

PLANET STORIES



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Joe Berne went mad then.

Illustrated by MEILINK

MURDERER'S BASE

By WILLIAM BRITAIN

They played a ghastly game on that lonely asteroid. Killer and victim-to-be danced and feinted between space-beacon and ship. Only the stars knew the winner.

HE DID NOT REMEMBER exactly when the idea of killing Hervey occurred to him. Probably, though, it had been that day at Hermes Station, when the wrench had slipped from his grasp as he worked on the tower; it had drifted lightly down and struck Hervey a glancing blow on the helmet. They had laughed about it, and Hervey had said, "If we were under grav condi-

tions, Joe, that probably would have conked me."

It had been funny then, but it wasn't funny any more. Joe Berne watched Hervey all of the time now, waiting. There had to be an opportunity, some day, some time. Accidents weren't frequent on the beacon service-run, but they did happen. And it had to look like an accident.

Berne knew that it wasn't going to be

easy. Sam Hervey was a careful, cautious man. He was a man who checked his equipment before he went through the air lock, who nursed his jets like they were infants, a man who had every intention of living a long life in a dirty business where the careless died young. Berne had been glad when Space Service had teamed him with Hervey; Personnel had clearly hoped that a tour of duty with the veteran Hervey would supply the balance and judgment that the younger man apparently lacked. It had worked out . . . Berne, Hervey and battered old Service Ship 114 had hung up an enviable record of efficiency and safety. And after their leave, Hervey had asked to work with Berne on another tour.

Hervey was good at this damned, dull, hateful task. Not many men were willing to spend nine months out of the year blasting from asteroid to asteroid, checking and servicing and reporting on the great beacons that beamed the dangerous spaceway from Mars to the moons of Jupiter. It was always tedious, often back-breaking and sometimes dangerous, and even Sam Hervey had said that he would be glad to be out of it.

That had been the start of it, three months before. The wheezing old SS-114 had burned out two of her ancient aft tubes on the run to Adonis Station, and Berne had eased her down on a jagged, unnamed chunk of black slag where they could jury-rig new lining. In between spells on the tube, they had looked over the tiny planetoid, and on one of their trips across the space-scarred waste their Cannon counters had begun to tick ominously. They had fled back to the ship; the rapidity of the signals warned them that volume of radioactivity was far greater than even their screened space-garb was designed to withstand. -

Berne had rubbed his hands gleefully that day.

"It has to be a damned big deposit to set up radiation like that," he had chortled, and Sam Hervey, after due deliberation, had agreed with him. They had started to make their plans then; they would pool their funds, buy a small ship on Mars, rig it up with equipment, and work the deposit. Even if it weren't as big as they hoped, it would set them up for life.

"It won't be easy, Joe," Hervey had warned. "Even with everything we've got in the bank, plus what we can borrow, we can't swing the deal. If we sign up with the Service for another trip, the six thousand credits we'll bank from that will do it."

Berne had argued with that. He could see no point in another tour, another nine months in the lonely wastes. Maybe they could cut in one of the big mining companies. Hervey had smiled at him commiseratingly.

"Let's look at the long haul, kid," he had said. "We cut in one of the companies, and right away they've got a big slice of the deposit. We could even file for mining rights and then sell out—let someone else do the hard work. But if we do it ourselves we'll really be in the chips, and won't have to split with anyone."

He had looked around the cluttered cabin of the SS-114.

"Lord," he said slowly, "don't you think I'd like to get out of this, too? I've had enough of non-grav conditions, enough of breathing revamped oxygen. I don't like it any better than you do. But it's been a living. Another nine months of it, a couple of trips out to our strike—and then we retire."

Berne had thought about it so much that it was eating a hole in his brain. Hervey was figuring on two, maybe even three years before they were in a position to sell their mining rights to one of the big companies equipped to do a large-scale extraction job. By that time, Hervey had said, bidding for their rights would be so high they could afford to be choosy.

Maybe so, Joe thought, but he couldn't see it that way. He knew they could sell now and make enough to do what they wanted for the rest of their lives. Sure, they wouldn't make as much, but . . .

"The hell with the long haul," Joe Berne had said to himself. "I'm getting mine while I'm still young enough to enjoy it."

So he decided to kill Sam Hervey. With Hervey out of the way, Joe Berne would own the deposit. There would be no division of the take. The fact that Sam Hervey had been his friend did not even enter Joe Berne's mind.

MURDER in space is not easy. The Space Patrol is nosy about those things. Joe Berne knew that Sam Hervey's death had to appear accidental; as soon as Berne filed claim for mining rights, the SP would be extremely interested in the manner of his partner's death.

There was no question of disposing of the body—not in space. In the boiling heat of the Venusian jungles, perhaps, it would have been easy; there the bodies of earthlings rotted and were gone. But out here in the frigid void between Mars and Jupiter, the dead remain unchanged through eternity. Neither could Hervey's body be jettisoned in space; held by the attraction of the ship, it would slowly circle the SS-114 like a horrible toy on a string, a mute accusation against a murderer . . . Nor could the body be buried on an asteroid; Space Service demanded that its dead be brought home whenever humanly possible. Berne could not conceive of any circumstances that could arise in the Asteroid Belt that could adequately explain to the Service and the SP why Sam Hervey was not brought home.

SS-114 would have to land at Mars Terminal with her engineer still aboard, frozen solid in the hold, testifying to the accident that killed him . . .

The great beacon of Astarea Station pulsed steadily into the star-hung void. Sam Hervey finished his service check list and watched Joe Berne scribbling furiously at his desk, his powerful shoulders hunched over the paper. Berne looked up and found his partner's pale blue eyes on him, saw the amusement in the space-burned, homely face.

"Don't you ever get tired of figuring how you're going to spend your money?" Hervey asked. He pushed away the dinner plates and relaxed in his seat. He belched quietly, tamped tobacco in his old pipe, and blew a reflective cloud of blue smoke at Berne. Berne felt a flash of annoyance.

"No," he said, shortly. "I've been poor too long. There are so many things I want, I don't even know where to start."

"A new-model helicopter, most likely," Hervey said easily. "You want a red one or a yellow one? And a permanent membership at one of the sexier pleasure domes at Luna City, complete with blonde, maybe?"

Hervey was making fun of him. Berne felt his fists clench and the muscles bunch in his shoulders. Watch it, he told himself.

"Maybe," he replied. "Why not?"

The old man chuckled, watching Berne's dark, flushed face through the smoke.

"A fool and his money . . ." he quoted. "You're no fool, Joe, but you're apt to be careless. Like the other day, when I asked you to check the oxygen supply on the suits."

"I forgot," Berne said sullenly. "Anyone can forget."

"Not out here," Hervey said sharply. "There ain't many second chances in space."

BERNE looked at the older man, and wondered if he were getting suspicious. He had not forgotten to check the oxygen supply before they stepped through the air locks at Adonis Station. He had made very certain that Hervey's suit tanks had been almost empty. But just before they left the ship, Sam Hervey had paused, checked all of his equipment, and of course had discovered from the indicator dials on his suit control box that his tanks were low. Hervey had said little—just another lecture on being careful in space—but perhaps he had started to think about it, had remembered that he himself had filled the tanks a few days before . . .

It was time to play smart.

"I know," the big man apologized humbly. "I'm sorry, Sam. Sometimes I think I'll never learn. If it weren't for you . . ."

Sam Hervey smiled. "You'll learn," he said. "You're learning all the time. Make a spaceman yet, before I'm through with you. But you sure were a wild one when they teamed you up with me. You just needed a little seasoning."

Who in hell wants to be a spaceman, Berne thought. To hell with that, and with this busybody of an old maid and his superior airs. He yawned.

"I'm going to hit the sack," he announced.

Hervey nodded. "I'm with you," he said. "We finish here tomorrow, soon's we run a check on power output. And then the run to Hermes Station."

He stretched. "Guess I'm getting old, Joe. I need my sleep before I strap down

for blast-off. Seems like those G's hit me a lot harder than they used to." He looked admiringly at the bulk and muscles of his younger partner. "Now you're built to take acceleration. Me, I'm not—too skinny and too old."

Hervey unstrapped himself from his chair and drifted toward his bunk, pulling himself along by the handgrips.

"Be nice, someday," he uttered, "to walk to bed and go to sleep without locking myself in. And that reminds me . . ."

Berne looked up. "Yeah?"

"Joe, make sure you check the acceleration harnesses before we blast off tomorrow. I felt a little give in mine last time. I don't aim to get shoved clear through my own firing chamber bulkhead one of these days."

"Sure, Sam."

Berne had felt the give in his own harness, he remembered. The ship was getting old; she needed to be refitted before her next trip out. Like those harnesses, for instance. The strain against them was terrific . . . That is when it burst on him, flooding his mind with its perfection and simplicity. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it before?

"Going to the john," he told Hervey. He guided himself out of the cabin and into the pressurized tunnel leading aft, closing the door behind him.

It would be so easy. In a little two-man ship like the SS-114, the engineer lay prone in his power control station aft, cushioned in his webbed harness against the awful shattering thrust of acceleration. A weakened harness, or an improperly secured one—and a man would hurtle screaming into the jungle of gears and control levers and junction boxes that studded the bulkhead of the firing chamber. He would smash against that unyielding metal and be broken like a child's toy . . .

Oh, it was simple, but not quite that simple, not with a man like Sam Hervey. Even if he trusted Joe Berne completely, Sam Hervey would check his own harness, just to make sure; it was the habit of a lifetime in space. And especially after the oxygen-tank incident. But there was another way, a better way. In the dim light of the tunnel, Joe Berne kneeled beside one of the tool lockers. He found what he

wanted, and his big hand closed reassuringly around the handle of a heavy wrench. He closed the locker door softly, thrust the wrench into the bellyband of his dungarees, and drifted back to the cabin.

One smashing blow, and it would be over. Then he would work on the harness, weakening it further, and before blast-off he would cradle Sam Hervey's corpse in the webbing. The thrust, the unresisting corpse straining at the harness—then release and the dead thing smashing against the bulkhead . . . No wounds, no injuries on the battered thing that could not be explained by the crash into the tangled gears. It had happened in space before; it would happen again.

SAM HERVEY was already strapped down when he returned, but he was still awake, watching Berne. Now? Berne decided to wait until Hervey was asleep. He kept his back toward the other bunk as he groped along the handrail toward his own sack; no need of letting Hervey see that bulge in his middle . . . Swiftly he thrust it under the blanket, stripped, turned off the light and strapped down. In the darkness he heard Hervey's soft, "'Night, Joe."

"Good night, Sam." He grinned into the darkness, his fingers wrapped around the wrench, waiting.

It was not a long wait. The breathing across the cabin settled down, became deep, regular. The momentary tossing ceased. The cabin was quiet. Slowly, carefully, Joe Berne unsnapped his bunk harness. For once he was thankful for non-grav condition. He did not have to touch the floor until the last moment, when he would need solid footing when he swung the wrench . . .

Gently he drifted across the cabin, his left hand lightly touching the handrail, pushing along. He held his breath. Another few feet . . . He lifted the wrench, straining to see in the darkness.

Sam Hervey moved swiftly. His lean wiry body twisted on the narrow bunk, the harness was thrown off—how had he gotten free so quickly?—and he was away, sobbing through his teeth, clawing at the bigger man. Joe Berne gasped in shock, falling back from the fury of the sudden assault. A hard fist crashed into his belly,

and he cursed and swung the wrench. He cut air, and Hervey was scrambling away from him. The cabin door was jerked open, and in the dim tunnel light Berne saw his quarry plunging away, a shocked white face staring back over his shoulder. Cursing, Berne hurled the wrench. It was futile, of course. It drifted slowly away from his hand and crashed against the slammed steel door.

Berne was trembling with rage; waves of sick nausea gripped him. His dismal failure writhed in his stomach, and he cursed again as he groped from the cabin. Hervey had turned off the tunnel light; in the darkness ahead of him, Berne heard Hervey scrambling along the handrails, and then a clatter as something fell.

He plunged toward the sound, taking great leaps, using the power of his legs against the floor to hurl himself forward. He did not see the trap that Hervey had laid, the tangle of armored cable that Hervey had ripped from a locker and hurled into the narrow tunnel behind him. Berne smashed the cable, screaming obscenities at Hervey, and fought to free himself from the twisted mass.

Hervey had bought time with the cabin door slammed in Berne's face, with the cable hurled from the locker into the tunnel. As Berne freed himself and leaped forward again, he heard the *woosh* of escaping air as the inner air lock door was opened. Then the clang of the lock door echoed through the ship. Hervey was safe, for awhile.

But he couldn't go far. Sobbing, mouth-ing curses, sick with anger, Berne struggled into space garb and opened the gun-rack beside the lock. He saw with satisfaction that the fleeing Hervey had not waited to arm himself. Berne plunged through the lock.

THE great banded face of mighty Jupiter seemed to fill the whole sky, lowering down on the jagged black waste of the asteroid. Five hundred yards from the ship the gray metal dome of Astarea Station huddled forlornly at the base of the soaring beacon tower. In the cold half-light, Berne saw the bulky space-suited figure of Sam Hervey running toward the station.

Berne kneeled at the top of the ladder,

took careful aim, and squeezed the switch of the heavy rifle. The rocket flame lanced out. Just behind the fleeing figure, and to the side, the rocket mushroomed in a brief blinding flare. Berne could see the glint of the face-plate as Hervey turned his head. He fired again, and cursed the weak light as he overshot. The running figure wavered, looked back, started again toward the safety of the station air lock—toward the radio that could call Mars Base, that could tell the story of murder . . .

The range was too great. He missed again, but Hervey turned away. Silhouetted against the circle of the station air lock, he made a good target—but running amid the nightmare shapes of the black rocks, Berne could barely see him.

Hervey realized that he would not be able to make it into the safety of the station. He swerved away, leaping high with each huge step, and sped into the wild darkness. Berne leaped down the ladder and ran toward the station, peering into the half-light, finger on the switch. Then he saw him, sitting calmly on an outcropping, watching. Berne switched on his communicator.

"You can't get away, Sam," he said.

The answer came back, thin in the ear-phones.

"I'm going to try, Joe," Hervey said. "Have you gone out of your mind?"

Berne laughed into the throat mike. "No," he said. "I'm sane, Sam. I just decided that I wasn't going to split the money with you, Sam. Or wait three years to get it, either."

He heard the other's soft, "Oh." Hervey got up and moved away from the outcropping, looking back. Berne took up a position about midway between the ship and the station, watching him. Hervey was finished, he told himself; it was just a matter of time . . . Berne could cover both havens.

He was so sure of victory that when he heard Sam Hervey starting to laugh, he was genuinely shocked, and he was a little afraid. What . . . ?

"Joe?" The voice was in his ears.

"Yeah, Sam."

"You wouldn't want to blast an old friend, would you, Joe?"

"It would be a pleasure, Sam."

The laugh sounded again. "Now, Joe, you're not using your head. Always careless, that's you, Joe. What would the Space Patrol say when they find me full of rocket fragments? Might be a little tough on you, Joe."

Joe Berne gasped, and then the truth swept over him. Ye Gods, he thought, what a fool I am! I almost got him, almost brought him down with the projector. The heavy weapon slipped from his nerveless fingers. He sat down heavily on a rock, staring bitterly into the dimness.

"You can't stay out there forever, Sam," Berne said dully. "Maybe I can't kill you with a rocket, but I can kill you with something else."

"I know I can't fight you," Hervey said reasonably. "You're bigger and you're stronger. But you've got to catch me, Joe—and I can run faster than you ever could, you big dumb ox."

Berne shook his head. Everything was wrong. What had happened?

"You can't stay out there forever, Sam," he repeated.

The chuckle came again, thin and ghostly in the earphones. "No," Hervey said. "But Joe—neither can you!"

What did Hervey mean? Berne looked back at the ship, then at the dull metallic dome of Astartea Station.

And then it came to him, what Sam Hervey had tried to say.

HE, JOE BERNE, did not dare return to the ship so long as Sam Hervey lived, for then Hervey could make a dash for the safety of the station. Nor did Berne dare go to the station, for that would leave the ship unprotected. If Berne went to either place, Hervey could easily reach the air lock of the other refuge, slip through, dog down the doors and sit it out, waiting for the Space Patrol to come.

"Stalemate, Joe," Sam Hervey said softly. "It's your move."

Berne went berserk then. Howling with rage, he picked up a rock and hurled it toward the voice. Cursing, he plunged into the tortured rocks, seeking out his tormentor.

"I'll kill you," he sobbed. "I'll kill you!"

Sam Hervey did not hesitate. Bracing himself, he shot away. For half an hour

Berne followed him, panting, raging, almost mad with rage. They leaped and turned and twisted, two crazy little running figures under the cold Jupiter-light, gasping in the thin trickle of air from their suit flasks, blood pounding in their brains. And always Hervey circled away, trying to get between Berne and the ship, between Berne and the station, between Berne and the things that the big man had always wanted, the riches and comfort for which he had been prepared to murder . . .

And then the wild dash was over, and Berne sprawled gasping beneath a black rock finger and glared at the awkward space-garbed figure that watched him so placidly from another rock five hundred yards away.

"We use up a lot of oxygen that way, Joe," Hervey said quietly. Berne cursed, looked swiftly at his indicator. No, the tanks had been full. They had three days' supply. But . . . when that was gone? Could he calmly return to the ship or to the station storage locker and recharge his tanks? No. Oh, Lord, no! In that brief interval, Hervey would gain the refuge he sought, the refuge that meant the end of Joe Berne.

Berne got up and started to walk back toward the ship. He turned once; Hervey was following him, keeping his distance, but following. Berne spun, made a move toward him. Hervey darted away, and his chuckle was in the earphones. Hervey paused, waited.

"Tag, Joe," Hervey said. "Who's It? Do you know?"

Berne did not answer. He angled toward the ship, watching over his shoulder. Suddenly Sam Hervey dashed off toward the station. Berne shouted, raced towards him. Hervey retreated to safety. When Berne turned toward the station, Hervey started for the ship. Berne drove him back.

"This is fun, Joe," Hervey said. He was circling warily, drifting closer and closer toward the ship this time. Again the big man charged, again Hervey retreated, waited. When Berne finally reached his post squarely between the ship and the station, where he had dropped the rifle, Hervey was still five hundred yards away, but he was closer to the ship than he had been.

"You can't make it to the ship," Berne warned him. "I'll be on you before you get the lock closed."

"I know," Hervey agreed soberly. "I wouldn't like that at all, Joe."

"No," Berne said. "You wouldn't."

Stalemate. The two men sat on the black, seared rocks and watched each other, and the hours crawled. Twice Berne got up and chased Hervey away, into the outer darkness. It was useless.

"You got yourself in a fine mess, boy," Hervey said. "You should learn not to be so careless."

"Shut up," Berne gritted.

"I figured that business of the oxygen tanks was funny," Hervey went on. "Made me sort of stop and think, Joe. Then I knew what you were up to. And when I mentioned the harness, back there in the cabin, you didn't remember to hide your face. I had sort of a hunch that you might try something tonight."

"You weren't strapped down," Berne's voice was sulkily accusing.

"No," Hervey agreed blithely. "I wasn't. When you went out to the tunnel to get your wrench, I unsnapped. I was holding on to the bunk with both hands, waiting for you to make up your stupid mind."

"Shut up," Berne said. "Shut up!" His voice raised to a scream, deafening him in his helmet. "I'm going to break you to pieces."

"Not yet, you ain't," rejoined the mocking voice. "And you forgot something else, too, I'll bet."

"What?"

"The daily radio report to Base, Joe. Remember?" The voice faded, chuckling grimly.

For a moment Berne felt panic gripping at him, swinging him wildly through space. He was dizzy with it. The daily report! If SS-114 did not come through, Base would start wondering.

"Forget it," he said. "They won't worry for awhile. Maybe reception is bad."

"Sure," the other agreed readily. "For a little while, Joe. But if forty-eight hours pass and they don't hear from us, you know damned well they'll have a cruiser out here fast, investigating. The Service likes us, Joe. They don't want to lose us."

Berne knew that what Hervey said was true.

"You'll be dead by then," he assured Hervey.

The soft, hated laugh echoed in his helmet. "Will I, Joe?"

THE HOURS crept by, and the dim light waxed and waned as the planetoid spun in the void. Like clumsy fat robots, like puppets on a puppet master's strings, the two figures advanced, retreated, circled, attacked and fled. They danced their macabre minuet among the twisted, tortured black rocks, and always the soft, mocking laugh was in his ear-phones as Berne lunged panting after the darting puppet ahead of him. And finally he sank down at his post, breathing in sobbing gasps and tasting the salt of the bitter tears that trickled down his cheeks. The oxygen was sinking; not much more. At the rate they were using it, it would not last much longer.

"Hervey!"

The other stirred in the shadow of a rock pinnacle.

"I'm still with you, Joe."

"Okay, Sam," Berne said. "I've had enough. Come on in."

There was silence, then, from far away, the ghost of a chuckle.

"Don't you want to play any more, Joe?"

Berne snarled, then with an effort regained control of himself.

"No," he said. "We're killing each other. Come on in, Sam. I won't hurt you. I promise."

"Thanks, Joe," Hervey said. "But I don't think I trust you any more. Tell you what. You go on back to the ship, and I'll go to the station. Or vice-versa. Any way you want. But I don't think I want to be in the same place with you."

"You'd call Base," Berne said pettishly.

"Oh, certainly," Hervey answered. "We'd have to report, wouldn't we? And I'd have to tell them that you didn't like me any more, wouldn't I?"

For a moment Berne thought desperately of taking a chance, of letting Hervey into the station, and then trying to brazen it out, of accusing Hervey of being the one who had wanted to murder . . . His shoulders sagged. It wasn't any good. He knew that they would believe Hervey—Hervey with his reputation, careful, re-

liable old Sam Hervey . . . It was almost over.

"Damn you," he said. He heard Hervey laugh again.

It went on forever, Berne thought. The little robot figures went on with their dance, they advanced and fled, circled and quartered. His eyelids drooped, his head fell forward in the helmet. With a jerk he pulled himself into wakefulness. Hervey was moving like a shot, racing for the ladder of the ship. Screaming, Berne hurtled toward him. Hervey saw him, wavered while he gauged the distance, and knew that he could not make it. He leaped away. It was close. Berne almost caught him. When the big man finally halted, choking for breath, Hervey was barely a hundred yards away. It might as well have been a mile. Curiously shrunken upon himself, Berne turned and went heavily back to his post. Hervey waited until he sat down, then drifted back a little and sat down beside a rock, watching.

Joe Berne slumped down, waiting for a move. He was starting to gasp for air now, and he was staring hungrily at the inviting open air locks of the ship and of Astarea Station. His head was hurting him, and his eyes were not focussing properly.

Twice he thought he saw Hervey get up and start toward the ship, and both times he struggled to his feet and dashed after him. Both times he had been wrong; Hervey had not moved. Berne shook his aching head. Was he beginning to imagine things? Maybe . . . maybe Hervey was dead. He moved toward the fat bulbous bulk that was Hervey. Hervey got up and walked away, looking back. He wasn't dead, then. He was waiting out there in the Jupiter-light for Joe Berne to die.

"You'll die, too!" he screamed into his mike. "You'll die, too!"

The voice that came back was weak, tired, and he realized that his own voice had been choked and almost strangled. The sweat was streaming down his face, mingling with the tears, wet inside his suit. His feet were like lead.

"Yes," the voice said. "I'll die, too, Joe. But will that do you any good? There are no uranium strikes where you're going, Joe—no nothing, Joe, unless you get oxygen quick."

HE COULDN'T, he sobbed to himself. He couldn't go through that inviting lock to the big tanks that held the precious gas. How long? Five minutes, anyhow, maybe more, maybe a little less. But more than enough time for Sam Hervey to reach safety, to lock the air locks, to start his message winging into the sky on its way to the waiting ears at Mars Terminal . . .

The weird mad light was crazy with moving space-suited figures, laughing at him, mocking him, and they all wore the ugly space-burned face of Sam Hervey. He lurched to his feet and shook his fist at them. He picked up the projector and worked the switch until the rocks were splashed with the flame of bursting rockets. He laughed and cursed and gibbered at the figures, and then understood that there had not been any figures, that Sam Hervey was still beneath the same rock, where he had been for hours, watching him.

He had to control himself, he thought shakily. Every time he lost control, he wasted oxygen, precious beautiful oxygen; his laboring lungs screamed for it. He knew that Hervey was remaining calm, was conserving oxygen. And he knew that the smaller, lighter man would probably not consume as much oxygen as he did, even at rest; there would be little difference, but in the long haul . . . That again! Sam Hervey's long haul, that he was always talking about!

"I've got to be calm," he said aloud. "Be calm! Never was calm before. Got to be now!"

Shut up, he told himself. Don't waste breath. He started to weep again, and the dimness was shot with colored lights. In his mouth his tongue was swelling, it was thick and pushing against his teeth. A sip of water from his canteen tube did not help, the tongue remained swollen. He was falling, and he heard the sound of his own retching gasps. Clumsily he fumbled at the intake valve, felt the cool breath of the oxygen, felt the new life trickling through the tube, the pressure almost gone. He sucked at it, swallowing, moaning, great tearing sobs ripping from his chest. The colored lights faded and went away, and he saw Sam Hervey moving slowly toward the ship. Another few seconds . . .!

Screaming, he leaped at Hervey, his

arms flailing wildly, his fingers curled into claws, hating, wanting to rend and kill. He fell heavily, sprawling on his chest, staggered to his feet and ran on. Hervey watched him, then drifted away. Hervey was staggering, too, having difficulty in controlling the long gravityless leaps, but he did not fall. He went away and sat down and watched Joe Berne with great interest, and through the earphones Berne heard the faint mocking chuckle of his enemy.

Joe Berne went mad then. He had been a little mad for hours; perhaps he had been mad since that first crazy chase across the nightmare landscape. He twisted his intake valve all the way and laughed and howled and capered gleefully as the oxygen flooded into his starved heaving lungs. He leaped in the star-hung dimness and shrieked at the banded face of Jupiter in the sky. He gibbered, and he picked up the heavy gun and hurled it at Sam Hervey, and then he laughed with pleasure as it floated away and fell lightly to the rocks.

HE WAS still laughing when the intake valve bubbled and hissed and was silent, and there was no more oxygen. Slowly he turned away, staggering heavily toward the ship, toward the oxygen tanks. The colored lights had been turned on again. A great hammer was crashing against his brain. Someone was pushing his eyeballs out of their sockets; someone had strong fingers locked tight around his throat. He choked and tore at his throat with his own hands. He fell, face downward, and tried to crawl, and in his chest he could hear the sucking and rattling.

Berne was conscious of Sam Hervey standing over him, blotting out the pale cold light of the great planet above. He was conscious of the face peering through the plate into his own darkening features. He tried to reach out, to grasp Hervey, to drag him down into the pain-streaked night with him, but his arms would not move. Through the lightning-shot darkness he heard that soft mocking voice.

"Good night, Joe," Sam Hervey said. "You always were careless."