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Moon Of Treason

by EMMETT McDOWELL

Branded an outlaw by the ISP, hated and feared as a mutant, Clyde Vickers stalked his quarry in impotent rage. His kind, it seemed, was always wanted for the dirty work . . .

CLYDE VICKERS shuffled awkwardly down the gangplank. After two years on Jupiter he felt buoyant as a toy balloon in the mild gravity of Earth's satellite. Every step he expected to go sailing over the heads of the other passengers—up, up into the vast booming reaches of Luna City's airlock.

The line jammed, came to a fuming stop. Vickers found himself wedged between a woman who had boarded the liner at Mars and a bearded Plutonian explorer. He craned his neck, peering over their heads to see what had caused the bottleneck.

An officer of the ISP, in a blue uniform, was standing at the foot of the gangplank, examining passports. Vickers cursed under his breath.

"Damn them," he thought, "damn them."

Behind him, the black spaceliner made sudden pistol-like reports as it expanded in the warm air. It had brought some of the cold of outer space along with it, and hoar frost stood out on its sides a foot thick. It was rapidly exhausting the heat in the airlock. Vickers shivered as the cold struck through his ill-fitting gray suit.

"Papers," the ISP man said and held out his hand.

With a start Vickers realized that he had reached the end of the gangplank. The ISP man took one look at Vickers' little green book and his face hardened.

"Parolee!" he said.

There were whispers from the crowd. A little boy said: "What's he done, mamma? What's he done?"

"Hush!" she bade him.

Vickers gave no sign that he'd heard.

"Two-time loser, eh?" the ISP man went on and ran his eyes over Vickers. He saw a tall man with huge shoulders, the muscle bulging the cheap gray cloth—muscle that could be acquired only in the

killing gravity of Jupiter's penal mines. Then he saw Vickers' eyes, and he looked startled.

Vickers had his nictitating lids lowered; his eyes seemed almost normal. Almost but not quite!

"What the devil!" the ISP man wet his lips. "Vickers! By God, I should have recognized the name. Vickers, eh?" He seemed about to say more, then changed his mind. "Move along. You're holding up the line."

"My passport."

"Pick it up at the parole board. If you don't report there in twenty-four hours, you'll be picked up yourself and shipped back to Jupiter. You're a two-time loser, Vickers; you can't afford to get into trouble again."

Vickers regarded him with open dislike, then turned on his heel, started across the spaceport at a cautious shuffle.

Freedom!

He couldn't leave the moon. He had to accept whatever work the parole board secured for him—more than likely some stinking job deep in the moon pits. He must report for a check-up and a psychotherapeutic treatment every four weeks. He couldn't marry or hold property or change jobs.

And if he fell from grace again, it meant sterilization and a life sentence on Jupiter.

Freedom. What the hell had he to look forward to?

ALL his life Vickers had been lonely. His parents, horrified at having produced a monstrosity, had placed him in a home and washed their hands of him.

Not that Vickers' abnormality was disfiguring or particularly noticeable even—you had to look closely at his eyes to recognize the nictitating lids—but he was a freak, a mutant, and the sight of him had



been a constant reminder of their shame.

At the home, Vickers' playmates had quickly discovered his queerness and had taunted him about it with the cruelty of children. His attempts at friendship were met with rebuffs. He might have been able to adjust but he was never allowed to forget that he was different.

Later when the peculiar power of his eyes became known, he was feared a little, resented and cordially hated. Vickers was forced in on himself. He built a shell, a hard flippant armor against the senseless antagonism he met everywhere.

In spite of hysterical predictions and a flood of stories in the science-fiction magazines, the Atomic Age had not ushered in a wave of mutants—at least not radical mutants. Vickers was practically unique.

And alone.

Nevertheless Vickers experienced an odd tingling excitement as he emerged from the lock into Luna City. Beneath his thick layers of protective indifference, he was eager as a boy, friendly, sensitive. A starved gregariousness looked out of his eyes in unguarded moments.

He stood with his back to the wall of an export firm, breathing deeply of the warm, artificially earth-scented air. Through the soles of his feet he could feel the pavement vibrating faintly, as deep inside the bowels of the moon, the mechanical mining worms gnawed out the ore, chewed it, digested it, spat it out as metal ingots.

The voice of the city rolled over him, deafened him. His eyes were bewildered at the crowds jamming the pavement. His pulse leaped. He was like a blind man who has just had his sight restored.

Someone said: "Hello, Vickers," and struck him on the shoulder. "Glad to see you out."

Vickers brought his eyes down. He stared at the man who had addressed him. The look of exaltation slowly faded from his face to be replaced by a puzzled frown.

"I don't know you."

"Oh, come now, surely you recognize me." The man was as big as Vickers, exactly, and the same build. He was clad in a shabby gray suit. There was something tantalizingly familiar about him. Vickers wrinkled his forehead in concentration.

"I must remember that," said the man, and wrinkled his forehead exactly like Vickers.

They were standing in a doorway out of the stream of pedestrians. Suddenly Vickers' mouth fell open. He stared at the man in startled disbelief.

It was himself!

The resemblance was too perfect. The same close-cropped black hair and Jupiter-enlarged muscles. The same short, straight nose, wide, thin-lipped mouth, square jaw. Even the same transparent inner lids lowered over pale gray eyes. It was like looking into a mirror.

Vickers felt his mouth go dry.

"Who are you?" he demanded harshly.

"You recognize me? Good."

The man grinned, began to edge away.

Vickers lunged for him. But the fellow eluded his grasp, slipped into the stream of traffic like an eel. He was rapidly being swallowed up by the crowd. Vickers ploughed after him.

There was something afoot—something dangerous to himself, he felt. He was determined not to lose sight of his double and opened his nictitating lids.

Instantly, the scene about the busy spaceport changed. It took on a vaporous unreality like an x-ray photograph. The people, the buildings, even the pavement underfoot became tenuous as smoke. He could see right through them.

It always frightened Vickers a little to use his full vision, taking him a second to adjust. Then he located his double about ten steps ahead.

He could make out the misty outlines of elevators in the man's flashing heels. So that was how he'd given himself the necessary height. Pads filled out his frame reproducing Vickers' Jupiter-trained muscles. The nictitating lids had been cleverly simulated by contact lenses.

But why?

Why should anyone go to all that trouble to disguise himself exactly like Vickers—even to the ill-fitting gray suit? There was something sinister about the whole affair.

Just then Vickers tripped, lost his precarious balance and fell sprawling.

He scrambled to his feet in time to see

the stranger leap into an air taxi.

"Look at his eyes!" a woman cried out at his elbow. "Look at his eyes!"

VICKERS hastily lowered his inner lids, cursing under his breath. There wasn't another cab in sight. He'd better clear out before he was the focal point of a riot. Normal humans weren't fond of mutants.

Already a crowd was collecting. Vickers heard angry mutterings. He forced his way through the press bull-like. Suddenly he found his path blocked by two determined-looking men.

"Hold on," said the man on the outside and put his hand on Vickers' chest. He was blond with cold, pale blue eyes. "What's your hurry?"

Vickers started to thrust them aside when he felt the second man jam a gun into his ribs.

"Vickers, aren't you?" asked the blond man.

"What of it?"

"Come along." He jerked his chin toward an air taxi. "Don't make a fuss."

"Where?"

"Headquarters." The man produced an ISP card. "We tried to catch you at the ship, but you'd left."

Vickers hesitated. Despite the pistol in his ribs, he thought he could take the two plainclothesmen. It would be a futile move, though. The ISP would throw out the net for him, and this time he would be sent back to Jupiter for life.

He sighed, "All right," and climbed into the cab.

He wondered if there could be any connection between the incident outside the spaceport and this visit to ISP headquarters, but he knew it would be useless to ask. He stared silently out the cab window at the polyglot crowd, drawn from three worlds.

The moon was international. It was governed by a board of seven delegates, one each from the seven great nations of Earth. They were known simply as "The Seven" with headquarters in the moon-tower near the center of Luna City. The ISP offices were located there too as well as all government bureaus.

All at once Vickers realized that the cab was headed in the wrong direction.

"Where are we going?" he demanded, jarred out of his stoical calm.

The ISP agents had taken seats one on each side of him. He could feel their guns prodding his ribs, sleek automatics with built-in silencers. Wicked things that could tear half his guts out.

"Shut up," the blond man said.

Vickers lapsed into silence again. He was more bewildered and angry than alarmed. Try as he would, he couldn't guess who'd want him badly enough to snatch him.

There had been no rivals in Vickers' line of work. Samuels and Rebki, his partners, had both been killed in the ISP trap two years ago. There was no one left who had any interest in him. Unless—

He said suddenly: "You're not ISP agents."

"That's right."

"What's the idea then?"

"You ask too many questions," said the blond man.

"An' that's a fact," the other agreed.

Vickers' mouth set. He still thought he could take the two gunmen, but his curiosity had the best of him. He sank back in the cushions and waited.

The cab had gone about three kilometers when it pulled up at the curb.

"All right, Vickers," the blond man said; "here's where you get your answers."

He crawled out, straightened. The cab had stopped before a door of opaque blue plastic. Above it in letters of electric blue light was the inscription:

INTERNATIONAL SPY RING
INCORPORATED
Secrets Bought and Sold

Vickers stared at it in disbelief. There was just the plain blank door squeezed between a theatre on the right and a travel agency with posters of the Martian deserts in its windows on the left. The blue door was hard to focus on—like a slightly blurred picture. He opened his nictitating lids.

To his utter bewilderment, he found himself looking through the door into the

theatre lobby. The blue door didn't lead anywhere. It wasn't even a door, he realized, but an illusion!

VICKERS had been examined many times. "The peculiarity of your vision," one eminent psycho-biologist had told him, "lies in your ability to see matter as it actually is. Tenuous unmaterial energy. There's more space between the nucleus of an atom and its electrons in proportion than between the sun and its planets. It's like looking at the stars"—and he had waved his hand at the sky—"you can see them but they don't obstruct your vision."

It was a strange world that Vickers could see with the nictitating lids raised—a fairy-like insubstantial world, beautiful and shocking. A glass world without secrets.

But his eyes never lied to him. And the door didn't exist in fact. There was only a blank theatre wall where he had seen it.

Then the blond man stepped forward and went through the motions of opening the door.

"Inside," he said and walked through and vanished!

Vickers knew he had vanished, because he could still see the misty outlines of the wall where the door should have been and the interior of the theatre. He felt his stomach go hollow. "In you go," the other man said and nudged him with the pistol.

Vickers allowed his nictitating lids to close.

At once he could see the door again, standing open, and a reception room beyond. The blond man was just inside motioning for him to enter.

Vickers drew a deep breath and stepped across the threshold.

There was a moment of abysmal darkness, a giddy sensation, then Vickers found himself standing in the reception room, ankle deep in carpet. He felt unaccountably heavier—not as much as he would weigh on Earth but more than he should weigh on the moon.

A girl was approaching him. She said: "Go right in, Mr. Vickers," indicating a door across the room; "they're waiting for you."

"Who's waiting for me?"

"Mr. Thorpe. The president of International Spy Ring, Inc. Right in here, sir."

The utterly absurd title of the company struck him anew. The seven great nations would no more permit such a business to exist than they would sit supinely by and allow an armed invasion.

In the first place they all maintained their own very efficient espionage and counter espionage systems. They couldn't afford to let one nation grow more powerful than the rest. At any costs they had to preserve the status quo.

He didn't voice his doubts, but followed the receptionist into a large, sparsely furnished office. There were no windows, the room being lit by soft yellow light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. The top of a huge desk of purely functional design was littered with gadgets, and behind it sat a bald, pink-faced man, wearing a pleasant expression.

There was one other person in the room—a girl—and she was crying softly.

"Mr. Thorpe," the receptionist said, "Mr. Vickers to see you," and withdrew.

The girl turned her back quickly to Vickers so that he couldn't see her face, but he could watch her hands worrying the material of her dress.

It was an expensive dress, Vickers recognized, an exclusive Venusian creation of green gossamer that was very nearly transparent even to his normal vision. He was a little shocked and looked away.

The man called Thorpe beamed at him. "Glad to see you, Vickers," he said and made it sound genuine. "Won't you sit down?"

Vickers let himself sink into a chair across from the girl. He couldn't keep from studying her. Her brown-hair was done in a sort of halo effect and she wore wedge type sandals that must have added three inches to her height and made her feet look tiny.

Thorpe cleared his throat.

"We had a good reason for bringing you here," he said; "I hope it didn't inconvenience you too much."

"Get to the point," said Vickers.

Thorpe looked startled.

"Vickers, we can use a man with your

unique talents. In fact, there's a job that no one but you—"

"Sorry."

Vickers was on his feet, starting for the door to the reception room.

"Don't be hasty," Thorpe said in an agitated voice. "I really can't let you go until you hear me out."

VICKERS caught the veiled threat in his words, swung around. Thorpe's finger was resting on a button. The girl had begun to sniff audibly.

"All right," said Vickers, "but make it short. I have to register at the Parole Board office before the expiration of twenty-four hours."

"No hurry," Thorpe said, waving him back to his chair. "You met your double on the street. He's gone to the board to register in your place. He'll also fill any job they see fit to assign you. So you see, Vickers, you're quite free. You're even supplied with a perfect alibi."

Vickers did see. He saw a number of things, none of which reassured him. He said: "Fingerprints?"

"They'll check. He's wearing tips with your prints. So will his height and weight. He's a fine actor, Vickers, one of the best."

"How did you get my prints? My record is in the ISP secret file, but—"

"But that's our business. Secrets, Vickers. Any secrets. State secrets, scientific secrets." He chuckled. "We make no secret about it."

Vickers looked skeptical.

"Do you mean to tell me that you could steal the plans, say, of the USSE's new space drive?"

Thorpe rubbed his hands together, his grin broadening.

"We sold them the plans. In fact, we sold those same plans to the Black Republic, the Arab Federation, China and New Spain as well. The only reason we didn't sell them to the United States is because they happened to be the ones who had developed them."

He paused to let his words sink in. "That may seem unethical, but it's our policy. In our small way, we feel that we help to preserve the status quo."

"Rubbish!" said Vickers. "If you'd done

that, they would have sent the lot of you off to Jupiter."

"They try." Thorpe looked at his watch. "In fact, Vickers, we have information that the ISP plans to raid us in exactly twenty-three minutes."

Vickers stiffened. "Is that straight?"

"Quite. But don't alarm yourself. They'll never get past the blue door."

Far from being soothing, Thorpe's reassurance had just the opposite effect on Vickers. For the first time, he began to doubt that he could get through that blue door himself. There was something so damned complacent about the man behind the desk—

In sudden alarm, Vickers opened his nictitating lids, flicked a quick glance around.

The room was quite real, but there was no sign of Luna City nor of the moon's desolate surface. He sucked in his breath.

The office seemed to be part of a large windowless structure. He could see, through the walls, a restless ochre sea outside and a red pebble beach. Strange, sinuous vegetation cloaked the shore.

"Where are we?" he blurted out. "How did I get here?"

"I'm sorry," said Thorpe, "but that's one secret that isn't for sale."

Vickers closed the nictitating lids and the office recovered its solidity.

"What's your proposition?"

Thorpe gave him a shrewd look. "This is Tani Fralick," he introduced the girl. "I'm sure you've heard of her father. He's the physicist . . ."

VICKERS sat bolt upright. Fralick was probably the most renowned man on Earth, Mars or Venus. He certainly was the Systems greatest physicist. Fralick was head of the United States' Bureau of Research. It was practically treason for his daughter to be in the offices of such an organization as "International Spy Ring, Inc."

Thorpe said: "Tani's father has been abducted by the Arab Federation."

The girl gave a muffled sob, buried her face in her hands.

Vickers yelled: "What!" Then in a lower voice, "But there's been nothing on

the newscasts."

"Of course not. The U. S. is hushing it up. They don't want it broadcast that their top experimental physicist has been stolen. They don't even know who has him or where he is. Tani has asked us to get her father back."

"Where is he?"

Thorpe didn't look so cherubic as he drummed on the desk top.

"Here. Luna City. He's being held in the embassy of the Arab Federation."

Vickers said: "Why don't you turn your information over to the U. S.?"

"It's not as simple as that. The Arabs would kill him before they'd give him up."

Vickers shrugged. "If the U. S. with all its resources can't release him, I don't see how you expect me to do it."

"You can, though. In fact you're the only one who can. The question is, will you?"

"No!" said Vickers flatly; "I won't."

"But—"

"No buts about it. With my record, it would be poison for me, if my name ever became associated with anything like International Spy Ring, Inc. I'm through, Thorpe, I've quit. I can't afford to be sent back to Jupiter."

Tani Fralick suddenly burst into a flood of tears. Vickers clenched his fist. At that instant a bell began to ring insistently.

"The raid," Thorpe said. "What say we watch it? Anyway, Vickers, you can't leave 'til it's over."

Vickers grunted, sank deeper into his chair. Tani's soft child-like crying was getting under his skin, but he steeled himself against it.

Thorpe pressed a button on his desk, and a huge television screen on the wall behind him glowed into life. The multiple noises of Luna City rolled into the office shattering their isolation. The tri-dimensional effect was so real, that it was as if the wall itself had been removed and they were peering directly into the street outside the blue door. Vickers could read its idiotic sign.

INTERNATIONAL SPY RING

INCORPORATED

Secrets Bought and Sold

All at once he frowned as he discovered the silent men converging on the entrance. They were dressed in civilian clothes, threading their way unobtrusively through the press. ISP men, Vickers recognized, with a thrill of alarm.

One of them reached the portal, put out his hand for the knob.

The blue door vanished.

It simply went out like a light, leaving the ISP man staring stupidly at the blank wall of the theatre.

Thorpe snapped off the television. Vickers could see that he was chuckling.

"The fun's over," he said. "But they'll be nosing around there for a week. There's really no door there, you know."

"Yes, I know. But I'll be damned if I understand."

"You will," Thorpe said cryptically. Then he switched on the inter-office com. "Miss Stevens, see that this memo is circulated throughout the organization. 'Due to a police raid, the new offices of International Spy Ring, Inc., are located at B624½ Water Street, Level Three'."

HE clicked it off, stared at Vickers coldly. All the friendliness was gone.

"Suppose we quit fencing. We know your history, Vickers. You used to claim that you could arrange the escape of any prisoner, no matter where he was being held—for a price. You made monkeys out of the ISP for a while. How many men have you broken out of the Jupiter Penal Mines and readjustment camps?"

"I don't know," said Vickers. "It was a good racket while it lasted."

"But you couldn't finagle your own escape, could you?"

"It's easier to work from the outside," Vickers rejoined laconically.

Thorpe said in a nasty voice: "That's just the point I'd like to make. Either you help us release Fralick, or we'll frame you and turn you over to the ISP."

Vickers' eyes narrowed. He leaned suddenly across the desk, hit Thorpe on the chin with his balled fist!

There was a "crack!" as Thorpe's jaw bone snapped. He was bowled over backward to lie in an unconscious heap against the wall.

Tani screamed. She tried to reach the desk, but Vickers grabbed her off her feet, thrust her under his arm.

"Put me down! Put me down." she cried furiously, kicking, squirming. Vickers paid no more attention to her frantic wriggling than he would have to a kitten. His inner lids were raised and he was staring with a strange fixity at the alien world visible through the walls.

"What are you going to do?" Tani gasped. "Are you crazy? You can't walk out of here. The blue door isn't operating. Besides, even if you did get away the Ring would have you framed."

"I'm not going back to Luna City," Vickers said tersely. "I'm going outside." "Outside!"

"Yes." He started for the reception room. "I don't know where we are. Another world, another dimension, it's all the same. I'll be free of the ISP. I'll find a way out if I have to break through the walls."

"But you can't!" she wailed. "The atmosphere outside it! It—it's chlorine!"

Vickers felt as if someone had kicked him in the belly. He set Tani on her feet.

"How do *you* know?"

"Thorpe showed me. He—he—" she straightened her skirt managing to look flustered—"he's been very friendly."

"Where are we?"

"In another dimension, I think. The blue door is a—a stasis, Thorpe called it. Don't ask me how they do it. They came through in space suits and built this hermetically-sealed fortress."

Vickers was silent. After a moment, he said: "All right, you win. I'll break out your father if it can be done."

VICKERS sat in a chair facing a blank wall; his nictitating lids were raised the pupils of his eyes like lambent flame. Beyond the wall lay the embassy of the Arab Federation.

"What do you see?" demanded Tani in a suppressed voice.

Vickers and the girl were in the house of Seth Adda, an ex-senator and a friend of Tani's father. He had been happy to lend Tani his house, which was on the eighth level flush against the Arabian Embassy.

Vickers was dressed in a snuff brown burnoose, the national Arab costume. He said:

"There's a sleeping room just beyond the wall. This part of the embassy must be the private quarters of one of the officials. The room opens on a hall. There are six-seven-eight other bedrooms along it. I think it's the harem. There's a swimming pool to the left."

"Can you see him?" Tani pleaded.

"Yes. But not very plainly. He's in a tiny cell almost in the center of the embassy. There's a guard in front of the door."

"Is—is he all right? They haven't hurt him?"

Vickers concentrated on the vague outlines of the man lying on his bunk. A thin man, elderly, with hollow cheeks. "So that's Doctor Fralick," he thought, "greatest theoretical physicist since Einstein."

He said aloud:

"He seems okay."

Tani expelled her breath in relief. Vickers looked at her suddenly and saw that tears were running down her cheeks. Involuntarily he started to reach out his hand to comfort her, remembered the repugnance normal humans felt toward him and let his hand drop to his knee.

The girl disturbed him. She was wearing practical gray coveralls instead of the filmy creation she'd had on yesterday. She was beautiful even in the baggy garment, but it wasn't altogether that. With the strides that had been made in eugenics, an ugly man or woman was the exception and, perversely, often had more appeal than the uniformly handsome ones.

No, he was hungry for a woman, hungry for companionship and admiration.

He frowned, catching himself up with a jerk. Self pity! He'd better watch himself. That way led to neurosis, manic depression and insanity.

He wished Tani would go away and leave him alone. He worked better alone. But he knew she'd been set to watch him. The Ring probably thought she'd do a better job of it since it was to her interest to see that he didn't double-cross them.

She said, "Clyde."

"Yes?" He was startled and dropped his

nictitating lids. She'd never called him by his first name before.

"You resent being forced into this job, don't you? I'm sorry. Honest I am, Clyde. But it was father's life or—or . . ."

"Or mine," he supplied dryly.

"That isn't fair."

"Isn't it?"

"No. You'll be protected and alibied—"

He said: "How much do you know about International Spy Ring, Inc.?"

She looked startled, her eyes widening. "Not—not very much, I guess. I've heard father speak of them. They're big, Clyde. You don't know how big. They've offices on Earth and Mars and Venus, too. The ISP can't do a thing. They can't get past the blue doors. You can't fight the Ring. They're invulnerable."

"Nothing's invulnerable."

"Clyde!" Her hand started towards him, dropped.

She can't bring herself to touch me, he thought. They're friendly now—because I'm necessary; they can't do without my help. But what about afterwards? What then?

If he were lucky, he'd be set free, to work in the moon pits where his double was now. If he were lucky! He shivered a little. He knew too much about International Spy Ring, Inc. As soon as he was of no more use to them, they'd dispose of him. Permanently. Probably in that dimension where their office was located. That beautiful little world with the atmosphere of chlorine.

"Clyde," Tani repeated. "What are you going to do? You're not planning to double-cross the Ring, are you? Not that, Clyde?"

"No." But he filed the idea away. The ISP might be willing to forget his record, let him start out with a clean slate if he could deliver the Ring into their hands.

"Why did the Arabs kidnap your father?" he asked Tani suddenly.

THE girl hesitated. "He—he was working on teleportation. And somehow they got wind of it. It would have made space ships outdated. Armies could be transported instantly behind enemy lines. It would have made the United States su-

preme. He was about to succeed." She shook her head. "But I don't see how the Arabs learned about it."

"Don't you?"

"No." She looked puzzled, then her brown eyes widened in comprehension. "The Ring! But they're helping to rescue him."

"Why not? They're getting paid by both sides. You heard Thorpe admit that they'd sold the space drive to every one of the seven countries."

"No. I can't believe it, Clyde." She bit her lip. "They're not like that. Not really."

"Rubbish."

The girl's face had grown very white. "You won't let me down, Clyde. You'll get father out, whatever you do?"

He opened his nictitating lids, peered through the wall into the embassy. There were two women in the swimming pool. The sleeping chamber was empty. So was the hallway.

He said, "Yes." Then, "Check the route. This is it."

He heard her gasp. Then she began to talk hurriedly into a tiny radio strapped about her wrist.

Vickers looked up and down through the various floors of the embassy next door, checking the position of the guard details, the officials and their families. It was going to be tricky, he saw, a matter of split second timing.

He got up and examined the sleek air taxi. It was a transparent plastic tear drop and filled a fourth of the room.

One outer wall of the room had been removed outright. It had been simulated with cloth flats like stage props so that it looked normal enough from the outside. But when the time arrived, the air taxi could burst right through it into the street.

The Ring was thorough, Vickers had to admit. And ruthlessly efficient.

He said: "Get in the taxi and start the motor. Tell them we'll crack out of here in exactly fifteen minutes."

He heard her catch her breath and wheeled on her suddenly.

"What's wrong?" he demanded sharply.

"Good Lord, don't go into a funk now!"

"Hold it!" she said, the radio to her ear. He saw the blood drain out of her face as

she listened. Then she clicked it off, turned frightened eyes on him.

"It's your double." Her voice sounded lifeless. "The ISP has discovered the substitution. They have the net out for you now. You couldn't get a block without being caught."

Vickers could feel his stomach knot with shock. He stared at her, his blazing eyes probing straight through her. Anywhere else in the system, he might have been able to escape.

But Luna City! It was like a hermetically sealed gold fish bowl with the ISP blocking all the exits. Sooner or later they'd dig him out.

Sterilization and a life sentence to the Jupiter Penal Mines! There was no leniency shown third offenders, no matter how minor the infraction.

He got a grip on himself with an effort.

"Tell them," he said to the girl, "we'll crack out of here according to schedule."

Her mouth made a soundless O.

"Get in the taxi and start the motor," he said with a grim sparkle of humor. "I might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb!"

"But how'll we slip through the ISP net?" Tani protested.

"Get in there," Vickers said in a voice that brooked no questions. He swung back to the wall separating them from the Arabian embassy. The adjoining bedroom, he saw, was still empty.

HE DREW the atomic knife from its holster beneath his burnoose, pressed the stud. A long blade of coruscating atomic energy shot from the handle.

The blade went into the wall as if the tough plastic had been butter. With infinite caution, Vickers cut a four foot window into the next building, lifted out the block.

"Don't fumble your part," he said over his shoulder. "We may be in a hurry when we come back this way."

Without waiting for a reply, he stepped through, fitted the block back into place.

His last glimpse of Tani revealed her crouched in the transparent plastic air taxi, her eyes round and frightened as two new moons.

VICKERS didn't hurry. Hope for success lay in two factors: audacity and his peculiar vision which allowed him to see what his opponents were doing and so keep a number of jumps ahead.

The Arabs were a mixture of the old and the new. Scientifically, they were on a par with any of the seven great nations, but they clung with superstitious fanaticism to the old customs, the old way of life.

The harem was still inviolate, and Vickers knew there would be a guard outside its door.

He located him through several walls that acted like layers of cheesecloth to his eyes, dimming the guard's figure but not obscuring it. He found the women. There were four, and half a dozen servants besides. But they were congregated at the pool and in two of the rooms.

He could watch them laughing and chatting or swimming in the limpid water. Dark-eyed houris with slender waists and full hips and breasts. It was like a silent film of the ancients. But infinitely more real.

And deadly.

There was no one in the hall. Satisfied, Vickers left the bedroom, walked swiftly down the carpeted hall until he reached the door at the end.

He could see the harem guard leaning against the wall, a burly bearded figure with a hawk nose and a hawk's fierce eyes. An automatic was belted outside his blue and white striped burnoose.

Without hesitation or haste, Vickers ran the atomic knife through the lock, forced open the door.

The guard spun around, gaping in surprise. He caught sight of Vickers, reached for the automatic.

"By Allah!" he began.

Vickers cut off his head.

The head hit the floor with a thump, rolled a little, came to rest on its stump, staring at Vickers out of open, startled eyes.

It upset Vickers, made him a little sick at his stomach. He swallowed, glanced about quickly.

Three men, he discovered, were approaching around a bend in the corridor. He had perhaps a minute or a minute and a half before they came into sight.

He stuffed the guard's body into a closet, threw the head in after it. He covered the bloodstains with a carpet, welded shut the harem door with the tip of the atomic knife. Then he ran up the corridor away from the approaching men.

This whole wing must be the living quarters of the embassy staff. It was preternaturally quiet like the upper floors of a hotel. He could see a few people in their rooms, one or two in the corridors, which he avoided automatically.

The cell block where Fralick was being held was located in the main building. The traffic was considerably heavier there, and Vickers' eyes were never still. They darted here, there, watching one person's progress, judging how many seconds it would take another to reach a certain intersection.

His ears were alerted for the first outbreak of the alarm bell. He didn't have time to notice the antique hangings, the exquisite decorations, though he did catch an impression of sumptuousness.

The rear of Fralick's cell butted against the back of an office. In advance Vickers had determined to cut through the wall between office and cell and so avoid killing the guard. If he were lucky, he would avoid detection for precious minutes also.

He had almost reached his objective when a heavy-set bearded official entered the office and sat down behind the desk.

Vickers could see him mistily as he set to work with some papers. He swore furiously under his breath, but didn't pause. Throwing open the door, he jumped into the chamber.

In the feeble gravity of the moon, Vickers' leap carried him across the room to the top of the Arab's desk.

The official gasped, tried to rise and call out. His face was turned up to Vickers—a long frightened face with skin like yellow leather.

Vickers kicked him on his pointed chin.

The Arab went over backwards with a crash. Vickers didn't glance at him, but shut the door, attacked the far wall with the atomic knife.

He lifted out a four foot segment. Fralick was on the other side staring at the opening like a startled cat.

"What—" he began, catching sight of Vickers.

Vickers said low voiced: "Shut up. Come on!" Holding out his hand, he half-helped, half-yanked the physicist from the cell.

"Who are you?" Fralick's clothes were wrinkled and he needed a shave. He was gaunt, pale, excited. "I know! You're Vickers!"

Vickers' eyes narrowed in surprise, but he only said: "Hurry!"

The passage outside was still deserted, thank the gods. He pulled the physicist after him, sprinted toward the living quarters in the wing.

There were voices ahead. Two men going in the same direction they were, Vickers saw. He slowed down in order not to trample their heels.

He was nervous now. He could feel the time running through his fingers.

Still no alarm! They burst out of the corridor into an enormous hall, crossed it swiftly, ducked down another passage. Damn place was a rat run. Fralick was panting. "Hold out, old man!" Vickers thought. "Hold out!" Still no alarm. They were going to make it. They had to—

All the bells in the world seemed to cut loose at once!

VICKERS jumped as if he'd been shot.

Fralick clutched his chest. For a moment Vickers was afraid the scientist would pass out.

The bell rang frenziedly.

Hundreds of bells! Everywhere. Bells and shouts and trampling feet. Through the misty walls Vickers could see running soldiers, frightened officials, women and children. A vast terrifying pandemonium like a disturbed ant nest—like a glass ant colony kept for observation.

Then the doors began to whoosh shut. Automatic doors closing off the passages. Blocking escape! One rammed shut just behind them.

A party of guards caught sight of them. Steel jacketed bullets ricocheted and whined down the corridor.

Vickers threw a gas grenade. The guards were blotted out by a fountain of pale green mist. It wasn't deadly, but it would knock out the Arabs, close off the

passage temporarily.

Fralick was sobbing for breath. Suddenly Vickers grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Here! This way! Through the harem."

With the atomic knife he freed the door which he'd sealed a few minutes before. A few minutes! He glanced at his watch. Eighteen minutes exactly; it seemed like hours! He was over his time. He put his shoulder to the door, threw it back with a crash.

There was a cluster of frightened women in the corridor. When they saw Vickers and Fralick, they began to scream and fled screaming like chickens from a hawk.

Vickers paid no attention to them, but rushed to the bedroom where he had cut through the wall. Kicking out the segment he almost hurled Fralick through the opening.

Tani was waiting in the air taxi with the door open. A white, strained Tani with a face like a mask.

"Dad," she cried.

Fralick tumbled into the taxi. Vickers started to shut the door, but Tani held it open.

"Get in," she begged in a tight voice. "Quick!"

"No," he said. "The ISP would spot me in that air taxi and stop us. You can get through all right by yourselves."

Consternation mirrored itself on Tani's waxen features. She shook her head. "We're not going without you."

"Yes, you are!" he said; "no time to explain. I'll meet you at the blue door."

She was almost in tears. "Clyde, we're not going to leave you behind!"

Through the gaping hole in the wall behind them, Vickers could hear the sounds of pursuit closing in, but he didn't look around.

"You little fool!" he said brutally, "do you want to get me killed? Do what I say. This is my kind of work!"

Suddenly she leaned from the air taxi, kissed him hard on the mouth. Her eyes were wet.

"I'll be waiting," she said, catching her breath; "you crazy Quixotic idiot. I'll wait forever."

Then she slammed the door. The taxi roared, bull throated, and leaped forward,

bursting a hole in the false wall.

Vickers stared after the diminishing air cab, rubbing his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I'll be damned," he said softly; "I'll be damned." Then he turned around.

He was just in time to see the first of the Arab guards lunge through the hole in the wall of the embassy.

Vickers hurled his other gas grenade. The egg-shaped glass bomb smashed against the floor. Plumes of the pale green paralysis gas shot upward. But Vickers didn't wait to see its effect.

He left through the hole torn by the air taxi, reached the pavement, began to walk rapidly toward the corner, the snuff-brown burnoose flapping about his ankles.

He had seconds only before the pursuit would develop again. The bomb was a delaying action, no more.

UP ahead he could see a road block, and pedestrians milling around in the street. A net hung from the level above, halting the air traffic. The ISP was on the job.

"Out of the frying pan into the fire," he thought grimly. He glanced back toward the house, although the Arabs couldn't possibly come through the room until they'd procured a fan and blown the fumes clear.

An ISP patrol boat was gliding slowly up the street behind him. It was manned by two men and was traveling just above the surface traffic. A shallow, heavily armed and armored craft, it reminded Vickers of a giant ray as it floated lazily through the air.

He jumped to the edge of the pavement, waved the patrol boat down frantically.

It gave a low moan on its siren, swung in to the curb. The door opened.

The two men inside wore uniforms—smart blue breeches and blouses trimmed in gold with the ISP insignia—three interlocking worlds representing Earth, Venus and Mars—embazoned on their shoulders. They were both young and clean cut. Only their eyes looked old and hard.

"What's the trouble?" the officer nearest Vickers asked shortly.

"I saw him!" Vickers sounded excited.

"I saw him!"

"Saw who?"

"The mutant!"

The ISP agents exchanged glances. At that instant Vickers hit the one on the outside in the temple. He hit him with the handle of the atomic knife. The man slumped forward, bumped his head against the slanting windshield. Vickers was already sliding in beside him.

He shoved the unconscious agent to the floor boards, pressed the stud on the knife handle. The blade of sparkling flame glittered into life.

"Take us up!" he said to the startled man at the controls; "and don't touch the radio!" Almost as an afterthought he added softly: "I'm Vickers. I'd just as soon die now, all at once, as be sent back to the Jupiter Mines to die by degrees."

The ISP man blanched. He lifted the patrol boat into the air, sent it scooting down the street. He kept dropping his eyes to the shimmering blade of flame.

"Don't get that thing too close," he pleaded hoarsely.

Vickers said: "B624½ Water Street, level 3. And I won't get the blade too close if we get through without trouble."

"But suppose I'm ordered in?"

"That's your tough luck."

The ISP man was sweating. But he didn't dare remove his hands from the controls. Beadlets of perspiration rolled down his cheeks and chin unheeded.

As they approached the roadblock, he touched the siren. At its eerie wail, a man hauled up the net, and the patrol boat slid beneath it.

Vickers let his breath escape. He was sweating too, he realized. His forehead felt clammy as a dead fish.

They reached the blue door without being bothered, though. Vickers stared at the sign:

INTERNATIONAL SPY RING,
INCORPORATED
Secrets Bought and Sold

It was the one place in Luna City where the ISP couldn't reach him. But would the ring give him sanctuary? He didn't know.

"They will," he thought; "they will, by

Heaven, or take the consequences!"

He said: "Here's where I leave you, officer. Thanks for the lift," and slid out of the patrol boat.

The ISP man had guts. Vickers had taken his automatic, but the agent reached for the emergency guns in the locker. Before he could shoot, though, Vickers had disappeared through the blue door.

He sprang from the patrol boat, started after him. He was three feet from the blue door when it vanished.

INSIDE the reception room, Vickers balanced on the balls of his feet, the ISP agent's automatic in his hand. His mouth was a thin line. Except for Vickers, the room was empty.

He was about to raise his nictitating lids when the door of the inner office opened and Tani flew to meet him. Involuntarily, he jerked up the automatic, but the girl didn't even notice it.

"Clyde!" she said, and threw her arms about him, clinging desperately as if she were afraid to turn loose. "I've been so afraid." There was a funny little catch in her voice.

Vickers stared down at her, refusing to believe his senses. Then she tilted her head back, and he could see the relief and happiness shining in her eyes—and something besides.

Vickers kissed her. All his doubts were suddenly swept away and somehow the old hurts along with them.

"Mr. Vickers," the receptionist said.

He hadn't noticed her enter the room. But he looked up and she was smiling too. There was no repugnance in her eyes.

He said: "Yes."

"They're waiting to see you, Mr. Vickers. If you'll just step this way."

He glanced questioningly at Tani, who nodded. Together they entered Thorpe's office.

Fralick was there, looking old and tired and a little messy. He was sitting behind the big desk with Thorpe at his elbow. There were two others in the office, a tall, parchment-faced Chinese, obviously of Manchu descent and an Arab with the features of a Biblical patriarch. They were smiling, all except Thorpe, who

couldn't very well with his jaw in a cast.

Doctor Fralick put the palms of his hands on the desk and leaned forward. He said, "I'm very glad you made it, Vickers. I haven't had a chance to express my appreciation."

Vickers wrinkled his forehead. There was an air of hopeful friendliness tinged with awe in their attitude that puzzled him. He didn't say anything.

Fralick looked vaguely embarrassed. "I—we've another favor to ask you, Vickers. We want you to come in with us."

"What?" said Vickers in a stunned voice.

"We want you in International Spy Ring, Inc. Need you. We—well, we wouldn't expect you to accept a minor position of course. Not a man of your calibre. If you'll join us, Vickers, you can take charge of the field work. None of us is so well fitted for active duty as you with your enviable vision, your resourcefulness."

Vickers didn't know what to say. That anybody envied him, wanted him around, considered him an asset, knocked a hole in his armor. He had no defenses against friendliness.

"But you," he said; "Doctor Fralick, you're head of the U.S. Bureau of Research—"

"I'm also the head of International Spy Ring, Inc."

At Vickers' expression, Fralick allowed a smile to flit across his visage.

"Don't judge us too harshly. Science is international, not the property of one individual or one nation, even. It must belong to everybody.

"We don't want power. We're after peace and tolerance and the dissemination of knowledge. We're united, Vickers. The scientists, the technicians, the engineers of the seven great nations. Not all of us, but enough of us."

He gave Vickers a shrewd penetrating look. "Our way may not seem ethical, but it works. When there are no secrets between countries, war is almost impossible. And there are no secrets anymore; we see to that.

"If the Arab Federation discovers a new gas, we sell the formula to each of the other countries. If the Black Republic or China starts a program of military training or lays the keel of a new battleship, in a week everyone of the other countries has the complete details.

"We don't sell the information for profit, Vickers, but to finance the organization."

VICKERS was stunned. The realization that the Ring was not a hard grasping organization of thieves, spies and traitors; but an international group comprising the finest minds and bent on preserving the peace, left him completely bewildered.

"I don't know what to say," he said. "Of course I'll join you."

"Good." Fralick jumped up, came around the desk with his hand out. "We'll get you a pardon. It wouldn't do for my son-in-law to be a fugitive from the ISP." He winked at the others who had crowded about Vickers, pumping his hand.

It occurred to Vickers that these men were pleased to have him—not in spite of his mutation, but because of it! They'd even been a little afraid he might turn them down.

It was a new experience for him, a good experience. He had the sudden conviction that at last he'd found his place in the world. It made him feel warm.

The Chinese was saying: "You're a violent man, Vickers, a dangerous man. We were afraid that you might not see eye with us in our aims."

"No," Vickers protested, really shocked. "No, I'm not a violent man. I do what I must and do it as quickly and effectively as I can. But I'm not violent."

Thorpe's eyes twinkled. Seizing a pencil he wrote something, held it up for them all to see, at the same time tapping the cast on his jaw.

Vickers couldn't repress his grin. Tani squeezed his hand.

Thorpe had written: "The gods help us all, if he ever does get violent!"