tight," said Curt. "Regular state of siege." He looked at the others. "Don't forget what our friend said about the barrier."

They put on protective coveralls—except for Grag and Simon, who needed no such protection. Curt had handed Carey one of the suits. "You've come all the way out and you might as well see the fun," he said.

Then they went out into the black Plutonian night toward the star-ships. It was intensely dark, colder than anything Carey remembered except that one split-second touch of open space.

Carey stared at the distant mockery of a Sun, overcome with the feeling that he was indeed on the outer edge of the universe. He was so occupied by his sensations that he was taken completely

by surprise when men rose suddenly out of the hollows of the ice and closed around them.

A torchbeam flashed out and struck Curt full in the face. He said, "Burke?" and from beyond the light a voice grunted, "Okay, relax. It's him."

"What's the idea?" Curt demanded.

"Well," said Burke, "we picked up your call but we wanted to be sure it really was you and not one of Lowther's smart tricks."

"Or," said Curt, "did you hope maybe it was Lowther himself, trying to get behind the barrier before you knew who he was?" He glanced around at the shadow-shapes of the men, who were numerous and armed.

"Maybe," said Burke. He switched the beam around the Futuremen and onto Carey. "Who's this?"

"He's not Lowther either. His name is Carey and he's a friend of mine."

Burke nodded briefly. His attention returned to Newton. "What's the news? What did they say on Earth?"

"Let's go on to your ship," said Curt. "I'll tell you about it there."

Burke and the others must have known from the way he said it what the answer was going to be. But they turned silently and went back across the ice with the Futuremen and Carey into their ship.

They had the port shutters down but there was light inside. It felt very warm to Carey after the spatial chill. They stripped off their heavy garments and went aft into the main cabin, sorting themselves out so that the officers of both star-ships sat down around the battered table and the crews crowded where they could in the passageways to listen.

CAREY stood unnoticed in a corner of the cabin. He could see these starmen now. They had large scarred hands and faces burned dark as old leather. Their uniform jumpers were worn and their boots were shabby and they wore their greasy caps in a certain way that Carey remembered. He saw the sort of eyes they had too—and those

he remembered also.

Burke leaned forward across the table. He had an oblong face that was mostly bone and sinew like the rest of him and a hungry look around the mouth. "All right," he said. "Now tell us."

Curt Newton told them and as he talked Carey watched the star-men. An eerie feeling crept over him that he had known these men before. He had served with them in the little ships that fought their way along the planetary roads that seemed then so long and hard. It was strange to see these men again, to know that they still lived. He could almost have called them by name except that their faces had altered a bit and he could not be sure.

Burke was talking. "If they won't do anything we'll have to do it ourselves. And we will! I'm not going to sell our ship to that pirate for a load of fuel."

Curt said, "The law—"

"To blazes with the law! When it starts protecting thieves instead of honest men it's time to forget the law."

There was no cheering or loud talk. There was only a harsh mutter of assent.

"Listen," Curt said. "You can't smash into the domes and take the fuel. You know what they've got ready for you."

"We don't have to smash in," said Burke. "Lowther's on his way here. We intercepted his message saying so. Well, he can't land behind the barrier. There isn't room."

Curt nodded. "The same thing you pulled with me. Get Lowther in your hands . . ."

"And kill him, if we have to," Burke finished quietly. "But we'll get our fuel."

For the first time Simon spoke. "That is murder."

Burke shrugged. "They'll have to come a long way to catch us." He added in a sudden fury, "Murder, is it? We've got our wives and families out there! They need the medicines, the tools, the seeds. What if they die for want of them? Isn't that murder too?"

Simon said, "If you kill Lowther you can never come back for more."

Curt had got to his feet. He was about

to speak. Then Carey heard a voice clamoring over the annunciator, crying, "Radar room! We've just picked up Lowther's ship! He's still in free fall but he's coming!"

Carey saw the fierce excitement that took the star-men. There was a sudden wolfish shouting, a ringing of boots on the deck-plates. Burke was yelling orders. The men in the passageways began to move.

Burke faced Curt Newton. "Well?"

Curt said, "Hold your men back."

There was a tenseness about him now. It seemed to Carey that he was listening for something. "Hold them back!"

Burke's face hardened. "I couldn't if I wanted to." He added slowly and meaningfully, "They'll trample anybody that gets in their way."

He turned his back on Newton then and for a time nothing more was said or done. They listened to the voice of the radar man, calling out the position of Lowther's ship. The voice became more and more puzzled.

Simon's lens-like eyes were fixed intently on Curt Newton.

"He's still in free fall," said the radar man. "He hasn't started his curve yet and the indicators don't show any rocks."

Burke put his mouth close to the speaker-grid. "Communications," he said. "Are you getting anything from Lowther's ship?"

The answer came back, "No. The Company station is calling Lowther but he doesn't answer. It's like he hasn't any power."

"Still no rockets," said the radar man. "I can't figure this one. He's way past his point of approach and going wide."

"Still no signals," put in Communications. "He doesn't answer."

"Going wide—" The voice of the radar man reached a tight pitch of excitement. "He's lost his landing-curve! He's heading right out into space with no rocks!"

For some odd reason Curt Newton seemed to relax. But Burke and the other officers stared at each other with dawning comprehension and then with

a joy that was more savage than their anger.

"He's out of fuel," said Burke. "Nothing else would kill both his rockets and communications. He's out of fuel and heading right out into the stars in free fall with no power."

He began to walk back and forth with short steps as though he could not bear to be still. His hands gripped fiercely at the air. "We don't have to kill him now. It's done and not a finger laid on him. And it's better—better! He'll learn before he dies. He'll learn what it means to be between the stars with no fuel!"

Curt Newton turned sharply toward the door.

Simon glided before him. "Curtis," he said, "this is your doing."

Curt said quietly, "Get out of my way, Simon. I'm going after him."

Burke heard. So did the others. Carey saw them move toward Newton.

"What do you mean—going after him?" cried Burke.

"There are other men in that ship besides Lowther. There's no reason why they should die."

"Oh no," said Burke softly. "You're not going to bring him back."

Carey saw them closing in around Newton and he pushed in to stand with Otho beside the red-haired man.

"Listen," said Newton. "I've fought for you. I'm still fighting for you. Are you going to trust me or aren't you?"

Burke's glance wavered before his. But he said, "It don't make sense to bring him back."

"Let him go," said Simon Wright slowly. "He has done this thing for you. Now let him finish it."

UNCERTAINLY, reluctantly, Burke stepped aside and Curt Newton went out of the star-ship with Carey and Otho and Simon Wright.

Not until the Comet was rising up from Pluto on a jet of flame, rushing out into the vast darkness where Lowther's helpless ship was gone, did Simon speak again. He asked tonelessly, "How did you do it, Curtis?"

Newton shrugged but would not meet

his gaze. "There's a certain chemical, you know, a pinch of which can kill a whole tank of ship-fuel. An anti-catalytic. Well, that night before we left Earth, I slipped into Lowther's ship and used it to kill his Number Six, Seven and Eight fuel-tanks."

He shrugged again. "One to Five would take him out around Neptune, I knew. But then he'd run out and couldn't curve in toward Pluto."

"But why?" Carey asked puzzledly. "Why do it and then save him?"

Simon said, "I can guess why. But I tell you, Curtis, even if you succeed it was harebrained. Once in the past your rashness made outlaws of us four. It could happen again."

No more was said until Curt Newton's masterful piloting brought the Comet at last alongside the dark silent ship that was steadily falling toward infinity. The emergency locks were coupled together with magnetic grapples. Curt and Otho were armed and Grag stood behind them like an iron colossus, guarding the narrow passage.

The locks were opened and Curt stood facing Lowther. Watching from the background Carey caught a glimpse of Lowther's face, ugly with fear, with hatred.

"I might have known it would be you," he said to Curt Newton. "You caused our fuel to go dead. How you did it I don't know but—"

"You can't prove that," said Newton. He spoke to the men who were crowding behind Lowther. "Take it easy," he told them. "You're in no danger."

A ray of hope crept into Lowther's eyes. "You're going to take us back?"

"Well," said Newton, "I can't tow you for my stern-grapples aren't working. And my ship is small. I could take off your officers and crew but I'm afraid there wouldn't be any room for you."

Lowther thought about that. Carey could see it in his face—the visualization of his ship plunging on and on into the great deeps with him alone in it.

"You couldn't do that," he whispered.

"I wouldn't have any choice," said Newton.

Carey saw Lowther's face whiten and crumble until it was hardly human. Then Newton said, "However, I might sell you fuel to get back to Pluto."

Shrewd and biting even through the terror Lowther's eyes fastened on him. "Now we're getting to it," he muttered. "All right, what's the price?"

"As you know," said Curt, "fuel is very high these days. But I'm not out for profit. You sign over all rights in all your Pluto mines and refineries to a Government foundation, for the furtherance of travel and exploration among the stars. And I'll let you have a bunker full."

Something like a smile touched Lowther's mouth. He smothered it at once, beginning to protest and threaten, but Curt shook his head. "Oh, no," he said. "There will be no repudiation of this deal later on when you're safe on Pluto. You're going to make out a full confession of your activities in gaining control of the five other companies. It will be kept in a safe place. And just to make doubly sure . . ."

Here he pointed to a fat-joweled little man behind Lowther's shoulder—a man whom Carey recognized as one of the group who had been with Lowther that other time on Earth.

". . . to make doubly sure," Curt was saying, "you will go into another cabin and write out a separate confession. As Lowther's secretary you know every angle of that deal because you helped him. And if the two confessions don't match I will know that someone is lying—and that will be two people there won't be room for in my ship."

He turned again to Lowther and waited. Three different times Carey saw Lowther start to speak, and give it up. At last he made a gesture of defeat and Curt motioned him into the *Comet*. The secretary whimpered once and disappeared.

Less than an hour later, Curt Newton had the signed irrevocable papers and Lowther had his fuel.

* * * * *

Time had passed. The two great ships on the white plain of Pluto were readying for take-off. Rock and ice quivered to the deep hum of great generators running on test. Men were feverishly busy around the gangways.

Carey came hastening across the ice to where Newton and the Futuremen were watching. And as he ran he felt buoyantly and fully alive for the first time since his strange awakening.

"I'm going with them!" he cried. "I talked to Burke. He signed me on and I'm going with them—out to the stars!"

Otho laughed and said to Newton, "You were right about him."

Suddenly Carey understood. He said, "That's why you brought me out here with you? You knew!"

The red-haired man nodded. "I knew that only out on the edge, out on the frontier, would you find your own kind again."

Newton paused and added, "You're not the only one, Carey. I've seen it happen over and over again to spacemen in my own time. They go out young and eager, dreaming and talking of how someday they'll come back to Earth with wealth and glory and live there happy the rest of their lives. And when they come back they find they can't do it, they find they're Earthmen no more."

"Earthmen no more," Carey repeated, wonderingly. "Why, yes. That was it, of course. It wasn't Earth that changed so much. It was me."

From the distance, amplified by an annunciator loudspeaker, roared Burke's voice. "Time to lift, starmen!"

And Carey, slipping and hurrying, went back across the frozen plain, toward the ships and stars that waited.