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Front cover painting by Lawrence, suggested by
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MONKEY IN THE ICE BOX

By Gerald Vance

They really had something here: about the finest prize a space raider could get—until they looked in the freezer!



IT BEGAN out in free-void near the Mars orbit when Scorp and I spoke this derelict. Lucky? We could hardly believe our eyes. Scorp picked her up on the radar screen and whistled me out of my bunk and I came forward. There she was, sleek and gorgeous, a big intergalactic six-jet job turning end over end, tired and lazylike; riding a slow orbit—

so slow a nursemaid could have caught her while pushing a perambulator.

I grinned and Scorp's eyes glowed. Naturally—us with a little one-jet local job and knowing the laws of salvage the way we did. And knowing also that a boat going end over end was—nine times out of ten—deserted.

Scorp, always the dreamer, was crooning, "We live right, boy. We just



The interior of the ship seemed to erupt into a welter of fury!

live right. A thousand tonner if she holds a pound. And with Plutonian-thrad ore selling at sixty units a hundredweight in Detroit."

"Easy, son. We haven't got her yet. We may not even be able to scrape up the breakage. It comes high on boats like that." The breakage is what it costs to pay off the Space Authority charges, the taxes, and any prior claims against a derelict before a salvager can get clear claim.

Scorp grinned. "Relax, Joe. It just can't happen that way—to us. We live right and keep ourselves pure. I tell you we're in."

While Scorp held abeam of her, I went to the equipment lockers and got into a suit. I checked two grav-plates for charge, put them on and then pushed a grav-hook into the port airlock.

I followed it out and then went through the shell door and slapped my plates against our hull and swung out the hook.

It got the derelict boat just under her lower jet and I pulled her to an even keel with just the power of my plates holding to our hull.

From here out, it was a two-man job. Scorp set the controls at inertia pitch with a drift equal to that of the derelict and got himself into a suit. He pushed two big grav-bars through the port and I could almost see the grin that went along with the words over my radio. "Lucky we just happened to have these bars along."

It sure was. As a matter of fact you'll find a pair of grav-bars in every one-jet limp-job plying the Lunar lanes. They're bought and stowed away against the chance of finding a derelict someday. It's the one-lunger's only hope of better things. Like a ticket in the old lotteries.

I held the grav-bars steady until Scorp came through the lock. Together

we pushed them against the derelict's hull on each side of her port and then locked them to our own hull. We pulled her up close, shortening the bars until our little *Nancy Anne* looked like a barnacle glued to her shining side.

THE TOUGHEST part was over now. With the boats anchored close to each other, we slipped down through the narrow leeway into our own port and finished the job; hauling the two ports tight together and locking them with plastic packing. We got out of our suits, Scorp chuckling like a Mercurian clawed owl. He extended his arm. "Pray wouldst accompany me to the promenade deck for a saucer of coffee and a cigar butt?"

I took his arm and we walked into the big baby's airlock.

But here the clowning stopped. We each had a hand-gun, for emergencies, and we were on our toes when the air valve stopped hissing and the inner door swung open.

The long companionway stretched out ahead of us. It was dead quiet, but it wasn't empty. Down the line, in the order of their placement, I could see an overturned chair; a table in two pieces, split down the middle; the steel drawer from a chest in one of the cabins.

"Looks like there's been a battle."

"Maybe some guy hunting his collar button. Let's have a look-see."

We had a look-see and found the ship had been gone over from stem to stern by some very untidy people who didn't care how they handled other people's property. And the boat was jumping with dead men. In the galley, we found the cook with a cleaver in his hand and another parked deep in his skull. Two dungareed crewmen were dead in the mas-

ter-jet stoke chamber. One had been kicked to death. The other's neck was broken. A white-capped boy—probably an astrogator—met the grim reaper head-on in the social hall. The top of his skull had been smashed in with a feeder bar.

"A luxury setup," Scorp muttered. "You could run this tub with nothing but a blonde for company. The crew was strictly for swank."

We found our last dead man in the pilot room. He'd been shot between the eyes—right under a bright green turban that set off his baggy gray-silk pants and pastel jacket.

"We're sure taking over a dilly," Scorp said. "You think maybe Space Authority will tag us for this little job of wholesale slaughter?"

"Why should they? We're peaceable. Let's reseal this tub and head for port. I don't like the company."

SO THAT was what we did. We got back into the *Nancy Anne* and overloaded her jet until I was afraid we'd blow her tail off. Everything held, though, and we hauled into Mars City and dropped the big ship down on a ramp with our little gal twanging her rivets and spitting deep purple.

We reported to the Port Authority and got ready for stiff questioning. A curly-headed attache who looked like he belonged in high school came in finally, after letting us sit for two hours. He offered us each a cigarette and lit one of his own. He said, "You boys seem to have hit the jackpot."

"She's a nice ship," I admitted.

"The *Space King* but of White Sands, U.S.A. The latest thing in intergalactics. You boys kill everybody?"

I said no, we hadn't killed anybody, and Scorp said: "You should know. There were too many. We ain't

that big."

This damp-eared aide let it pass. He said, "We spaced a report from White Sands. The turbaned corpse was a Venusian oriental named Cordat Singh, an adventurer who slipped through several shady escapades with a partially clean nose and plenty of unicredits. He blasted off three months ago from White Sands on DU clearance papers. The authorities figured he knew where he was going but there was nothing they could do about it."

Scorp said, "Not to change the subject, but what do you think the breakage will be on that boat?"

The aide blew a cloud of smoke at the ceiling and said, "There was a Space Bureau report attached to the microgram on Cordat Singh. There was word out around he'd been swindled recently by another oriental clique. He paid a mess of unicredits for a space directional on a small three-planet family out beyond The Great Bear—a hard family to find. Maybe that's where he came from."

I asked, "Did you check his mono-flight plate?"

The young aide shrugged. "No. That's not our job." Now he glanced suddenly at Scorp on a delayed take. "Oh—the breakage? Well, a rough first estimate indicates around ten thousand unicredits."

Scorp looked at me. I looked at Scorp. We both looked at Downy Ears. He smiled. "Too much for you boys to handle?"

"A thousand would be too much to handle."

He got up and ground out his cigarette. "Well, you have ten days before Space Authority asks for bids. Where are you staying?"

"We'll be at the Carol Plaza."

"Yeah," Scorp said glumly. "They got a good bar in the basement. And

very homey. The bellhops'll carry you upstairs cold for half a credit."

WE WENT into the Carol bar to mourn—a couple of one-lungers who had just missed the jackpot by about nine thousand unicredits. We had two stingers to loosen up our tensions. Then two more to dull our inhibitions so we could do some really serious mourning. After we finished the second two, I heard a soft, cultured voice by the bar at my elbow. It was talking to the barkeep. It said, "Two more of the same, you, for my friends."

I cocked an eye and saw the voice belonged to an oriental turbaned in bright orange and mustached with a thin pencil mark along his upper lip. He smiled without moving a muscle in his face—a good trick if you can do it, and he could. He said, "Please to accept introduce," and I knew he was a Venusian. "Donat Singh, I. One who wishes to say good luck, you, on salvage."

Scorp cocked an eye. "You know a hell of a lot awful fast."

The oriental bowed. "Very large salvage, you. Get around swift. Very short unicredits, you?"

"No unicredits, us."

"Would please to advance same, I."

We said, "Huh?" in the same breath.

"One condition, I. Request charter first voyage."

I turned and said, "Look—this doesn't meet. We can't raise the dough so the boat will be bid in. You could get it for yourself. Why help us?"

"Please to understand, you. Others will bid. Do not wish ship, I. Only first voyage. Risk of loss in open bidding great."

Scorp and I looked at each other. This joker evidently wanted the first ride on our ship and was willing to

pay for it. Why should we analyze and hunt for flaws? Plenty of time for that when we had title to the baby. I turned to Donat Singh and blessed the planet Venus for producing such as he. "Are agreeable, we. Thank you much. Are your servants, first voyage."

He produced a wallet from some place in his very loose purple pants and began thumbing our unicredits. He thumbed until there was a heap of them on the bar. When he put the wallet away it was still fat. He gave us that smile again and I looked to see how it was done, but I didn't get it. He said, "Suggest you haste to Port Authority with breakage. Will be at residence, I, waiting to bow low at entrance, you."

I clawed up the money and got off the stool. "We'll be there as soon as we can. Where?"

He handed me a card, turned and walked out.

Scorp's eyes glistened. He is ever the dreamer. He crooned, "Neptunian ice-tiger fur into Paris at a thousand units a pelt. Let's go buy, baby."

We went out arm in arm.

Downy Ears was still in charge, looking as though he should be home with mama. He said, "Well, that's fine—just fine. An oriental inquired here and I directed him. Orange turban?"

I was thumbing the money. "Then one of these is for you."

He shook his head. "Oh, no. Glad to be of service."

We paid up and waited half an hour for title. He brought us seven hundred credits' change and Scorp asked about the stiffs.

"No trouble there. The Space Bureau isn't too interested. They're glad the ship went out DU from White Sands. That includes an automatic protection waiver from all on

board, you know. The prints were microgrammed and checked. All accounted for."

That wasn't as hard-hearted as it looked. Space is big and the Bureau can cover only so much. A Destination Unknown clearance automatically puts a ship beyond their fatherly arm.

THE CARD said Suite 5A, Garden Terrace. With the stingers biting, we took on a good meal near Port Authority, then caught a gyro for Donat Singh's holeup.

A beautiful layout it was, with a fountain bubbling away in the foyer and nobody around to enjoy it. A moving staircase took us up to the fifth terrace and we found an ivory rosebud for a button beside the oriental's door and punched it.

All the very latest, it was—with one of those service robots I'd heard about but never seen; the kind that answers doors and is death on dirt and dust or any muss around the house.

This robot let us in and then rolled away and left us standing there. It seemed peculiar, but I figured maybe the gadget was out of order. It wasn't. It had just been trying to do two things at once—answer the door and clean up a mess in the living room. We followed it and found it scrubbing like the very devil, trying to clean the rug where the blood had gotten all over it.

The blood had come out of Donat Singh's head, dribbling in a dull red patch and driving the robot nearly frantic.

"Great snakes," Scorp grunted. "Everybody keeps dying." He bent over. Somebody had snapped a flouroslug into our oriental benefactor's head so there probably wasn't much left inside his skull. I'd seen

those flouropellets work and knew why they were outlawed. Too goshawful dangerous. You take them between your finger and thumb, like kids playing marbles, and snap them against something. Whatever you snap them against, they keep right on going until they get inside away from oxygen and they they begin playing hell. A bullet without a gun. You don't need a gun.

The robot shoved Scorp out of the way. Scorp said, "How do you shut a damn thing like this off?"

There were buttons to punch so we punched a few, but we were wrong because the robot turned and rolled into the wall with a crash and tipped over. I reached underneath then and jerked a copper wire I saw and the thing went dead.

But not as dead as Donat Singh, because the robot could be repaired and he couldn't. He was all done and wasn't going anywhere with us on our first trip.

Scorp sat down on a chair and looked a little disgusted. "Venusian orchids docking for fifty units a bulb at Amsterdam and we keep meeting corpses! Killing time!"

"Take it easy. If it wasn't for the Singh we wouldn't have a ship. Give the man a little respect."

Scorp is a dreamer but callous. He said, "Respect he doesn't care about now. Shall we call the Safety Bureau?"

SOMEBODY was moaning. We both heard it at the same time and jerked around toward a side of the room showing an open doorway. We investigated as the moans kept coming and found the next room occupied by a very beautiful number indeed.

She was tall—you could tell that even though she was sort of curled up on the floor—and had chestnut

hair spread around her head like a shining pillow.

There was an ugly bruise on the left side of her head and she seemed just to be coming to. Scorp bent down and lifted her up and laid her on a low divan near where she'd been slugged.

Her big violet eyes were on Scorp as she straightened up. Scorp said, "It's all right, lady. Did you see who cracked you on the head?"

The fright dawning on her face kind of broke up and disappeared as she took both of us in. "You're—you're the men he was expecting, aren't you?"

I said, "If you mean Donat Singh, ma'am, I think he probably was. We told him we'd come."

She shuddered and laid a smooth arm over her eyes. "The—others came instead. He was expecting you so he wasn't on his guard. They—"

"Take it easy, lady," Scorp said. "You just lay there and rest. We'll call law and order."

We started hunting around for a videophone or a wire-comm, but before we found it our beauty queen had a relapse. She hit the floor like a rock and we went to work on her, wondering if maybe she had a delayed concussion of some kind.

Then there was what sounded like help maybe; a musical note that we figured must be the doorbell. With Robert the Robot out of commission with his wires down, I held the lady's head while Scorp went to the door.

A minute later he came back with Downy Ears and a funny look of surprise on his ugly pan. I was surprised too, because Downy Ears didn't look like the same boy anymore. He hadn't aged any except in his mouth, which was twisted into a very businesslike sneer. Scorp was walking in front and our little aide from Space Authority

was coming along behind him with a flouropellet between his thumb and forefinger like he'd enjoy playing marbles with Scorp's head.

Immediately the brunette dream came alive and said, "Let go of my ears, buster. We've had enough of this byplay." She came erect in one graceful motion and snapped: "Up off your knees and close your mouth. You look like a badly designed ash-stand."

She had a little gun of some kind in her mitt so I closed my mouth and got up. Scorp muttered, "Plutonian buff tallow selling at three hundred units a ton in—"

I said, "This dame was stalling. That's what. Waiting for her son here—"

IT WAS the wrong thing to say. But worth it. She snarled and brought the gun around, but Scorp drew her attention with a plaintive, "Say—what the hell is all this?"

Downy Ears said, "Just a pair of nice people trying to pick up a quick unit." He looked at the dead Singh and the busted mechanism against the wall. "Did he have an argument with the robot?"

"No, with me," the gun girl said. "I asked him to take us in or bow out. He slugged me. No man slugs me, so he bowed out."

"Did you get what he knew?"

"He didn't know anything we haven't heard before. He said he got the vibrogram from Cordat Singh two weeks ago. The bum told him he was bringing back a treasure beyond all price; to get set for negotiations, whatever that meant."

Scorp said, "If you two don't mind—"

Downy Ears looked at Scorp and me in a rather preoccupied manner.

"Get over by that wall and shut up."

We looked at the pellet in his paw and the little gun in the girl's slim mitt and got over by the wall. The crooked little tramp of an aide looked at the gorgeous tramp of a girl and said, "Then I'm convinced our original pitch was right."

You could see she wasn't completely sold on it, whatever it was. He scowled and said, "The legend about that three-planet world is true. It was too fantastic to have been invented. I'm convinced the temples bulging with loot *do* exist and that the loot isn't too hard to get hold of."

She *wanted* to be convinced. "You think then that Cordat was on the way back with a load of it?"

"I do. By 'get ready to negotiate' he meant get ready to turn the stuff into unicredits. Then some pirate ship gave him a going-over after he sent the vibrogram and cleaned him out."

"So we—"

"It's simple. What Cordat could do, we can do. And we'll be a little more careful about pirates on the way back."

She decided to buy it. "Have you got clearance all arranged?"

He nodded and turned his attention to Scorp and me. He said, "Face the wall."

It seemed a reasonable request. Besides, they had the artillery. We turned and faced the wall. I couldn't see them, but I knew they were walking toward us. I was just getting ready to give Scorp the high sign to start the festivities, when they hit us. I think they used a couple of chairs.

Anyhow, there weren't any festivities.

I CAME to first; came to with a big headache. I was lying on the floor beside Scorp. Scorp was still sleeping—he always was a late riser—so I oc-

cupied the time by figuring out where we were. It wasn't too hard to do. Any man with a headache could have done it. We were in the galley of the nice new space ship we'd gotten on salvage and were going to make a million units with.

Scorp stirred and muttered. "Yak butter to Venus for opals at five to—"

I nudged him with my shoulder. "Come alive. We're all clabbered up."

I didn't get a chance to elaborate, because at that moment Downy Ears came in through the galley door with a gun in his hand. He was all business; that boy. He said, "Get up."

I figured it was time to stop being a yes man, so I said, "Go to hell."

He kicked me alongside the skull and said, "Get up." I decided to be a yes man until my head quit aching. I got up and he pushed me out into the companionway and forward to the pilot house.

Our hostess, more completely dressed now, was lounging gracefully in a control chair. She said, "Hello, Buster."

What I replied was under my breath, because I doubt if she'd have liked it. She said, "Mike here has a little job for you."

So pretty boy had a tough name like Mike. That's the way it is, sometimes. He said, "I want you to plot a course from the monoflight plate."

"I don't feel like plotting a course today." I knew the angle now, of course. They wanted to go where Cordat Singh had been before he'd died. Evidently he left no-space directional, so the only way to do it was to run a new one from the mono. It was a four-hour job and not every pilot could handle it. I decided to stall. "I never laid a course from a mono in my life."

That seemed to sadden the girl. "Too bad. Then we have to get a new

pilot. Your value to us ceases."

Mike said, "Where do you want it? Front or back?"

You have to make a decision in such spots. I decided they weren't fooling. "What's in it for me if I do it?"

"You live longer."

Maybe it wasn't much but it was something, and this seemed to be a seller's market. "Where's the plate?"

"There in the work slot. Where else would it be?" They were very snappish, indicating foreshortened nerves. Very dangerous in people carrying guns. I went to the work table and sat down. "How about a cup of coffee? My head aches."

Mike said, "Nicky, go have the other gonn take over his duties."

That meant Scorp was going to be cook. He'd like that. The gal known as Nicky left the pilot room and Mike asked, "How long will it take?"

"Four hours."

"I'll give you three. If you want to get clobbered, take three and a half."

A nice boy. A nice tough boy. I grunted and lifted the monoflight plate out of the work slot and laid it on the table. There was a lot of tedious work involved in a job like this. And complicated. Ever since I'd learned to do it, I'd been patting myself on the back for having the brains.

I GOT OUT the plotting instruments and checked the plate. The course angles on it served only as a basic guide. The work I was doing would enable us to backtrack over the last course flown by the ship, but we wouldn't necessarily know our destination. It was merely the point at the end of the projected course and could be four miles under the surface of some planet for all we knew. We could only take it for granted that it wasn't.

A ticklish job, as I said, because

time had passed. The galaxy was in a new position relative to space and the components of the galaxy were in new positions relative to each other.

I took an arbitrary time off the clock—four hours and ten minutes hence—which would be blast-off time. It had to be blast-off time or the whole job would have to be done again. Now the time on the plate had to be subtracted and the remainder reduced to one-hundredth seconds. I got out a fresh drafting plate and went to work.

Two hours later the lines were plotted and the ticklish work began; checking microscopically and redrafting the variations. A man can go blind doing that. It took another hour before the two lines faded into one under the double lens.

Mike had been easing in and out of the pilot room but hadn't bothered me. As I slammed the course plate into its work slot, he asked, "How soon can you get this tub off the ground?"

I pointed to the blast-off time and at that moment the primers hit the tubes and the guts of the ship growled. "Jets heating," I said.

It wouldn't be long now. If anything was going to happen, it had to happen quick. Otherwise Scorp and I were going to take a long ride. And probably our last one. I knew Mike had been busy arranging clearance. He said, "In case you've got any ideas of calling control, forget them. I've got the relay open in the radio room and it stays that way."

I'd found that out earlier when I tried contacting control. "How clever," I said. "Do you want to lift the ship or shall I?"

"You'll lift it, but on intercom. I'll be in the radio room monitoring. And I'll handle outside contact."

Things looked bad. In fact they

were bad; so bad that an hour later we were outside gravity drag kiting for some spot in the cosmos not quite clear, along a course laid out to one-tenth the thickness of a very small gnat's eyebrow. I wondered where it was.

While I was wondering Nicky came into the pilot room and said, "Okay, buster. I can run the manual. Your quarters from now on are the galley along with Stupid. I had him haul a couple of cots in there. I'll come get you every twelve hours and we'll review the pilot room together. Get going."

I WAS BEGINNING to admire her.

I always admire people with orderly minds who look ahead and lay out programs. All neat and orderly. Respecting the little gun she carried, I went back to the galley with said little gun following right behind my left kidney and heard the door snap locked with me on the inside.

Scorp sat on a table with his legs hanging down and his chin in his hands. He was very gloomy, something I could well understand. I was very gloomy too. He said, "With every zoo on Earth yelling for six-footed—"

I cut him off. "Don't start that again. You better start thinking about your own hide. I understand human skin sells on Fanta IV at eighteen *zorngs* a square *lictro*. If we don't look out somebody will be peddling burs."

Scorp shrugged. "What the hell can we do? They didn't leave any cleavers in here."

The door came open and Mike shoved his head in. "Get going, you. I expect dinner in three-quarters of an hour. And it better be good." The door slammed.

Scorp grunted and walked over to

the pantry. "I wonder how we're stocked?"

The pantry was cram full. Scorp moved on and opened the freezer. He started to close the door, did a double take, and went inside. He came out a minute later carrying something that looked like a frozen turkey. But it wasn't. Scorp could see it better than I could and he said, "Who the hell would eat monkey meat?"

I went for a closer look and that's what it was—a frozen monkey; hard as a bullet and all curled up with its hands over its eyes like the middle monkey—the 'see no evil' one in the sets people use to decorate mantels. He flung it away in disgust. It hit the floor and bounced across the room and came to rest in a corner. Scorp went to the pantry and came back to the table with an armful of glassines and began opening them. "You know how to make goulash?" he asked.

I stretched out on the cot. "Nope. You're the chef. My job around here is to do the thinking."

"Well, get going then," he growled. "You're way behind." He went about getting a meal together while I lay staring at the ceiling trying to figure out the score. I couldn't make anything add up, though. Not then or after dinner. Not even before the sleep-period rolled around and it was time for some shut-eye. It began to look as though thinking wasn't my racket either.

Scorp laid down on his cot and I asked, "Where the hell you think we're going?"

"I don't know, but I know where I'm going."

He went there. In forty seconds, he was snoring like a rock saw.

LATER, when I woke up, it was to realize Scorp had gotten playful. I lay there with my eyes closed and

Scorp tickling my left ear and wondered about it. It was something new. Scorp wasn't the kind to be playful, least of all right after a sleep period. I wondered what to do about it and finally decided to plain haul off and let him have one.

Fortunately for my fist, I decided to open my eyes first. If I hadn't I'd have busted the fist against the wall because it wasn't Scorp at all.

It was a monkey. The little joker sat there looking at me with his tail curled over his head and it was the tail that played with my ear.

Where, I wondered, had a monkey come from? The answer followed right behind. This was the same lump of rock Scorp had found in the freezer and had thrown into a corner. It had been quick-frozen. That made me realize what an up-to-date boat we'd salvaged, because very few of them were equipped with one of the new instantaneous freezers used to bring dangerous animals from the far planets and asteroids for Earth and Martian zoos.

The monkey made a remark in a language I didn't get and hopped over on Scorp's head. Immediately Scorp's sleeping period was over. He came up like a shot while the monk jumped on the table and squatted there going through a peculiar routine. It put its little paws over its ears and chirped; then over its eyes and chirped again, but differently; finally over its mouth and just sat there nailing us with its bright eyes.

Scorp ground the sleep out of his eyes and looked again. He said, "Cripes! A monkey. That makes three of us."

"You better apologize for using him for a football," I said, "or you'll keep finding his tail in your soup. When a monkey doesn't like you—"

Scorp scratched his head. "You

think it's the same one?"

"What else? The other one's gone."

Scorp thought along the same lines I had. "An instant freeze in the ship. Cripes! We can stock zoos! We can make a million!"

I got up from the cot. "You keep forgetting the tub is ours in name only—that a high school kid and a chorus cutie took it away from us. I'd think you'd be kind of ashamed of yourself."

"I'd hate to meet the rest of the chorus or walk within a hundred yards of that high school," he grunted.

WE HEARD the lock snap and were on our feet when the door opened. The alertness didn't pay off though because Nicky had the gun waist high and poked it in first. "A little action here," she snapped, "or we'll fire the cook. We do it with a gun."

Then she saw the monk and stopped. "Which one of you gave birth?" she inquired acidly. I was halfway to the door before my good sense caught up with me. Fortunately it caught up with me in time. That babe would have shot me down and kicked me in the teeth for bleeding.

"Come on, you," she said. "We'll check the pilot room while Stupid gets breakfast." She stepped aside and I walked out into the companionway. "See that that monkey doesn't turn up in the stew," she told Scorp, and then slammed and locked the door.

The boat was riding like a dream, I discovered. That old character, Rip Van Winkle, could have taken his nap aboard and waked up five inches from any doorstep in the universe. The boat was that easy to handle. I checked through the microscope and found the channel peeling off as clean as bark from a tree. We weren't whipping ten feet on any side of our orbit.

"Not good," I said. "The channel has varied several times. I'll have to recheck the route."

The idea was that if I could get her to come and look, I might be able to do something with that gun she kept pointing. But I think she must have read my mind. Her words were too pat for anything else. She said, "When I look over your shoulder, buster, you'll be dead and I won't have to worry."

Nails were soft beside Nicky.

Back in the galley, I found the monkey helping Scorp with breakfast. Everything Scorp put down, the monk picked up and put some place else until Scorp was fit to be tied. It was mostly show with him though, because he grinned and said, "He's kind of a cute little character. Helps pass the time away."

AND THERE was plenty of time to be passed. Of course we kept making plans to nail the brass-riveted duo on a rebound and take back our ship and the interest in those plans kept us from being bored. But as plan after plan fell through, we began to get discouraged. You just can't take an efficient team that doesn't leave any leeway to be taken.

We kept on trying, though, and came finally, according to our pre-route, within a week of our destination.

The monkey and Scorp got along fine. The closest Scorp came to getting killed on the whole trip was when Mike lifted the monkey on his boot once and sent it sailing across the table. While the monk righted itself and sat cursing Mike, I thought Scorp was going to dive right into a flouro-pellet. I got in his way in time, though, and a quick death was averted.

The little joker liked me too and we were quite a homey three there in the galley. But he spent most of his

time with Scorp—wrapped around his neck, or sitting on his shoulder pulling the hear-no-see-no-speak-no-evil routine.

I was kind of surprised at the way Scorp got attached to the monk and some comment, handed out casually, brought a response on the subject. Kind of a round-about one. Scorp said, "You know, those two pirates figure on finding a planet crawling with loot—a place where they'll set down and go to work with shovels."

"Uh-huh. They figure Cordat hauled a load away already. We're back for the second one."

"That yarn about the treasure planet—I've heard it myself. It's supposed to be the place that Chinese space ship set down over four hundred years ago. The legend goes that they got prosperous and waxed very fat in the way of such knickknacks as platinum statues with diamond eyes, before they forgot to breed often enough and ended up with nobody to bury the last resident."

"You must have been listening at keyholes," I said. "I don't think the dynamite duo have it down that pat."

"No, but I think Cordat Singh did before he drew a slug in the brain," Scorp said.

"Then you think it's the straight layout? That they just squat and fill the ship?"

"Uh-uh. I got a hunch those pirates are in for a surprise. I'll bet my share of this tub they find a plenty different picture."

"Your share of this tub isn't much right now," I hastened to remind him. "But we won't dwell on that. I kind of gather you don't think it was pirates that threw all the furniture into the companionway."

SCORP stroked the monkey's ears. The monkey put its arms around

Scorp's neck and kissed him. "It doesn't add, for me. I don't say you couldn't bump into a shipful of bandits who would take a cargo of treasure and then kill everybody, but usually they don't work that way."

"I was thinking that myself."

"They're too smart to kill for no reason. It leads to trouble.

"I thought so too."

"Quit second-guessing me. The job had the earmarks of some jokers that came aboard and didn't find what they wanted. Religious fanatics might kill that way."

"But Cordat Singh microgrammed ahead that he was loaded."

"Maybe he was playing some game of his own. Or maybe he did have the haul and got it hidden safely. It wouldn't have to be too big. I've seen chunks of midian from Pluto you could put in your hip pocket, and there wouldn't be enough money in the universe to buy them."

I sat there thinking for a while and Scorp began playing with the monk. He said, "Come on, Loopy. Let's do the Over My Dead Body act."

The monk grinned from ear to ear and chattered a little. Then it glued itself belly-tight to the front of Scorp's shirt and wrapped its arms and tail around his neck. Then the little joker went partially crazy. Looking over its shoulder, it laid a baleful eye on me and began to swear a purple streak.

I was taken aback for fair. You'd have thought I was just getting ready to kick Scorp's teeth out and the monk was not going to allow it. The monk called me names that would have curled another monk's hair. I gaped in wonder until Scorp laughed and peeled the simian off like a plaster and gave him a mock-banana from the table. Scorp grinned. "Just

a trick I've been teaching him. He's a smart little devil. Picks up fast. I've taught him some other ones I'll show you some time."

I wasn't particularly interested in watching a monk do tricks. I was hotter on thinking up some tricks of my own to use on a couple of parties I could name. But I guess I wasn't as smart as the monkey. I couldn't think of any tricks. Any that hadn't failed already.

The sleep period had rolled around and I watched Scorp and Loopy get ready for bed. Scorp had made the monk a nightgown out of three sugar sacks and the monk put it on and got into its biscuit-box bed. I thought, murder. A guy who was going to make a million in the space trade ending up making nightgowns for monkeys. Great stuff.

Then I went to sleep myself.

IT WAS three days later by the chronometer that Scorp and I got our chance. It came accidently—not one of those manipulated deals that always fell through.

The food hadn't been so good, according to Nicky, and she was in the galley raising hell. Scorp was getting ready to make a stew and the gravy was in a bowl on the table. The gorgeous Nicky said, "Let me taste that stuff. What do you put in it—glue?"

The gun was hanging at her side; the first time she'd lowered it that I could remember. Scorp, all innocence, said, "You want to taste it, baby?"

"Don't call me baby, you stupid ass."

"Sorry—here." And Scorp pushed the bowl of gravy into her face. We'd been together so long, there was kind of a contact between us—Scorp and me—so I was there when the right time came. I snatched the gun out of her hand while she was clawing at

the gravy, and wrapped an arm around her pretty neck.

But maybe there was something between Mike and Nicky, too, because he barged in right at that second ready to flip a flouropellet at a likely target.

I started to raise the gun but Nicky clamped thirty-two sharp teeth into my wrist and I had to shake loose. Scorp took his life in his hands and heaved the gravy bowl at Mike. Mike ducked, a merciless grin on his face, and I could see somebody's number was up.

As the gravy bowl crashed against the wall and Mike straightened to shoot the pellet, I got Nicky's teeth out of my wrist and lifted her up and heaved her across the galley at Mike.

If he'd been a gentleman he'd have caught her. It isn't nice to let a lady land by herself. But Mike ducked out of the way and Nicky hit the wall with a thud that started Loopy chattering from his spot on the ice box.

I clawed for the gun trying to get in ahead of Nicky with the business. Scorp looked desperately around for something to throw, but he was fresh out of gravy bowls. Nicky moaned as she struggled to get her gorgeous body up off the floor.

Then everybody froze.

It must have been an interesting tableau there in the galley. Nicky with the pellet almost ready to leave his fingers. Scorp hunting for a hole. Me with the gun halfway up and Nicky all uncovered and undignified. Frozen.

The radar signal did it. It whined out over the intercom to which it was always hooked; a high whining signal. The boat we rode in had the latest thing in deflectors. When the ship and an asteroid came close together, one of them turned away; whichever was the smallest. The signal siren meant that the obstruction

was the only thing that wouldn't swing out; another ship.

THE TRUCE was instant and mutual. We crowded for the door in a pack. Mike made it through first and I followed with Nicky limping along behind me. I remembered wishing, as I pushed past her, that there had been a gentleman aboard to give her a little help. Too bad there wasn't.

Scorp might have helped her but he had Loopy to think about and Loopy was more important to him.

We crowded into the pilot room and snapped on the fore and aft video plates. They both showed the same thing.

Ships.

A ship ahead and a ship behind; big black war cruisers, as vicious-looking as any I'd ever seen. And they meant business. Each of them was sending out three magnasleds and each magnasled carried a half dozen black-garbed warriors.

While I stared at the place wondering where such as these could have come from, the sleds moved in on us. In no time at all, the six craft were glued to our sides and the attack force was running over our hull.

"Blast off!" Mike yelled. "You goddam fool! Hit your power and let's get out of here."

"We've got no power," I told him. "They've got our atom pile counteracted from two sides. Turn on the power and we'd just be driving against ourselves."

"How the hell do you know that?"

"From the sound of the slag through the baffle plates. Can't you hear the stuff whine as it fuses? It's happened to me before."

Nicky was against the wall, bloody where she'd ripped her skin in the fall. "They're not in yet," she snarled.

But they were. This was an outfit

that knew its business. They must have used a hot-bore on our port, because it was opening. We could hear the air valve hissing from the control room.

"We got to do something," Mike barked. "They're cracking us. They'll let our air out. We're cooked."

"We're inside an atmosphere," Scorp said. "There's the planet down in the corner of the plate. Anyhow, you could see none of the troops wore helmets." Scorp stood oddly alert, stroking Loopy's head, his face tense.

HE WAS RIGHT. We'd been in space so long we'd overlooked the absence of helmets on the invaders.

Now they were coming down the companionway, and I'll have to give Mike and Nicky credit. They weren't cowards. Mike's pellet got the first warrior who stuck a head in the door. The warrior kept right on coming—down toward the floor in a long pitch. When his face touched metal, he was dead.

Nicky got the second one with her little gun she'd grabbed. The slug went through the black armor on the soldier, through his chest and out the back. It didn't leave much inside.

Scorp had reached out and grabbed my arm. "Get behind me," he whispered—between me and the wall." He was so close to the wall there wasn't much room. When I stood flat-footed he snarled the order again: "Get behind me, you damned fool, if you want to go on living."

I got behind him just as the next soldier in burned a six-inch hole through Nicky's lovely body. Mike weakened at the last minute. As Nicky went down he screamed and fell to his knees. The soldier blasted off his head with a spurt of green flame from the odd gun he carried. Blasted it off

just as I heard Scorp whisper to the monkey, "Come on, Loopy. Into the Over My Dead Body act." The monk responded.

Glueing itself to Scorp's shirt front, it turned its head and began giving the soldier hell in monk language.

And the silly soldier listened.

He did more than that—or rather *they* did. There were a half dozen of them in the room now and they all took one look at Loopy and dropped to their knees. Loopy kept on jabbering, scolding them, and so they went further. They bent over until their foreheads touched the floor.

Scorp whispered. "Okay, Loopy. Good act." The monk grinned and nestled against Scorp's neck. Scorp turned to me and grinned also. "I was right, wasn't I?"

"Right about what?" I grunted. None of it made any sense to me.

"That's the trouble with you. Never ready to give a smart man credit. You got any green fire holes in you?"

"No."

"Then I must have been right."

"I wouldn't rob you of any glory," I said, wiping my forehead. "You were right."

CORPELLA, we found, was a neat little three-planet family around a small blue sun out beyond the Great Bear. That was where our blind routing had taken us—to *Corpella*.

There was more to it than that, of course. And lucky for our hides, Scorp had put his money on the right legend. These people had come from Earth and found the new family some four or five hundred years before. They brought a rich oriental culture with them which had been diverted somewhat during the later centuries—diverted by some very clever medicine men, or whatever you'd call

them. Characters who brought monkey worship to these people and made a very good thing for themselves.

And there was even more.

Scorp and I began learning about it when the warriors escorted us off the ship like a couple of visiting dignitaries. Not having the ball, I kept my mouth shut and went along. They didn't pay too much attention to me. I figured I was kind of tolerated. All their attention was on the monkey that kept itself glued around Scorp's neck.

And it finally dawned on me that the monk was our passport to *Corpella* and a lot more years of life. It was driven home when Scorp whispered, "The nightgown and all the chin tickling is paying off now, pally. As long as I wear this monk for a necktie we keep from being made dead. Stick close."

I intended to.

They moored our ship to hard gravity and took us down to one of the planets and into a city in an open air-car. We rolled along the avenues close to the pavement, and on all sides the John and Jane Publics went down on their knees as we went by.

"A pretty damn important monkey," I muttered. "Do all the monks on these planets rate this high?"

"I'm not sure," Scorp said, "but I think we'll find I'm right in thinking there aren't more than half a dozen in this whole three-planet world. Kind of a royal family, so to speak. And if I'm not wrong, we'll find a damn solid and crooked bunch of phoney priests behind the whole thing. Those priests are our ace in the hole."

Scorp's knowledge, we found, was accurate. We found the first priest, a joker in a long purple robe, waiting for us in front of a building that looked like some kind of a temple.

We got out of the car and the first rub came when this priest character tried to get his mitts on Loopy.

The monk would have none of it and the character in the purple robe didn't like it. But there was nothing he could do, evidently. So Loopy went with us into the luxurious apartment they had for important people.

A short time later, four more of the robed clan came visiting, each with a monk on his shoulder. And there was great consternation when Loopy began swearing at them. He wanted nothing to do with his relatives it seemed.

The priests went away after that and Scorp said, "We're in. Loopy is the top monk. I was banking on Cordat Singh kidnapping the top monkey for ransom. I didn't think he'd settle for one of the younger ones."

I sat down on a bed that was like a cloud. "What do we do now?" I asked.

Scorp grinned. "You want more than this?"

"I want to get the hell away from this screwy world. I don't like people that kowtow to monkeys. It's not dignified."

Scorp kept on grinning. "I'll see what I can do."

SCORP DID something a week later. One night he woke me up and whispered, "Come on. We're taking it on the lam."

I got dressed and outside there were a group of very shadowy figures waiting for us. I got my guard up but it wasn't necessary. They were pals. They had an air car for us and we rode to a little space cruiser and took off. It was pretty dark and I couldn't get much of a look at the characters, but I had an idea who they were.

Then I noticed something and asked

Scorp, "Where's Loopy?"

"Never mind about Loopy," he whispered back. "Just keep your trap shut and take it easy."

I did and pretty soon we were back in our ship with the port locked and the jets hot. "Get it going," Scorp said.

A new plotting wasn't necessary. I had the monoflight plate Cordat Singh had used to get away from this world. I lined it up and gunned the jets.

Then I went to find Scorp and located him in the galley counting junks of gold. He grinned. "Big market for this stuff. Happy days ahead, chum."

"How the hell—"

"I made a trip before I woke you up."

"I still don't get it."

"The priests; you chump. They wanted to get rid of us bad. I made a

deal."

"All this for Loopy?"

"That's what they think."

And Scorp went to the deep freeze and took out a lump that looked at first like a frozen turkey. A quick look showed it wasn't. It was a monkey.

"Loopy," Scorp said. "They don't know he's gone yet."

I said, "You play it dangerous, boy."

"You didn't think I'd leave my pet monk with those heathens, did you? Besides, I don't think there'll be any trouble. The priests can ring in one of the others this time."

"But what if there *is* trouble?"

"Then just gun those jets, boy. Gun those jets."

So I went out and gunned the jets some more.

THE END