

# Venture

## SCIENCE FICTION

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VIRGIN PLANET

POUL ANDERSON 4

*It was a daydream come true— a brand new world, like Earth but more beautiful, and Davis Bertram the only man among a million women. And holy Cosmos, he'd found it, and he wanted out!*

World of the Future

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# HERO AT WORK

by JOHN JAKES

After what he'd done to the Marsport girl  
Boone was through on Mars—  
There was only one way out,  
and it took a shocking weapon to find it . . .

AT THE NARROW INTERSECTION, Martin Boone stumbled and fell. He might as well have died then and there. He had the deep conviction that he could if he wanted to; but he didn't want to just . . . die. He wanted to kill himself, and this time, by God, he thought bitterly, it's going to come out the way I plan it. Not the best way. Not the worst way. *My way.*

His head hung buzzing, for long seconds, and in a drunken all-fours animal posture he stared at the heat-cracked, dust-stuffed cobbles. Finally he rose and got himself around the corner into the Street of the Terran Merchants. He slid with his back along a wall, choking and shivering; then, driven blindly by some instinctive homing sense, he twisted away from the wall and staggered down the center of the narrow, sour little street.

Two silent natives hurried past, like animated bluestone carvings. Boone swung around and

leered at them, waiting for an insult. Then he slumped and snifled, watching them vanish in the shadows with their resentment of Earthmen sharp as the planes of their wide bony shoulders. *We're just too damn good for you,* he thought, but his heart wasn't in it.

## MARTIN AND HEDDA BOONE

### TERRAN ANTIQUES

the sign read. Boone stood weaving under it and glared at his distorted image in the glass. Hedda, one of the things he had planned and planned for, and now look. The antique shop, fighting him every hour of every day, never in any detail being what he had wanted it to be. The planet itself, for that matter, the lousy arid dustbowl of a planet, hadn't given him what he wanted, and had taken what he couldn't afford.

He cursed into the dry wind, threw back his head and stared

bleakly up to the windows above the antique shop. "Well, this time," he promised his twisted twin in the glass, "this time I'll . . ."

He had to fumble for the opening to the stairway, and he almost fell once halfway up. At the top he put his head up, squared his shoulders, and defiantly kicked the door open like a man.

Hedda was waiting for him in the dim apartment, crouched like a lard billiken under the smoky glow of a kriswood lamp. Her ridiculous yellow hair was dirty and her robe was too short, and one eye was a circle and one a slit as she took in her husband, the filthy white suit, the bruise on his cheek. Then her nostrils writhed.

Boone knew she smelt the Martian girl.

Carefully he walked to the window and stood looking down on the cobblestones, trying to focus his eyes. He heard behind him the savage decisive stabbing of her cigarette in the tray, and other movements, and oh God, he thought, she knows, she knows; and before I can find my own clean way out I have to argue.

He sighed and turned around, and self-pity fled with the alcohol. A dry shriek started in his throat, and stayed there stifled by fear.

Hedda Boone held a shotgun in her hands. Boone had paid a

lot for that shotgun, sure he'd have the customers bidding against each other for such a collector's piece . . . quite over-looking that in these times such an instrument of blood-letting and flesh-tearing was not attractive. These were the days of sanitary, incisive death from the silent needles of a projector no larger than a pencil. And so the shotgun had attracted only Martian dust and had lain inactive with the rest of his plans, until now, when its two black muzzles, like eyes, stared at Boone's stomach.

Hedda spoke very softly, all the months of festering sickness which had grown between them implicit in every syllable. She said, "I'm going to kill you, Mart."

*For the Martian girl?* he was going to cry. *But Hedda, Hedda—she wouldn't have me!* But he never got the chance to say it, because his wife, his soft-lard tired-eyes wife pulled the triggers, and the eyes staring at Boone's stomach flashed red, one after the other.

Indistinctly Boone heard thunder, like the roar of the old freight rockets. The thunder spun him around with hurt lashing at his left ribs. He doubled over and capered forward in pain, crashed against the window and dove through it.

There was a time of infinite relief for him, then, when with a kind of joy he knew he could die

now and be finished with all this; and then another time of slow reflection and growing fury, when he realized that again he had not been permitted to follow through. At the intersection he hadn't wanted to die, because he wanted to kill himself. By the same token, he didn't want to be murdered. *Just let me do it my way once, huh?* he whimpered childishly to the spangled blackness around him. And then there was a time of gathering, of focussing, until all things in the world came down to an incandescent demand, a total anger. If ever he had in him an atom of pity, of sympathy for what Hedda had gone through, it disappeared now. If ever it had been in him to blame himself, shame himself—even see himself, it was gone. For by her act, Hedda had at last given him something to hate, something to destroy, a purpose of purposes, symbol of everything he had ever done, half done, not done in all his miserable years.

These reflections completed, he struck the cobblestones with a crunch; and this was how he learned that time can be compressed.

Much more dead than alive, more unconscious than not, he began to crawl into the blackest alley shadows. Again and again the other blackness rose about him, squeezing away breath and trying to plug throat and nostrils and

hood his eyes. He beat it back and down, and went on crawling, grunting and slobbering with effort. *Hedda, he thought, damn you, Hedda. I have to live to get you.*

A grey rat ran chittering down the alley. He wormed after it, sobbing.

Sometime after dawn he scratched at a grimy subsurface door and hung on to consciousness until he felt hands under his armpits, lifting. Gratefully, then, he accepted the tide of black and let himself drown a little.

When next he saw anything, it was the ragged back of a tall man who was washing his hands in an inch of water in a bowl. Boone felt luxuriously comfortable. His side no longer hurt; the constriction of bandages was comforting, and the heap of dusty sacking on which he lay was like clouds. "Stickney . . ."

The tall man turned around, wiping his hands on an aqua-saver. He dropped it into the chipped reclaiming unit and grunted. "You with us again, Boone?"

"Is it bad?"

"It was. It might've been. It isn't," said Stickney. "What did that to you? Never saw anything like it." Stickney's eyes shone green with narcotics, which, although they had robbed him of his practice, had not quite destroyed the skill of his hands.

"Stickney, is the teleportation house still in existence?"

"I'd say somebody dropped you on the comb-dunes," said Stickney, "except that I dug out eighteen pieces of lead."

Boone sat up and grunted. "It was a shotgun, damn you," Boone spat. "Now what about the teleportation house?"

"It's illegal."

"Stickney, so help me, if you . . ." Slowly understanding came, and he sighed and palmed open his money-pouch. Watching Stickney's greedy eyes, he realized clearly that if the pouch had responded to Stickney's palm-patterns, he would probably be dead by now. "Here," he growled.

Stickney pocketed the notes. "What do you want to know for?"

"None of your business."

"All right." Stickney shrugged and seemed to close the subject with an audible snap. If Boone had had room for a new hate in him, it might have started here. Instead he sighed and got his money out again. Reluctantly he skinned off one of the few notes left and gave it to Stickney, who said immediately, "You go to a telephone. Call Marsport 8-7734. That's all."

Boone smiled thinly, rose, climbed into his soiled white coat and left the place. He reached a plaza where mobiles moved like shiny bugs. Venusians, blue Martians with silent, servile faces,

bearded Terrans thronged the square. Boone stood in the crowd for long minutes, breathing and hating. He thought of the Martian girl and put her swiftly out of his mind. First, Hedda.

He went to a phone cluster and dialed the number. No one answered it, but Boone simply let it ring. He had no alternative to this, and wanted none. If he reached an obstacle, he would simply press against it until it went away or he died . . . and after a while someone answered.

Boone said, "A man named Stickney gave me this number."

"Stickney?" The voice was remote. "Describe him in detail, please."

Boone did so.

"Ah, certainly. We cannot be too careful. My name is Rakejian. I suppose you wish a job. Eighty solars a week. It is . . . rigorous. Were you ever a soldier?"

"It happens that I was," said Boone, who had been with Cruces at Black Hollow when they opened up Venus. "But I wasn't planning to go myself. Someone else."

"Ah? Perhaps you'd better have this man call himself."

"It isn't a man."

"Now you interest me very much. Three hundred and twenty solars, outright. All right?"

Boone had not thought about the money. He truly had not. Injecting it into the conversation confused him for a moment and

he was silent. Rakejian apparently misunderstood his silence, for he explained, "We compute it at four weeks of a soldier's pay. Women seldom last any longer than that out there, so we have some basis for computation. I'll make it three fifty, sight unseen. All right?"

"Where can I meet you?"

"Depends on what time."

Boone thought rapidly. "Tonight. After dark. Say around eleven."

"Admirable. Be at 81 Street of Hitler and Napoleon. Make yourself known to the man with the yellow face. And—bring the . . . ah . . . material."

"See you," said Boone, and hung up. Quickly, he dialed again. A sourness rose in his throat as he forced out the words: "Hedda? Mart. Please listen, please. Could I see you later today? Look, I'm all right. Yes, I'm sorry. Please, Hedda. Yes, I got someone to bandage it. No, it's not bad. Oh, Hedda, I must've been out of my mind, after all you . . ." He bent forward near the mouthpiece, crooning, injecting into his words every possible note of craven remorse. The conversation was extremely long, and at its end, Boone was chilly with sweat. Yet somehow he had succeeded. Death-mask lines etched his face as he left the cluster and hailed a mobile cab for the Street of the Terran Merchants.

Hedda Boone clutched her husband's arm. "Oooh, Mart, my head, my poor sick head." With a wet nuzzling of her lips, she leaned against him. Flick-flick-flick went the pattern of white lights through the cab's interior. Warm lips moistened his cheek. Hedda's bubbling, silly monologue went on as Boone crooked a wooden arm about her waist and attempted to keep from retching audibly. Her heavy body quivered as she raised one perfumed hand to touch his cheek.

"So many drinks, Mart. So many lovely drinks, my sweet Mart."

He grinned vapidly in the hot flickering dark. "We'll have dinner soon, Hedda. This place I'm taking you to, it's—wonderful. Genuine animal flesh, cooked over coals." Boone's eyes flicked ahead. He sucked in breath as the mobile shot into the Street of Hitler and Napoleon. "Tonight we're going to be a real married couple, sweet."

She murmured childish syllables. "Eighty-one," said the driver. The mobile hissed to a stop. Boone handed his wife out. She staggered, and he held her up. He paid off the driver and the machine hissed away.

This section of Marsport was deserted, ancient. The house was large, with heavy double doors. It was a Terran house, built in the claiming days of the early seven-

ties to remind someone who did not count his money of some exactly similar house in Terre Haute or Bucyrus or Kankakee. The architecture was a jumble. Stone lions flanked the wide steps. Gables like crooked shoulders slanted up against the glare-yellowed night sky.

Lounging against the balustrade behind a stone lion was a man in an old-fashioned coat. He lit a match and raised it to his cigar, and the flickering light revealed a bland, heavy-lidded face, a yellow face—not the brown-yellow of a Terran oriental, but the clear greenish yellow of jaundice.

"Restaurant?" Hedda burbled. "This doesn't look . . ."

"Shh. You'll see. It's 'way different from anything else. Just you wait." He urged her up the steps. As he passed the yellow-faced man, he met his eyes and murmured, "Mr. Rakejian?"

The man nodded very slightly. Boone made an equally slight motion of his head to indicate Hedda. The man blew out his match, and instantly two heavy-shouldered shadows appeared, one at the top, one at the bottom of the steps.

"Marty, Marty, I love you so . . ." crooned Hedda, and then the edge of a calloused palm caught her on the nape of the neck and she went down without a sound. The two dark-clad thugs

caught her up like a dropped garment, for all her weight, and whisked her through the double doors. They closed. Martin Boone stood on the dark steps numbly, not frightened, not surprised, not anything at all, until he felt a touch at his elbow. He turned his head slowly.

"Three fifty," said Mr. Rakejian. Boone looked down at the little roll of bills. He took it and put it away. Rakejian said, "Happy to deal with you any time. We never get enough females. The pit miners on Titan will be very happy tonight."

Boone did not answer, and when he walked away he did not look back. He found a cab and got in, thinking of the Martian girl. He gave the address to the driver, and in thirty seconds roared, "Can't you hurry?" Beneath his trousers his thighs were running with sweat. Far in the back of his mind something nibbled at him, something he had meant to do and hadn't carried out. No matter; he was alive again, unattached, unburdened. The Martian girl had calmly cited ancient laws to him: that a man must be these things, and a good man too, before she may go with him. Well, he was all these things and good enough for her, the blue bitch. "Hurry up, damn you!"

Nightmare, nightmare. . . .  
Was it really asking such a hell

of a lot of life? he demanded whimperingly. Just to want something, and then get it—just that. And he'd never wanted much. Other people wanted to rule planets, buy castles, own, control, command. All he'd wanted was a nice little business and—and now, when everything else was gone, the Martian girl.

And she, so blue and cool, so polite to him, explaining about the ancient laws, and how freely they permitted such a union as he wanted; but money and freedom were not enough by themselves, and desire, even her desire, wasn't enough. He had to be a good man. What is a good man? Many things, any one of many kinds of things. Had he done anything for Mars? for example. Or for Earth, or Earth's people or interests? Had he had children, perhaps? That was a gift to his kind. Had he ever given anything to life?

Slender, blue, fine cold hair, narcotic lips and politeness, talking of ancient moralities while he sat with a drink in his fist and his glands fairly squirting within him. At first he had tried to follow her words, but soon, very soon, that became impossible, and all he could do was to watch the movements of her lips and head and the exquisite gestures of her slender hands. That couldn't last long, and it hadn't. He had exploded, hurled his drink, roared like a wounded animal, leapt on

her to take what she wouldn't offer. And even then she had been kind, careful of him, lithely twisting behind him and locking his forearms together in a thin blue vise, whispering cold cautions into his ear. He must not, he must not; did he not know the unspeakable cruelties the Martians worked on anyone, even their own kind, who attacked women? And how much worse it would be for a Terran, with his more sensitive nervous system?

He was past caring, and after that it was no conquest, for she would not fight him. He had not even the satisfaction of forcing her. Afterward, he realized fully what he had done, and the implacable, inescapable torture he had loosed upon himself. He had run away sobbing, while she lay and looked at him disdainfully. Would she tell the men now, or later, or tomorrow? Would she wait months? He would never know until the blue shadows closed on him one day (today?) and he disappeared into some dusty desert gopher-hole where the Martians, over months, would flick and flick away through tiny inexpressible torments.

A way out, a way out . . .

Rakejian!

He slid through alleys like the grey rats infesting Marsport, until he found the back of a phone cluster at the corner of one of them. He waited in the shadows

until there was no one, Terran or Martian, in sight, scuttled inside and slammed the door control. Private at last, he fumbled out coins and dialed Marsport 8-7734, all the while feeling his heart beat like a count-down before blast-off, each pulsation marking off one less left to him. Through the louvres in the cluster wall, he could see blue Martians in their steady pacing, going about their business two and two; and was their business Martin Boone by now?

Rakejian answered immediately.

Boone identified himself. "I want a job," he gabbed into the phone. "You said eighty solars a week, that's fine with me. Anywhere you say, but I want to leave right away."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Boone. I can do nothing for you. Not for a while. Certain mechanical difficulties—"

"Is it the money? Forget it. Is it the job? I don't care what or where, Rakejian; don't you understand? Titan, Ganymede, I don't care. Mining, murdering, anything you got, I want, long's it's off Mars."

"You're talking too much!" rapped Rakejian. "Calm down. I couldn't do anything today if I wanted to, and now I doubt if I want to. I told you there are mechanical difficulties, and that's what I meant. Call me in—"

"You don't understand!" Boone cried. "I'm in trouble with the natives!"

"A girl?"

Boone moaned in terror. Rakejian said, "You damn fool. Don't mix me up in anything like that." He sounded shocked—he, dealer in flesh . . . procurer, drug-pusher, slave-trader—he was shocked. He hung up.

Boone screamed hoarsely and dialed back. He got no answer. . . .

He went mad then, rat-mad, shrewd-mad, and in an odd way, superhuman as well. He flogged his weary body and lacerated lungs into carrying him all the way back to the Street of the Terran Merchants.

He burst into his deserted shop and tore into his own stock. He got an ugly little early 21st century blued-steel automatic and a half-dozen of the fourteen-charge magazines to fit. He fired four test shots at random, to see if the old charges were still operable, and it was this that first attracted attention. Then he went out at a dead run, making no attempt to conceal himself. He ran right up the middle of the main streets, half across Marsport, brandishing his weapon in one hand and a full magazine in the other, moaning for breath, eyes red and glazed. People of three planets faded away ahead of him and followed after. When he came to the

Street of Napoleon and Hitler, it was like the arrival of the mobs at the Bastille, with this difference: the mob had the numbers, but he alone had the hatred.

At number 81 he sprang up the steps. The doors opened and three heavy-set Terrans boiled out, two with needle pencils. Five needles were projected, and all missed. The automatic yammered, and the three guards fell screaming.

Boone ran through a deserted entry room and shot another guard just inside the main hall. Here perhaps forty men cowered and froze—dirty, ragged, scarred, rot-lunged, shifty, the very dregs of all in humanity that is rotten and beaten—Rakejian's recruits, ready to be shipped out to the moons of Jupiter, to the asteroids, to Venus . . . to whatever hidden, festering spot in the cosmos where they might be needed and need never be traced to. And here too was Rakejian himself, and his traitor Martian technicians.

Boone ran to Rakejian, bashed the yellow hand he saw emerging with a needle projector, and sank the cold muzzle between Rakejian's ribs. "Get me out," he said in a tattered, rasping, voice which was no longer human. "Put me through that thing or by God I'll blow your liver out."

"Boone, you fool, you don't know what you're doing!" said Rakejian, his face hideous as it paled under the yellow. "I told

you, it's not working! Can't you wait for just a—"

Boone shot him four times, and then turned his gun on the technicians. "You send me out, hear?" he barked, and ran and dove into the shimmering mist which hung in the transmitter ring.

Something like a gigantic padded sledge-hammer hit him between the eyes, and his consciousness clicked out.

On River Island in the City of Marsport stands a massive stone building blazoned with massive stone letters: PSYCHO.

In a cell, a man in white spoke softly to Martin Boone.

"Don't you remember? don't you remember?"

He did and he didn't. Men in white had asked him this, and asked him, time and again, insistently, for . . . for a long time. After they asked him, they would tell him a story, and that was the part he never could remember.

Here it came again:

"You're a hero, Martin. Don't you want to live, for that? Three worlds are waiting for you to come out, so they can tell you what they think of a man like you.

"Single-handedly you wiped out the most vicious racket existing today. Because of you the teleporter is in the hands of the government where it belongs, and you've changed the face of the

universe, opening up new frontiers, obsoleting space-ships. Because of you the illegal mines are closed, their slaves freed.

"But more than that, you've given us a new symbol for real devotion and sacrifice. The rescue of your wife from her kidnappers is a legend even now, and will make your name immortal. You saved her from something worse, even, than the worst *they* could have done to her, because she was trapped in . . . well, say trapped in a kind of time which isn't the time we know.

"The teleport field works *almost* all the time. When it doesn't, some poor soul gets lost in a twist of the continuum for all eternity. It probably kills, but it might not. It didn't kill Hedda. From what we can gather, it froze her as she was, loving you with all her heart, for twelve hours of time as we know it. *But in that place where she was, the twelve hours were countless years—years in which she did not age nor think nor change her mood.*

"And in a way that's your greatest reward; for when you freed her by flinging your own body into the choked teleport field, you freed the most devoted human being, I think, who ever lived. It was as if she had soaked and marinated for half a century in noth-

ing but love for you. She will never leave you, and three planets are ready to see to it that you and she never are separated again.

"You have no idea how much you mean to us now, Martin; you will have no idea until you get up and come out and accept all that the grateful planets are ready to give you. Just to give you an idea, there's a Martian girl waiting for you, just waiting—knowing of your love for Hedda, knowing how impossible it all is, but still, waiting just for you. And you know how highly they prize civic duty.

"Won't you see Hedda now?"

Martin would scream then, trying to pull his arms out of the gentle immovable sleeves.

"Won't you see the Martian girl, even?"

He would scream some more.

"Martin, Martin, if you would just tell us—why do you keep trying to kill yourself?"

And Martin Boone would try to explain that he'd planned to kill himself, he'd *planned* it, and by God this time something was going to come out the way he planned it; but that never seemed to make any sense to them, and at last the laws of time would begin to perish again for him and he'd sink away and forget, forget, forget, until the next time they told him the story. . . .