

# fantastic

## ADVENTURES

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# Contents

## STORIES



Jalu, the Golden Girl of Kalendar, returns once more in Orlin Tremaine's newest story, in the March issue.



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# Lancelot Biggs

## COOKS A PIRATE

By

NELSON S. BOND

**"Cooking," explained Biggs, "is simply a matter of chemistry." But he didn't expect that he'd have to prove that statement!**



**T**HE whole trouble started with Slops. Slops wasn't a *bad* cook, you understand. He just wasn't a cook at all, rightly speaking. He had what you might call a "tapioca complex." It was tapioca for breakfast, tapioca for lunch, tapioca for dinner. Every day. Boiled tapioca, stewed tapioca, even fricasseed tapioca—

Ugh! When you hop gravs twice a month on a lugger shuttling between Earth and Venus, you can't get by forever on a diet of ta—that stuff!

Anyhow, it finally got to be too much for even an iron-bellied old spacedog like Cap Hanson. So when we pulled into the Sun City airport, Cap said firmly, "You're through, Slops. And I do mean through!" And he kicked our (alleged) chef off the *Saturn*, along with his clothing, his back pay, his harmonica and his ta—you know what.

Which left us way out on the end of a limb, for it turned out that there wasn't a single spaceriding cook dry-docked in Sun City. While the *Saturn* was taking on its cargo for Earth, pepsin and medical supplies, mostly, with one or two holds full of *mekel* and *clab*,

the Skipper did his doggonedest to scare up a grub-wrangler. But no soap.

An hour before we were scheduled to blast off, he ambled up to my control turret. He plumped himself into my easy chair and scratched his gray pate nervously.

"Damn it, Sparks," he complained, "I thought I was doin' the right thing when I fired Slops, but—"

"You were," I told him. "By chucking that greaseball off the ship you saved fourteen lives. The crew. They were planning on either mutiny or murder, they didn't care which, if they had to eat one more dish of that goo."

"But," he continued worriedly, "in another hour we throw lugs for Earth. And we don't have no cook. What the blue space are we goin' to do?"

Our First Mate, Lancelot Biggs, had entered as the skipper was talking. Now he offered, helpfully, "I'll ask Slops to come back if you want me to, Captain. I saw him at the Palace Bar—"

"No!" said the Cap and I in the same breath.

Biggs looked hurt. His wobbly Adam's-apple bobbed in his throat like an unswallowed orange. And he defended, "Well, after all, tapioca's good for you! It contains valuable food elements that—"

"Shut up!" howled Cap Hanson. He wasn't in a mood to take advice from anybody, and especially Lancelot Biggs. Perhaps that was because our recent "transmuting trip," in the course of which we had attempted to turn lead jars to platinum by exposure to cosmic radiation, had failed. The Corporation had carpeted Cap for that, and Cap was sore at Biggs because the whole thing had been Biggs' idea in the beginning. "I'll murder the guy who even mentions that—that stuff!"

Mr. Biggs said aggrievedly, "I was only trying to be helpful."

"You're as much help," the skipper told him caustically, "as fins on a dicky-bird's chest. Now, git out of here! G'wan! Git!"

Our lanky first mate turned and started to leave the turret. And then, suddenly—

"Wait a minute!" yelled Cap Hanson. "Where do you think you're goin', Mr. Biggs?"

Biggs gulped, "Why—why you told me to—"

"Never mind what I said! Do what I say! I think I've got the solution. Mr. Biggs, that cranium of yours appears to be stuffed with miscellaneous lore. Do you by any chance happen to know anything about the art of cooking?"

"Who?" said Biggs. "Me? Why, no, Captain. But I don't imagine it would be very difficult. After all, it is based on elementary chemical processes. By exposing certain organic substances to the action of hydrogen dioxide, under suitable thermostatic conditions—"

Cap Hanson's jaw dropped open. He goggled at me. "Wh-what's he sayin', Sparks?"

"He means," I translated, "that cooking is easy. All you need is water, heat and victuals."



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"MIND YOU," SAID THE PIRATE ICILY, "NO FANCY MEDICI FLAVORING TO THIS MEAL"

"Oh!" The skipper grinned ghoulishly. "In that case, our problem's solved. Mr. Biggs, you've just earned a new private office and a new uniform. You'll find both of 'em below decks, third door on your right."

It was Biggs' turn to look shocked. His protuberant larynx performed a reverse Immelmann. "H-huh? But I'm not a cook, Captain. I'm your First Mate!"

"You *was* my First Mate," corrected the Old Man coolly, "until just now. The IPS codebook says, 'It is the Captain's privilege to draft any member of crew or command for any duty in times of emergency.' This is an emergency. And besides, you just got done sayin' that cookin' is simply a matter of exposin' certain hoochamacallits to the action of thingamajigs. So—" He brushed his hairy paws with a gesture of finality, "That's that! To the galley, Mr. Slops!"

AND he was right. That was that. But the funny part of it was that, forced to a showdown, Lancelot Biggs came through!

The first meal out, which was lunch served at noon Earthtime, I went down to the dining hall thinking anything might happen and expecting the worst. I got the shock of my life, and shocks are a not inconsiderable part of the life of a spacelugger radioman.

Mr. Lancelot Slops had pulled a banquet out of the hat! We had fried chicken with cream gravy, hot biscuits, candied yams, a side dish of stewed *clab*, Creole style, raisin pie, and the best damn coffee ever served on the wallowing old *Saturn*.

What the other men of the crew thought, I have no idea. They didn't say. Every man-jack of 'em was so busy shoveling grub into his puss that the conversation was dead as a Martian herring. But after I'd bulged my belt to the last notch with fried pullet, I waddled into the galley and confronted Mr. Biggs.

"Biggs," I said accusingly, "you've been holding out on us! Why didn't you tell us before you could cook a meal like that?"

He shuffled his feet sheepishly. He said, "Was it all right, Sparks?"

"All right? It was terrific! I haven't had such a feed since I was a kid."

He looked relieved. "I'm glad. Because, you see, that was the first meal I ever cooked."

"It was the first—*what!*"

"Mmm-hmm! But there were lots of cook books here in the galley. And I figured so long as I had to do it, I might as well do it right—" He grinned at me shyly. Once in a while I wondered, briefly, whether any of us understood this strange, lanky genius, Lancelot Biggs. This was one of the times. "I—I found it rather interesting, Sparks, to tell you the truth. It is, just as I told Cap Hanson, just a matter of elementary chemistry. The pots and pans are the test-tubes; the stove is a huge Bunsen burner."

I said admiringly, "I'll hand you one thing, Mr. Biggs. You believe in sticking to theories, don't you?"

"But of course. 'Get the theory first'; that's the

big secret of success in any undertaking." He looked pleased and a little excited, too. "We're going to have a good trip home, Sparks. There's plenty of food here to experiment with. And in the holds—"

It was just then that I caught my number being buzzed on the intercommunicating audio. I cut through and yelled, "Sparks speaking. What's up?"

"Sparks?" It was my relief man calling from the radio room. "You'd better come up here on the double. A message from Sun City, and I think it's bad news."

"Right with you," I hollered. I snapped a brief "See you later!" to Biggs and raced up the Jacob's ladder to the turret. My relief man was there, also Cap Hanson and the second-in-command, Lt. Todd. All three of them looked a bit grim and a bit glum and quite a bit apprehensive. My relief shoved a wire flimsy into my hand. It was a cipher message from Sun City spaceport. I knew the code as well as I know English and Universal, so I read it aloud.

"HANSON COMMANDER IPS SATURN EN ROUTE VENUS-EARTH. TURN BACK IMMEDIATELY FOR CONVOY. PIRATE HAKE REPORTED ON COORDINATES THREE FIFTEEN PLUS NINE OH NINE YOUR TRAJECTORY." It was signed, "Allonby, Comm. S.S.C.B."

I stared at Cap Hanson, wondering if my face were as queasy as my tummy felt. I said, "Hake! Runt Hake!"

Hanson said, "Yes, but that's not the worst of it, Sparks. Tell him, Mr. Todd."

Todd wet his lips and faltered, "We—we're in a serious spot, Sparks. We accelerated to max twenty minutes ago and cut motors for the free run. And since we had—or thought we had—almost nine days of idleness, I told Chief Engineer Garrity he could take down that number. Three hypatomic that's been missing."

That still didn't make sense. I said, "So he took it down? So what? He can put it together again, can't he?"

"No. He found the casing worn, melted it down for a recast. We—we can't recase it for at least two days!"

FOR the sake of you Earthlubbers who don't get the lingo, let me say it in words of one syllable. We were in a hell of a jam! The hypatomics are the motors that operate spacecraft. In this case, one of them had shown signs of weakness. With the ship "free wheeling," so to speak, in space, the engineers had taken down the faulty motor, discovered it needed remoulding, and had melted down the casing. As Todd had said, it would take at least two days—probably more—to recast the moulding, put the hyp together again, so we could blast.

But the worst of it was — Hake! Runt Hake. There are pirates and pirates in the wide transverses between the planets. Some of them are good guys, that is, if an outlaw can ever be considered a "good

guy." Like Lark O'Day, for instance, that gay, smiling bandit who always gave lugger captains a signed receipt for the cargoes he stole, and who had once let a tramp freighter go through untouched because the Captain acknowledged his life savings were wrapped up in the cargo. Who had once stopped a passenger superliner for the express purpose of stealing a single kiss from its charming passenger, the newly crowned "Miss Universe."

But others were skunks and dogs and—well, think of the nastiest things you can think of. Then multiply by ten, add infinity, and you have Runt Hake.

Runt Hake was a killer. A throwback to the rotten old days when men's first thoughts were of death and war and violence. He was a pirate not so much because of the value of the cargoes he lifted as because he liked to do battle. And he had a sadistic strain in him somewhere. His idea of good clean fun was to board a freighter—like the *Saturn*—unload the cargo at his convenience, then blast a slow leak through the outer hull.

After—I might mention—having first removed all lifeskiiffs and bulgers from the ill-fated victim. Once, in the asteroid Sargossa, I saw a ship that had been scuttled by Runt Hake's cutthroat crew. Its crew still remained with the ship. But not as recognizable human beings. As raw and frozen clots of pressured flesh.

Oh, a swell guy, this Runt Hake. And now we, disabled and helpless, were drifting right into the trajectory where he awaited us.

Cap Hanson said grimly, "There's nothin' much that we can do about it, of course. We've got one six millimeter rotor-gun for'rd. We'll give him that."

"And get ourselves blown to atoms," interjected Todd, "with his pierce-guns. No, Skipper, that's no good. But how about the Ampie? If we set out our Ampie, maybe—"

An "Ampie" is that strange, energy-devouring beast from Venus whose inordinate appetite for electrical power forms a shield for spaceships penetrating the Heaviside layers of the various planets. It wasn't altogether a bad idea. But Hanson shook his head.

"No. It wouldn't work. An Ampie couldn't take a heat ray. There's only one thing to do. Send word for the convoy to come on the double-quick—and hope it reaches us before we run into Hake."

That was my cue. I shoved the relief man to hell off the bench and got the wobble-bug going. And, mister, I filled the ether with SOS's—and added a couple of PDQ's for good measure. I picked up an acknowledgment from Sun City, and threw them a hasty explanation. They wired back that the convoy cruiser would make all haste, and to not be frightened. . . .

Ha! Can I help it if my knees chatter?

**T**HERE was one thing you could absolutely depend on Lancelot Biggs to do. And that was—stick his nose in at the wrong minute. For as we three were giving the sob-towel the good old go-over, the door

popped open and who gangled in but Mr. Slops, First-Mate-and-Bottle-Washer! His face, in contrast to ours, was radiant with joy and delight. He had a grin on his phizz that stretched from here to there and back again. He chortled, "Hey, Cap—"

"Go 'way!" mourned Cap Hanson. "I'm thinking."

"But, look!" Biggs opened one hamlike paw. And there was a wee, gray ship-mouse. He placed it on the floor before him. "Look what I found in the No. 4 Bin. It acts so darned funny—"

"Go 'way!" repeated the skipper, still gloomily. "If you make me lose my temper—"

Biggs said, "But he *does* act funny—" And to tell you the truth, the little mouse did. Usually, you know, a mouse is the scaredyest thing alive. Put him down in a place like this, surrounded by giant humans, and he'll run like mad to the darkest corner.

But this little twerp didn't run. Matter of fact, he deliberately moved to the man nearest him, Todd, that was, and began to nuzzle himself against Todd's shoe! Just as if the Lieutenant were an old and loved acquaintance! Mr. Biggs chuckled again.

"See that? Do you know what makes him act that way, Skipper? I'll tell you. It's the pro!"

"*Mister Biggs!*" The Old Man's face was fiery red with rage. "This is no time for nonsense. Within hours, or perhaps minutes, we may all be dead! Now, for the last time, get out of here!"

Biggs, sort of stunned, said, "Y-yes, sir!" He retrieved his curiously-acting little pet from where it rubbed its soft muzzle against Todd's shoelaces, put it in his pocket, and backed out the doorway. As he went he tossed me a beseeching wigwag. I nodded; then when no one was paying me any neverminds, joined him in the runway outside.

"What's the matter, Sparks?" he demanded.

I gave it to him, both barrels. He had a right to know. Every man has a right to know when it's bye-bye time. "But don't tell the crew," I warned. "The Old Man'll do that if he thinks best."

Biggs' eyes were huge and round. "Runt Hake! Gee, no wonder the Skipper was cross." He plunged into one of his characteristic silences. Then, suddenly, "Hey!"

"Hey, what?"

"They say Hake is a show-off. Likes to crack the whip on captured ships, ordering up big meals and so on before he scuttles it—"

"Well?" I said. "You think you're going to poison him, maybe? Don't be a dope. He'll make you swallow a pussfull of everything you serve him."

"Never mind. I'm not sure my idea is any good—yet! But have you got a book on physiochemistry?"

"In my office."

"Swell. Get it for me, will you? I'll explain later."

Well, I got him the book and he jammed it into his pocket and disappeared toward the galley, jogging along like a stork on stilts. But I had no time, now, to laugh at Biggs' physical or mental peculiarities.

Because my ears had just caught a sound they did

not want to catch. The sound of metal grating on metal near the off-port. The banging of a mailed fist on *permalloy*, the asthmatic wheeze of the airlock, a sailor's shout ending in a choked gurgle—

I charged back into the radioroom. "Cap," I yelled, "at the airlock! Somebody. It must be—"

It was. Runt Hake and his pirates.

YOU wouldn't think, to look at Runt Hake, that he was a killer. True, he held a hand pierce gun on us as he approached, moving smoothly, lightly, up the runway. A half dozen men behind him also held their side arms poised, ready for action, while another half dozen deployed down the side corridors toward the engine rooms and control turrets. But as Hake came nearer he tossed back the quartzite headpiece of his bulger, and I saw that his hair was wheat-gold, his lips curved into something like a tender smile, his cheeks smooth, soft, boyish.

His voice was gentle, too. He said, "You offer no resistance, Captain? That is wise."

Cap Hanson said, "Hakè, I surrender my ship to you freely. But do not harm my men. That is all I ask. My men do not deserve—"

"But, Captain!" The slender little pirate's eyebrows lifted archly. "Surely you are a little premature in your pleas? We have just arrived. There are so many, many things to be done before we—ah—enjoy our little pleasures."

And then, as he said that, I saw why men cursed the name of Runt Hake. It was not in his face. His golden hair, his pink cheeks, his soft mouth—all these were but gilding for the rotteness within him. The real Hake was in his eyes. Those dancing, glinting, gloating eyes that leaped into swift, flaming delight as he hinted at that which was to come.

He was a devil. A pint-sized devil, perhaps, but a devil nonetheless. I knew, now, that the stories were all true; that we could expect no mercy of this man. He would amuse himself with us for a while, toying with us in feline fashion. Then he would leave. And we would stay. Like the broken things I had seen in the Sargossa.

He was speaking again. Softly, melodiously, as if he were a warrant officer at some cargo port on Earth rather than a midspace pirate appraising his "take".

"The cargo, of course, Captain, is mine. Even now my men will be transferring it to my ship beside yours. But there are a few other things we will do while aboard. It is lonely, being in space for months on end. And we do not dine luxuriously. You have, I suppose, a well-stocked larder? With fine foods; wines, perhaps, to tempt the palate?"

Hanson tried again.

"We have, Hake. And they are all yours if you'll promise me the men will be unharmed." He hesitated. "Take me along as hostage, if you want to. That'll be all right. But—"

"But, no, Captain! That would never do. I think you had best remain—with your men." Again there

was that tiny, dancing light in Hake's eyes. "You see, many know my name, Captain, and I understand I have a small reputation. But none have ever seen my face—and lived. It would be unfortunate if I were to be identified, would it not?"

He turned to his followers.

"Disarm them," he designated us negligently. "And when the cargo has been transferred, have our men come in to dine. We will dine aboard the *Saturn*."

YOU Earthlubbers will think this part strange, maybe? That we showed no more resistance than this to Hake's invasion? Well, I don't blame you. I've read *Martian Tales* and *Spaceways Weekly*, too. The writers for those mags would like you to believe that every freighter-captain is a horny-fisted John Paul Jones. But think it over! The *Saturn* was a lumbering old cow compared to Hake's streamliner. Hanson had adopted the only sane policy. To placate the pirate, be nice to him, hope we could stall off his scuttling plans until the S.S.C.B. cruiser reached us.

So for more than two hours, unarmed and disconsolate, we of the *Saturn* sat around and diddled our fingers while Hake's men, using our engine crew, the wipers and blasters, for porters, transferred the more valuable parts of our cargo to their ship. They didn't take the bulk stuff. Just small necessities that could be fenced from a hideout on one of the rogue asteroids.

Meanwhile, Runt Hake had made at least one special trip. Down to the galley. He took Todd and Cap and me along so he could keep an eye on us. Down there we found Lancelot Biggs, quietly reading.

Hake said in that soft purr of his, "You—you're the cook on this ship?"

Biggs answered, "Mmm-hmm."

"You will address me," suggested the little outlaw, "as 'Sir.' Very well, Slops. I want you to prepare a meal for us. A good meal. Fresh meats and vegetables. You have no idea—" He drawled this last to Hanson. "How one wearies of canned concentrates."

Hanson just glowered. But Biggs looked confused. He said, "I—I'll have to get produce from the storage bins if you want a big meal. This galley's small—" He looked about him helplessly.

Hake nodded. "That is granted. But, mind you, attempt no medieval—ah—toxicological exploits. I remember the chef of the *Spica* tried something of the sort. Poor lad! He screamed horribly. I shall never forget it."

I bet he wouldn't! The louse. But I hoped, now, that Biggs would understand I had been right. He couldn't pull any funny business on Runt and get away with it.

He seemed to understand, all right. He said, goggling, "I'll do the best I can—sir. It will take a little time, of course."

"We have time and to spare," agreed Hake. "A good meal, that is what we want. And now, gentlemen—?"

He motioned us toward the turret room. We started to leave the galley. I was the last to pass through the door. As I did so, I felt a fumbling at my side. Mr. Biggs was shoving something into my pocket. He whispered in my ear, "Sparks—give each of our men a piece. Tell them to chew it!"

FOR a moment my hopes flamed high. I didn't know what Biggs had up his sleeve, but I dared dream that he had devised some way of overcoming the pirate menace. But when I managed to get away, unobserved, a few minutes later to see what he had thrust in my jacket, my hopes died as suddenly as they had been born.

The stuff was nothing but pepsin. Plain, ordinary pepsin; a by-product from the outspread Venusian ranches.

I was half minded to chuck the damn stuff away. I thought maybe worry, desperation, had made Biggs slip his gravs. Then I thought better of it. After all, he may have had some reason. And in a spot like this, any gamble was worth taking.

So, slowly, I started getting the stuff distributed around. I managed to slip half the package to Doug Enderby, the steward, with instructions to get it to the black gang. I met Chief Garrity 'tween decks, and gave him some for his engine room crew. Todd took a piece, wondering, reluctant, but put it in his mouth when I signalled him to do so. Me? Sure, I had some, too. After all, it tasted good. And a man might as well check out with a clean taste in his mouth.

The only man I couldn't slip a piece to at any time was Cap Hanson. Runt Hake had the old eagle eye on the Skipper. Matter of fact, Hake had the eagle eye on all of us. He didn't miss a trick, that murderous little squirt. Just before dinner was served he made my heart miss a beat when he asked, "What are you chewing on, Sparks? Gum?"

He gave me the fright and the out at the same time. I nodded. "Yeah," I said. Then, fearful not to ask, "You want a piece?"

He shuddered delicately. "Barbarian custom. I do not want a piece."

Boy, was that a break for our side!

SO, like I said, Biggs donged out the dinner call, and we all went into the mess hall. Talk about irony! Here we were, a score of honest, hard-working spacemen and an equal number of pirates, sitting down to the same table, eating the same meal.

Screwy? Sure—but that was Hake for you. As Mr. Biggs had said, he was a showoff. But don't think he took any chances. We were unarmed, his men were walking hardware stores. As for the conviviality of that banquet, that was strictly on the stinko! To outward appearances, we were all palsy-walsy at the banquet table; actually we of the *Saturn* were being fattened for the slaughter to follow.

Still—well, you know the old gag. "The condemned man ate a hearty meal." That's what I did, and that's

what most of the other fellows did, too. Because Mr. Lancelot Slops had come up with another Q.E.D. that cooking is, after all, nothing but applied chemistry.

We had, just to make you drool a little, chilled consommé with a light sherry. Then a tempting wisp of baked whiting, served with Moselle Erdener Treppchen, and was the Old Man fuming! (He'd been saving that for his golden anniversary). Then a chicken sauté Florentine .

They were the preludes. The main drag-'em-out was a saddle of lamb accompanied by peas in mint, potatoes Parisienne, and served along with Pommard, 1974. The salad was a Salad Alma; the dessert was something which Biggs told me later was Plombière a l'Havane Friandises (pineapples, bananas, frozen custard, and not a damn bit of tapioca in it!)

This came along with the Piper Heidsieck, '65. A demi-tasse was next, then liqueurs—

It was here that Runt Hake called a halt. "We'll transfer the beverages," he said, "to our own ship. We want no drunkenness aboard while we—ah—do that which is now necessary. Captain Hanson?"

He nodded significantly toward the turret room. I rose, so did Todd. Surprisingly, Biggs joined our group as we moved up deck. Hake said, with a malevolent regretfulness I shall never forget, "We have enjoyed our banquet exceedingly, Captain. But you understand I can allow nothing to stand in the way of my next—ah—duty. So—"

Hanson said stonily, "You will give us a lifeskiif before scuttling the *Saturn*, Hake?"

Hake lied, "Captain, I had planned to do that very thing. But a most unfortunate accident . . . it seems that some of my men were so careless as to blast holes in each of the skiffs. Of course if you'd still like to take your chances in the damaged craft—?"

Oh, he was a whipper, that Hake! I looked at Todd and saw the same thought mirrored in his eyes that I was thinking. This was our last chance. If we didn't get Hake now, it would be too late. I tensed myself. If we could grab the pirate chieftain, maybe his men would not dare do anything for fear of hurting him. And Hake, quick as he was on the trigger, might not get us both before—

Then once again Lancelot Biggs intervened. To me he barked, "No! No, Sparks!" And to Hake, quietly, almost tenderly, "Why, Mr. Hake—it's all a big mistake, isn't it? These rough, nasty old men think you want to hurt them! And you don't at all. Aren't they the old meanies?"

AND then—hold your hats, folks!—and then Runt Hake's soft mouth began to twitch! Yes, twitch! It pursed up like the mouth of a kid, his eyes wrinkled, and he began to blubber!

"Hurt them?" he complained. "Me hurt them? Why, I wouldn't do a thing like that! I love them! They're my pals." And he tossed his pierce gun away, reached out and patted Biggs' cheek!

Beside me I heard Lt. Todd whisper hoarsely,

"Good gods of Greece, what is this!" I myself was stunned for a moment. But I had sense enough to stoop down and get Runt Hake's gun before this crazy interlude had passed. "He's blown his fuses!" I squalled, "Grab him, Todd! Mr. Biggs, come with me! You and I will round up his crew—"

But Biggs said quietly, "Take your time, Sparks. There's no hurry. See?"

He stepped to the wall; flicked on the visiplat that showed the interior of the mess hall. And there, where a moment before, a grim-faced score of space pirates had maintained watch over our crew, now our crew were standing staring with blank, uncomprehending faces at twenty men who looked and acted for all the world like affectionate puppies!

They were hugging each other, patting each other's arms and faces, murmuring soft words of endearment. It was stupefying. More than that—it was embarrassing! Off in one corner a bearded, one-eyed outlaw dandled a companion on his knee. Another burly bruiser, big enough to tear a man in half with his bare hands, was playing piggy-back with a buddy!

I gulped and stared and gulped again. I choked, "But, what—what—"

Biggs said suddenly, "Sparks! You didn't give the Skipper a piece of that pepsin!"

"I didn't get a chance. But how—"

Then I saw. The Skipper and Runt Hake were sitting in the same chair, murmuring soft words of tenderness at each other, stroking each other's hair fondly. Just as I looked, the Old Man leaned forward and gave the pirate a big, juicy kiss on the forehead!

And just then there came a welcome interruption. The audio throbbed to electric life; a brusque voice rasped, "Calling the *Saturn!* *Saturn!*, ahoy! S.S.C.B. Cruiser *Iris* calling. Stand by! We'll come alongside you in twenty minutes. "

AFTERWARD, when Runt Hake and his pirates, still babbling incoherent protestations of endearment, had been removed to the patrol ship and taken back toward the Venusian prison that had long awaited them, we held a confab in my radio room. Todd was there, and Chief Garrity, and Lancelot Biggs and myself. Also a very foggy-eyed, befuddled Captain Hanson who seemed to be having a hard time keeping from saying we were all "dear, sweet boys"—as he had told us quite a few times in the past hour or so.

I couldn't make head or tail of it. So I asked Biggs

bluntly, "But what was it, Mr. Biggs? We all know it was something you put in the food. Something from which the pepsin saved us. But what? Surely no drug would make a man act like that."

Biggs grinned, his Adam's-apple jerking amiably.

"No, not a drug. But a chemical. Prolactin, to be exact. If you'll remember, I started to tell you we were carrying a load of it to earth."

"Prolactin?" said Todd. "What's that?"

"An extract of the pituitary gland; the hormone that governs human affections. Prolactin is the hormone that is responsible for all acts of parental love. It causes roosters to brood and set on eggs, tomcats to give milk and milk-deficient females to become normal. It is commonly known as the 'mother-love' crystal."

"And we," I said, "were carrying a load of it. I still don't understand, though, why we had to chew the pepsin. And why it failed to turn all of us into bunny-huggers like—"

I glanced at the Old Man, then glanced away again. He looked at me fondly.

"Well, you see," explained Biggs, "prolactin happens to be a pure protein. And pure proteins are insoluble in most things, alcohol, water, anything you might normally take in your diet.

"I cooked Hake's banquet, and his goose, with liberal sprinklings of prolactin. But, as you had previously pointed out, I had to find some way of keeping our men from being affected by the hormone that disrupted their morale. Pepsin was the answer. Pepsin breaks down pure proteids into soluble peptones. That is why it is commonly used as a digestive agent."

"Drwstbynly—" mumbled the Skipper soothingly.

"Eh?" I demanded, "What's that?"

Biggs looked embarrassed. "I'm not sure," he said, "but I think he's saying, 'You're a dear sweet baby and I love you very much!' Er—Sparks—I think maybe we'd better put him to bed until it wears off . . ."

So that was that. And maybe I shouldn't have told you all this; I don't know. Because the Skipper, recovered now from his spell of "maternal affection" is rather sensitive on the subject. And I'm still clicking the bug on the *Saturn*.

Anyhow, now you know. But if you ever tell Cap Hanson I told you, it's going to be just too bad for me. I may have to catch the next express for Pluto and points west. Me and Biggs both. There's not much "mother love" in Cap Hanson's right cross!

