

PLANET STORIES



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HAPPY RAIN NIGHT

By DEAN EVANS

*It was the Big Sleep for those at Residential Number 327
this night . . . this very dark Martian night . . .
this very good night for the Synthi-Rain.*

IT WAS the eve of the annual synthi-rain and all Mars was settling down for the big sleep that always went with it. Everything was ready, reso-skins had been peeled off the pumps a week before.

Uh huh, thought the lone attendant at the fuelport outside the city. You could tell everything was ready, even the traffic was thinning. Hadn't been a 'copter or anything in for fuel in the last ten minutes.

He eyed the wall clock inside his cubicle. Almost eleven. Might as well close up and go on home, there wouldn't be any more customers in tonight.

He suddenly decided to modify that thought as an old hull-weary job came banging clumsily down into cradle number one and slumped, little vibration tentacles rippling here and there over its surface. He sighed, went out the lock, went over to the cradle.

There was a woman in the ship. Not much of a woman, but you never knew what the big gambling city of Fraon would draw next in the line of tourists. All kinds.

Like this one. This one could be called typical. Wild black hair on the dame. Not long, but wild. A little sloppy, like the last-season's modo-strap she wore on the white skin between her breasts. The strap looked fringy.

"Fuel, Miss?" he asked.

But the woman didn't seem to hear. She was studying a small scanning disc, turning it this way and that like somebody pruning herself. Only not. She was giving the place the once over.

"Yeah," she said finally. "Yeah, but not the kind you think . . ." she stopped. She glared suddenly across the ramps at another jet—a Security Ship—that was coming in

fast, settling for the cradle next to hers.

"No," she said. "No. Changed my mind. How far's Fraon from here?"

"You're on the edges now. Follow the bottom lane and drop when you see the lights. That be all?"

But the woman didn't answer. She yanked at controls inside the cabin and the old beat up jet rose with a tired, grumbling roar like the sigh of a very old man contemplating the long long years that have gone.

Ten minutes later she looked down, yanked once more on the controls. She'd almost overshot. The ship shuddered violently fore to aft and then jammed down inside the Administration Port.

She hunched her shoulders inside the plastiskin, let her eyes go up to a sucker sign off in the distance. She read:

CITY OF FRAON, GAMBLER'S PARADISE

And in smaller letters beneath:

COME CLEAN—GO AWAY THE SAME

She curled her lip. Between Fraon and the city of Jao to the south, the planet had quite a bit of "Paradise." Of the two cities, though, Fraon was the larger; Fraon would be the logical one. That's why she'd chose to try it first. That's where *he* would come.

She left the ship and made her way over to the Guide, a small niche of a place set into the corner of the now darkened Administration building. The Guide was open but it didn't look as though it was doing any business. She went inside.

There weren't any customers at all. The only person in the place was a young, greasy



looking man, an attendant, who just now was looking bored and fingering a black pencil line mustache.

THE greasy looking man raised his eyes. His finger left off caressing his mustache, and he studied the woman coming toward the desk. H'mm. Nice build. A little on the rough side, like something left out in the atmosphere too long, but all in all not too bad. Beggars can't be choosers. Not on Rain Night they can't. Not way out here on the edge of nothing at eleven in the evening when everybody's gone home, they can't.

He pushed the machine of buttons across the desk toward the woman. "Just in off the deserts?" he asked.

The woman tossed her hair out of her eyes. She gave the greasy man a look. She eyed his mustache. She didn't say anything.

The greasy man grinned. Not hard to get, he thought, just a little careful. A little careful till she found out what he had to offer—generally speaking.

"Five more minutes before we close," he said, his grin changing to a leer. "You look a little lonely, sister. Me, I'm right there beside you yanking on the same controls. Look, it's Rain Night, sure, and most everything'll be closed in another hour but I know of a place . . ." he left the rest unsaid. He raised an eyebrow significantly.

The woman didn't say anything. She dropped a teal credit into the slot on the control box, punched a button. Nothing happened. Then the teal came rattling back at her through the reject. She looked up.

"Something?" the greasy man said.

"Yeah. I punch the button for a room and all that happens is my money coming back."

"A room?" He looked incredulous. "On Rain Night? Don't be absurd, sister. All taken days ago. Might try the 'Coptels. They might have a vacancy. But why worry about that? Like I said . . ."

He leaned over the counter, leaned over toward the woman. Leaned right into a heat gun that had appeared like old-time magic in the woman's right hand.

"Hey!"

"You're the soul of Martian generosity," the woman said evenly. "On you it sprouts

ears. I could see that eight lanes up. Open the bank, I need a fistful of credits."

"Huh?"

"Open the bank."

He was getting to believe it. And not liking it. He glared at the woman, then glared down at the heat gun in her hand. He growled indignantly:

"Why you lousy space tramp, I oughta . . ."

"Hold it!" Something hard was in the woman's voice.

But he didn't hold it. His hand went out darting, and his fingers clutched for the alarm buttons on the bank. And they almost made it, those fingers of his. They came within a thought-space of making it.

But didn't, actually.

The heat gun made a funny sound like a tiny jet biting at solid atmosphere. The greasy man's hand stayed for an instant, his fingers playing little chords of agony in the air.

Somebody like him. After that his body folded forward and his head came down over the machine. His mustache, somehow, didn't look so very good now.

The woman went around the counter, punched the control buttons on the rear of the bank. At once two compartments came out and she looked down into a mess of teal credits that would choke a moon crater. She frowned. Then she transferred the platinum teels to the big pocket in her plastiskin, closed the compartments, went around to the front of the desk again, and looked down at the buttons.

She dropped a teal in the slot and touched the 'Coptel button. The greasy man had been right, there were some left. From the side of the machine came her reservation identity key.

She had a last word for the greasy man: "Happy Rain Night, Buster."

She went out of the place, went back to her ship, dropped the identity key in a small slot on the instrument panel and closed the control lever. From here on the 'Coptel would do the directing and controlling of the weary ship. She leaned back, felt at the bulging pocket in her plastiskin.

She needed those teal credits. She didn't know how much, but she knew she'd need a lot, for *he* could always be found where the money was. Or the women. Or both.

THE 'Coptel court was empty. Cold winds just in off the deserts swept little memories of sand around, flicking at 'Coptel walls with a dry, brittle sound. The woman left her ship, went through the 'Coptel lock, dumped the bag she'd taken with her from the ship onto the bed. She looked around. Then sniffed softly. It didn't matter what the place looked like, she wouldn't be here long enough to notice.

She showered, and for the next ten minutes worked hard on her hair. After that she went to the bag over on the bed and took from it a new plastiskin with a gleaming, golden-colored modo-strap. She pulled it over very white thighs, struggled her arms in. All that remained was to transfer the teal credits and the gun. After that she went out to the ship and set the controls for take-off in fifteen minutes.

Going down the 'Coptel ramp to the spacelators she chuckled softly to herself. The ship would go up to the eighth lane and stay there. She wondered what the Security people would think when they found it up there with nobody in it.

The croupier at the telecto-spin table was a funny sort of a guy, a philosophic guy. Standing at one table night after night you get like that. He liked to study the people who came here to *Half-Century House* to gamble. Some could afford it, some could not.

That black-haired woman over by the quarter-teel machines for instance. The one with the cheap new plastiskin with the phony golden modo-strap on it. Take her. Ten to one she worked somewhere in a mining office and managed to put away, by great sacrifice, a little something from her salary each week.

Ten to one she'd done this for a year just so she could come up here to Fraon and have herself a whirl in the gaming houses for one or two days. How do you like that? And ten to one she'd go home broke as hell and go back to the slaving routine some more. Unless, of course, she could discover for herself some other less laborious way of making a fast teal.

Not a bad looking woman, either, he thought. There was something—some tiny little thing—about her that puzzled him, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He

watched her play the machines, watched her as she scanned the place with dark eyes that missed about as much as the teal-collector on tax day. Odd. She didn't seem to be paying any attention to the machines she was playing, she seemed more interested in the motley crowd in the place.

Oh, well. Just another woman. Another twenty minutes and they'd be closing up and he could go home for the big sleep everybody enjoyed during the synthi-rain. He spun his wheel idly and looked away.

"You running this wheel or just modeling for a space artist?"

The croupier jerked his eyes around. Then he blinked. The woman with the black hair and the golden modo-strap was standing at his wheel giving him a sour eye. He pulled himself together, worked a little house-smile for her.

"Dreaming," he admitted. "Like to try the wheel?" He felt sorry for her. Poor kid, she should stick to the quarter-teel machines.

He watched her flip the pocket in her plastiskin. He watched her with eyes that began to bulge as he saw the amount of credits she piled out on the table in front of him.

"What's the current odds on whether the scientists have figured out whether space is infinite?" she asked.

His eyes were still bulging, but he looked away, checked on the chart. My God, the long shots these amateurs take! "One hundred and two thousand to one," he said. "As of ten twenty-two tonight, which is the last quotation I have."

The woman nodded. "That gives me plenty of room for my elbows. Spin the wheel and see how I'm doing."

The croupier hesitated. "Those credits," he said warningly. "You mean to bet them all?" He made a rapid calculation out of the corner of his eye. "You must have five or six hundred thousand . . ."

That made the woman grin. "Shucks," she said. "What do you take me for?"

The croupier blinked again. He was quite sure he didn't know.

"BET one thousand only," she said. She watched him sigh with relief. Funny, she thought. The guy had a conscience, and in a place like this. She watched him spin,

watched the telecto-spin whirr, slow, come to a clicking stop.

"Ninety-nine thousand six hundred and four," he said. "To one."

"Uh huh. And now what does the chart say?"

The croupier checked. "One hundred and two thousand to one. It hasn't changed. Sorry, Miss." He raked in the teels.

"That was fun," said the woman. "So much fun I'm getting bored stiff. Rake in the rest of these teels, too. Stick 'em in your pocket."

"WHAT?" The croupier's eyebrows jumped.

"Yeah."

He blinked. Studied. Blinked again. His philosophic thoughts were going out the space lock fast. He was trying to revise, trying to bring himself up to date. He wasn't getting anywhere. That golden-modo-strap *was* phony. A child could see it was. And yet . . .

"I'm not so good on my telepathy tonight," he said coldly.

"Skip it. I'm like a guy named Slan you used to read about. Had shields up around my brain."

That brought a cell of silence around the table. The croupier didn't speak, didn't blink, didn't breathe, didn't do anything.

"Looking for a man," said the woman finally. "Space-happy guy named Artie Sterling. Know him?"

The croupier caught a glint of something hard in the woman's eyes. He still didn't say anything.

"Don't think you're selling a good joe down the canal," the woman went on. "If you thought that, drop it. There isn't a creeping, crawling, oozing thing on all Mars to compare with him. I know. Who would know better than me?"

The croupier still didn't say anything. But his eyes said it for him; they were asking a question as big as space itself.

"The guy's my husband," said the woman. She stopped. She studied the worry lines that responsibility had embedded in the croupier's forehead.

She said: "You look like a nice hard-working man, to me. A good family man. You probably got a nice wife, couple of nice kiddies at home. You worry a little some-

times, though, because the money a croupier makes isn't a hell of a lot. And growing youngsters need this and that and the bills pile up and a man worries and the end isn't in sight because you're young yet and there's years and years of struggle still coming up."

The croupier swallowed. He took a breath. He looked down at the thousands of teal credits on the table. He looked up again.

"Look at me," said the woman. "Look at what the guy did to me. You can see it in my eyes."

The croupier did look. Then he took another breath and then he looked down once more at the money on the table, and then he did something that would probably make him spit for the rest of his life every time he stared into a mirror. He whispered:

"Yeah. I know Artie Sterling. He was in here this evening early."

Uh huh. And now the big one. "Where'd he go?"

The croupier took a last long drowning breath and his rake started to pull in the teels. "Okay, lady, okay. The guy's shackled up right now in Residential, Number 327. With somebody else's wife. That what you want to know? That what you wanted me to say?"

The woman didn't answer. She let her eyes slit contemptuously for an instant before she turned, moved away from the table, and went quickly toward the lock that led to the spacelators outside.

ARTIE STERLING pulled the woman's arms from around his neck. "Look, baby," he said. His handsome forehead wrinkled, a little annoyed.

"Arthur . . ."

"Time to be shoving off, baby."

"Shoving off?" The woman's large brown eyes balled with dismay.

"Yeah. Frankly . . ." he lifted his shoulders lightly. ". . . frankly, the only reason I dropped in tonight was to sort of say goodbye. Get it?"

"Arthur!" There was shock in the woman's voice.

"Yeah. Look. Let's not push it into a corner like somebody's unwanted asteroid. Let's look at the thing. We've been slicker than the skids on the spacelator, baby, but it can't last forever. Sooner or later that

husband of yours is gonna open his dopey eyes. And then what?" He made a little mocking shudder. "And baby, if there's anything I *don't* want, it's to tangle with the Chief of all Space Security."

He grinned at the small figure of the woman beside him. "Up to now it's been great laughs on dull nights, but you know something? Every now and then I ask myself: suppose this guy, this Chief of Security—your husband, you know—suppose one of these nights he should get out a little early. Suppose he should come home an hour or two before we expect him?"

"Oh!" The woman smiled nervously. "That what's worrying you, honey? That's silly. John never does that. Never comes home early. Forget it."

Artie Sterling raised an impatient eyebrow. How do you tell off a dame when she doesn't want to believe it? He untangled himself from the woman's arms. He got to his feet. He said sharply:

"Look, baby. Here it is: it's done, see? Great fun, like I said, but it's done. Gone. Burned out like the hulls of hell. I'm shoving off."

That one did it. The woman was suddenly aware of it. He could tell that by the way her eyes shot open and then dulled quickly. That's the way they all act at first. They get over it, of course, but at first it's always like that.

He watched her get to her feet. Admiringly. He still appreciated the neat little figure she had. Still admitted she was a doll to look at. He watched her go to a black metallic desk against a wall. Open the center drawer. He said protesting: "Baby, I don't want that bracelet back I gave you. Hell, that's a souvenir. Keep it. When old Artie gives a gal something he means it."

"I'm not giving back the bracelet, Arthur." The woman's hand went into the drawer, came out again. The hand held a heat gun. "No, Arthur. Not the bracelet."

"Baby!" Utter shock laved the handsome man's features.

"You wanted goodbye, Arthur? All right. If that's the way you want it. If you're sure."

"For God's sake. . .!"

"The night of the big sleep, Arthur." Her finger jerked on the heat trigger.

The man was only human after all. His

hands came clutching tight, pressing frantically at a spot about where his navel would be. But it was late for that, and when he fell it was straight forward and down.

The woman looked at the handsome black waves of his hair. Death doesn't change that. No, not immediately, it doesn't. She sobbed once and fainted.

The guy had been right, although he didn't know it. And the woman had been dead wrong, although she didn't know it. Chief of Security, John Henderson, had on this night of the synthi-rain, quit a little early. Had, on this not-very-busy night gotten home a little sooner than usual. About an hour and a half sooner, to be precise. He had come in through the rear lock. Had come in quietly, for he planned a little surprise for his wife. Had stood very quietly in the doorway of the darkened anteroom that led directly to the living room. And he had listened. And he had watched.

He came through the doorway. He leaned down over his wife, took the gun from her hand and laid it on a table. He leaned down once more, took the woman in his arms. There was something quite impossible to express in his eyes.

He took her to the bedroom, put her down carefully, studied the shock-stiffness of her form. He went to a wall cabinet, got a hypodermic, found an artery in the woman's arm. Her breathing at once calmed, flattened. Sleep-breathing now.

The man back in the living room was a little larger problem. He was quite heavy for his slender build. Henderson half carried, half dragged, the body out through the front lock and out to the 'copter port alongside the house.

Artie Sterling's 'copter was there. Henderson had seen it when he came home but there hadn't been any significance to it then. He stuffed the body into the freight deck. Then he carefully latched the lock shut. Registration numbers on the ship gleamed dully in the half darkness. X-13-X. "X," the unknown. "13," the ill-fated.

He went back to the house, pulled the metal lock to behind him. He stood rigidly for a long long while. Thinking.

He went over to the transmitter set in the corner of the room and looked down at it. He brought his right hand up, let it hover

over the control buttons.

The room was as silent as a room can ever be.

A buzzer suddenly bracked out. It was a loud, naked, startling sound. Like a bugle in an empty church. Henderson jerked. He gulped in a trembling breath, turned, nervously wet his lips. He went over to the outside front lock and pulled it open.

IT WAS a black-haired woman who had wide, wild eyes. The woman was wearing a golden-colored modo-strap between dead white breasts. And in her hand she clutched a heat gun.

"Back it right in, Buster!" The woman's voice was harsh. "You're not the one I want, but right now I'm not too choosy."

Henderson swallowed. He took a few backward steps. Then a few more. He watched the woman's shoulder nudge the lock shut. He watched her come toward him.

"That's far enough. Where is he? Where's Artie Sterling?"

Henderson didn't say anything. The woman's skin. White. Prison white. He knew.

The woman saw the heat gun on the table. She smiled, not amused, and picked it up. That made two guns leveled at Henderson.

"What I couldn't do with these. All right, where is he?"

But he didn't answer. Adjustment is a method thing.

The woman rapped: "Look, I got the word. They said I'd find my husband with somebody's wife. Here. At 327 Residential. That jar your memory?"

It seemed to. Henderson said softly: "Your husband?"

"Yeah. Up here with a guy's wife. How do you like that? There ain't enough unmated kids around, he wants the married ones, too."

"He isn't here."

"Huh?" a little admiration lit up the woman's eyes. "Look, guy, you got guts. I'll hand you that. But tonight I ran across another who had guts too. You oughta see him now."

There was a silence then. You take away the sounds and there are always silences. And then:

"The guy's my husband, sec? An! once there was a time when I loved him. I loved him hard enough to figure he'd appreciate a little loyalty. I did five long years for that mistake. There was this woman—even then he had them, it seems—and I had the silly notion she was chasing him, instead of the other way around. So she died a little. And I did five years like I said. Can't you tell? Can't you see it on me?"

Henderson nodded.

"Sure. White, I am. You get that way after five years. Where is he?" The woman bared teeth. "Can't figure it, huh? Look, even in prison you get to hear things. Like I heard about him hanging out the 'business-as-usual' sign all the years I was inside. With the woman, I mean. Do you think he ever came to see me? Do you think he sent me letters? Post cards even?"

"All right. Yes, he was here. He isn't here now."

"Where is he?"

Henderson sighed. He looked into the guns in the woman's hands. "Did you ever hear of Jao?"

"Sure. Gambling city. Down south."

"Yes. And did you ever hear of Sarah Henderson?"

"No."

"My wife." He said it simply.

It took a few moments but the woman got it. She began to nod, began to get the comprehension in her stark eyes. She said after a little while: "I see, guy. I know how you feel. Is that what you had the gun out for? Uh huh. I can feel for you, believe me. Look. You got a can?"

"What?"

"Crate. Ship. 'Copter."

Another silence.

"Look. There's one outside. I saw it when I got off the spacelators. I'm going to sort of borrow it for a while. I've been doing it for weeks now chasing that bum all over the planet. So one more won't matter. I'm heading for Jao. Security will get it back for you. All I want is a little time."

HENDERSON shook his head. "You won't make it. The rains have already started. All ships are grounded for the next twenty-four hours. Security ordinance."

The woman snorted. "I'll chance that. All

up his hand and touched a button. The little screen came into life. He said softly:

"Henderson to Flight 9."

"Flight 9. Yes, Chief."

His voice became even softer: "A 'copter. Registration X-13-X. Pilot Arthur Sterling. Took off five minutes ago from Fraon. Headed for Jao."

"One moment, Chief, I'll put radar on it." A pause. Then: "Right, sir. Got it. Coming fast. Helluva nerve that guy's got. Don't he know all ships are supposed to be grounded?"

Henderson shook his head. "It's all right. He had a little trouble. I gave permission to continue flight. Contact Jao, tell them I said not to bother it. Got that?"

"Whatever you say, Chief. Right."

"Thanks." Henderson flicked the set off. He looked over at the gun on the table. He picked it up, took it with him into the bedroom. He laid it on the unoccupied pillow next the sleeping woman's head. He didn't look down at her now. He quietly went back to the living room, went to a black metallic desk up against a wall. From it he took a very small box with a little gold plate inset in the lid. Engraving on the plate winked up in the light:

From Sarah to John

Wedding present.

He lifted the lid, looked down at a tiny reel of tape inside. He touched a button under the lid. Music filled the room quite softly for a moment. Organ music. Wedding music. And then no more music. But voices, a man's voice, and a woman's voice. When it got to the part where the woman's voice said, "I take thee, John . . ." he stopped it. He re-reeled the tape, put it back where it had been before. Then his trembling fingers touched the erase button, held it there until the entire little reel had run off.

After that there wasn't anything else to do but go to the front lock, go outside, go away from Residential Number 327. The night was dark, very dark. A very good night for the Rain.

I ask from you is a few hours before you report the stolen ship. Get it? And in return I'm doing you a favor when I find him. I'm trusting you, you trust me."

Henderson sighed. He looked at his heat gun in the woman's hand, looked up then into the woman's eyes.

She nodded. Put his gun back on the table. "Yeah. See what you mean. I won't need yours. A deal?"

"A deal." He watched her go. He listened to the 'copter take off. After that there was another silence in the room, a very heavy silence.

He slowly crossed to the transmitted set in the corner. Hesitated. Slowly brought