

PLANET STORIES



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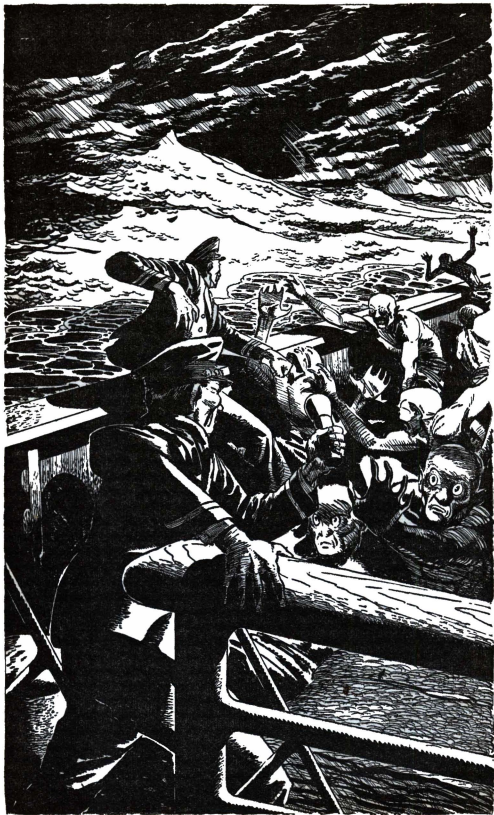
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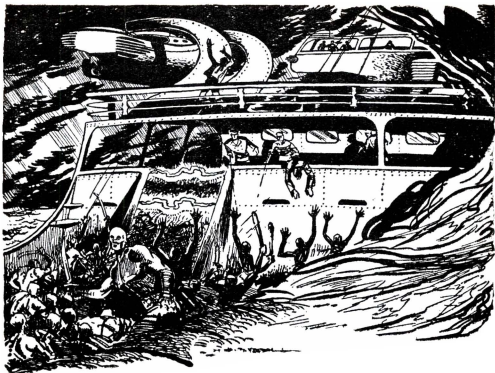
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For them, it was fists and feet, teeth and claws

MUTINY ON VENUS

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Boiling out of the slave-ship's stinking hold, the slimy, fever-maddened natives fought for freedom. What miracle could save the handful of sickened Earthmen on the bridge from the most terrible death in the System?

PORTER STOOD IN THE STAR-board wing of his bridge, looking down and aft along the quay. He was a big man, and broad—standing fully erect he would have been bigger. But he slumped badly and ran to paunch. In spite of the fact that his white tropical uniform was clean and smart, with braid and buttons untarnished, it was obvious that the climate was getting him down.

The climate—and the jobs that he had to do.

This was one of them. Up the star-board gangway, driven and herded like so many animals, crept a reluctant stream of convicts. There were those who said that they were animals. Porter was not one of these. He felt a sympathy for the natives of this world, living their own life

in their own way until the day when the ships of Man dropped roaring down through the eternal overcast. What followed was an old story. It had happened many a time on Man's own planet—the demand for cheap labour and raw materials, the setting up of an alien and unnatural legal code by the conquering invaders to satisfy that demand.

Convict labour is cheap. Convict labour is—expendable. No human would work in the marshlands of the Belt. Even among the overseers, armed and armoured, living in their air-conditioned, near-impregnable fortresses, the mortality rate was high. Among the natives—the convicts—it was higher. Conviction of an aborigine for failure to pay his poll tax was tantamount to a death sentence . . .

Porter watched the wretches reluctantly mounting his gangway, being herded aft to the cell accommodation in the after tween decks. As always, he felt mingled compassion and repulsion. They were so nearly human, these people—and yet there was no denying their not distant reptilian or amphibian ancestry. And—they stank. This was not the first time that Porter's ship had carried convict labour to the Belt ports—and no matter how he and his crew laboured to remove all traces of their unwelcome passengers the effluvium lingered, clung.

Once a convict ship always a convict ship.

There was a loud crash from the wheelhouse.

Porter swore, turned abruptly and strode rapidly across the clean, but perpetually damp, planking of his bridge. He flung open the wheelhouse door. Dillon, his Second Officer and navigator was inside. He was standing just abaft the chart table, looking ruefully down at the big P.P.I. It was obvious that the spare tube would have to be shipped before sailing. Dillon had removed the unbreakable perspex cover with the intention of giving it its routine coating of disinfectant—without which it would speedily have become opaque with the rapid growth of airborne molds. He, somehow, had dropped the bottle. It had gone through the end of the tube. Porter pushed Dillon to one side, looked down into the broken, tangled mess of deflector plates, grid and anodes. He said, trying hard to keep his voice emotionless, "How did this happen, Mr. Dillon?"

The Second put up a hand to push back his unruly red hair. He started a little as the disinfectant, which had splashed on to the less sensitive skin of his hands, stung his forehead. He replied, frankly, "I don't know, sir." Then, with infuriating vagueness, "Things drop . . ."

"They always do when you're around, Mr. Dillon. I don't know what you've cost this ship for assorted breakages—but it must be a tidy penny. All right—get one of the juniors to lend you a hand and get the spare shipped. And make sure it's tested before we sail."

"Ay, ay, sir," replied Dillon smartly and thankfully. He left the wheelhouse,

vanished down the ladder to the officers' flat, there to break up the poker school by his demand for assistance. Porter watched the slight, red-topped figure of his navigator go, permitted a half grin to flicker over his heavy features. Dillon might be expensive—but he was a good lad. And he helped to keep the ship happy and amused. One question, almost a greeting, was always sure to raise a laugh—"Heard what the Second Mate's dropped now?"

The Captain went back to the bridge. He looked up at the Blue Peter drooping limply and dispiritedly at the raking foremast, then turned and stared at the squat, strong buildings of Port Barclay, watched their outlines soften and fade as the yellow mists marched in from the sea. And then he could no longer see the foremast nor, looking aft, the funnel. He could have believed himself alone in a tiny world of his own were it not for the unpleasant, hateful noises drifting up from the gangway—the cracking of whips, the plaintive, half human cries of the convicts.

TELEPHONE buzzers sounded in the wheelhouse. Porter, looking down at his P.P.I. with its sweeping trace and its slowly fading afterglow, at the chart alongside it, ignored them. The Third Officer reported smartly, "All ready for'ard and aft, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter. Tell the Chief Officer to let go everything. Tell the Second to let go everything but his back spring."

Porter heard his orders being relayed to fo'c's'le and poop. He heard a new noise superimposed upon the steady roar of the blast turbines—the whine of electric motors as mooring lines snaked back aboard and on to their reels. The Third had switched to the amplifier, and the Chief Officer's voice came bellowing into the wheelhouse, "All gone forward!" Shortly after Dillon reported, less noisily, "All gone aft but the back spring."

The Captain looked down at the P.P.I., glanced from it to the gyroscope repeater. As if waiting for his attention the repeater clicked, slowly at first, then more rapidly. Under the influence of the strong current the ship's head was swinging away from the quay wall.

At the Captain's right hand, within easy

reach from where he stood staring down at the chart and the P.P.I., were the engine controls. Without looking away from the two pictures—one static, the other slowly moving and limned in light—he stretched out and put both engines full ahead. The kilowatts pouring from the turbo-generators surged through the motors. The screws churned up the muddy water aft. Slowly at first—fighting her own inertia and the strong thrust of the current—the big ship began to move. “Hard a-port,” ordered Porter. “Hard a-port she is, Sir,” answered the Quartermaster. “Let go the back spring,” was the next command. The Third relayed it to Dillon at his station on the poop. Moments only had elapsed when the Second Officer’s amplified voice boomed through the wheelhouse—“All clear aft!”

On the screen of the P.P.I. the two arms of the breakwater, two straight lines of pallid light, showed up ahead. Porter coned his ship so that she was steering straight for the opening. Outside the wheelhouse it was as thick as ever, zero visibility. Through the wet, yellow fog drifted the sound of voices, non-human, raised in dismal prolonged ululation. The aboriginal population of Port Barclay had come down to the quay-side in force, was sending off the latest load of victims to Man’s cupidity in a way that was proper and fitting. From the steerage came a long, throaty wail in reply.

Porter winced, tried hard to keep his attention on the safe, efficient handling of his ship. He winced again when the mournful sound from aft was suddenly cut off, was replaced by angry shouts and the cracking of whips. “They leave the poor beggars nothing . . .” he murmured to himself. He shrugged his heavy shoulders, stared grimly down at chart and P.P.I. The breakwater arms came abeam, swept astern.

“Course now, sir?” asked the Third.

“Not yet, Mr. Carter. Just because you can’t see the stern of this ship don’t blandly assume that it’s not there. I’ll let her run until we have two hundred yards clearance. Oh—and tell Mr. Dillon finish with stations aft. He can come up and check his gyroscopes.”

Carter passed the order aft. The Captain looked down at the fluorescent screen,

noted the time that the extremities of the breakwater arms cut the two hundred yard range circle. He said quietly — “Course zero, zero, zero, quartermaster.” The man replied smartly. The steering repeater clicked, slowly to begin with, then faster and faster. The illuminated, calibrated card spun jerkily behind the transparent face of the instrument. The wheel rattled over to starboard to check the vessel’s swing. “Course now, sir!”

“All right. That will do the wheel. Mr. Carter, switch over to the Iron Mike . . .”

Somebody flung open the starboard door of the wheelhouse, letting a gust of warm, fetid fog into its air-conditioned coolness. The door slammed shut. Porter straightened, looked up from the chart table, started to say, “Can’t you come in quietly, Mr. Dillon?”

But it was not Dillon. It was a stranger, a big man, big as the Captain. He was dressed in khaki shorts and shirt with tarnished insignia. His knee-high boots were muddy. It was at least forty-eight hours since he had last shaved. His face, like Porter’s, was heavy featured, but it was the face of a bully. He bellowed, “Tell your officers to mind their own bloody business, Captain!”

“Watch her, Carter,” said Porter quietly. He regarded the intruder for a few seconds, glanced at the dull metal on the epaulettes. Then—“I don’t think I have the pleasure, Major?” he asked.

“Major Kemp. Officer Commanding Guard. Wallis took sick just before sailing, so they sent me.”

“I should have been told. But what’s this about trouble with my officers?”

“It’s that young, red-headed Second Mate of yours. He was coming along from aft just as we were putting the fear of God into those reptilian swine. He didn’t like it, tried to throw his weight around. So I put him under arrest.”

“You put him . . .”

THE wheelhouse door crashed open again. This time it was a native. Porter’s hand shot down to where the holster that he always forgot to wear should have been. The Venusian was bigger than any of the Earthmen. He was naked save for a belt studded with tawdry scraps of metal and mirror. He grinned,

showing a mouth crammed full of needle sharp teeth. His protuberant eyes swivelled in their sockets as he stared about him, missing nothing.

"Well, Quassa?" demanded Kemp.

The native turned to face his master. He bowed—but there was, perhaps, only mock servility in his bearing.

"Plenty trouble blunt end, boss," he croaked. "Sailor officer call sailors, all fight soldiers. Sailors win. Me come here plenty quick, tell you. Maybe . . ." he looked at Porter and leered, gestured with the webbed claws that were his hands.

"No!" almost shouted the Major. Then—"This is a fine mess, Captain. Your men start the voyage with mutiny."

"I think the mutiny was on *your* side. But . . ."

The door opened and shut quietly. Dillon came in. His uniform was torn and he was bleeding from a cut over the right eye. He ignored the military officer, faced his own superior and saluted. He said briskly, "I have to report trouble aft, sir. When I came along from stations I found that the soldiers, under *this* man, had pulled some bundles of fat grass from the deck cargo. They had started a fire on deck. I don't know what it was for—but I think that they intended roasting some of the convicts a little. Anyhow, the sparks were blowing forward. There was a grave risk of the whole deck cargo going up—and you know how fat grass burns. So I told them," continued Dillon innocently, "to stop it . . ."

"He was interfering with discipline!" blustered Kemp.

"That is for me to decide," replied Porter icily. "By Mr. Dillon's telling—and you have not denied it—you and your men endangered this ship. That must not occur again. Furthermore, as long as I am Master here, I will not tolerate wanton brutality. Discipline, I agree, must be maintained. Apropos of that—one of the rules of this ship is that native passengers, free or under escort, are not allowed either on the bridge or in the engine room . . ."

"But Quassa, here, is my personal servant and bodyguard. He's faithful. And—he's no more than an animal . . ."

The Captain did not bother to dispute this. He looked from master to servant, noted well that the gleam in the protrud-

ing eyes was far from unintelligent. The same could be said for the whole, grotesque batrachian physiognomy. Here—true—was a savage; but never a brainless beast.

"You can go now, Major," said the seaman. "In case you are not familiar with the regulations regarding the carriage of convicts I will have a copy sent down to you. And, bear this well in mind, all and any disputes between your officers and men and mine are to be referred direct to me. *Get it!*" The last two words cracked like a whip.

"Yes, Captain," Kemp growled.

"Then I shall see you for inspection at eleven hundred tomorrow."

PORTER turned his back on the Major, walked to where Dillon and Carter, together with young Lacon, the Fourth Officer, were bending over the chart table.

"Dubonnet Island beacons showing up now, sir," reported the Second. "We should have them abeam inside of fifteen minutes."

The officers made way for the Captain, who looked down at screen of the P.P.I., at the sweeping scan, at the slowly fading, wanly luminous traces. The island, marshy and low lying, did not show up well. There was no clearly defined shoreline, no indication of off-lying dangers. But the black line being traced on the sensitised paper of the sonic sounder showed that Porter need, so far, have no fears of grounding. And the radar conspicuous beacons on the island came up bright and sharp, were an unmistakable "D" of light impressed on the cloudy vagueness of the swampland echoes.

"How much do we alter?" asked Porter.

"Seventy-five degrees to port, sir."

"You can go down to the gyroscope room now. I'll hold her steady on the beacons for you."

"Would you mind, sir, if I took Mr. Lacon down with me? He wants to see how it's done."

"That will be all right." Then—"But surely you've seen course altered before, Lacon?"

"Not this way, sir. I served my time on Earth."

"Oh. And came here by the fastest

rocket available with a brand new Master's Ticket in your pocket and high hopes of big money and quick promotion . . . You'll soon pick up our way of navigating, though. I was Chief Officer on the colonial trade myself before I came to Venus . . ." The Captain paused, a far away look came into his eyes. Then, abruptly, "Run along down with Mr. Dillon. He'll show you everything you want to know."

II

DILLON'S TASK CALLED FOR A certain degree of skill, of practice, of familiarity with the instruments with which he was working. Porter's part in the evolution called for seamanship of the highest order. The cursor on the P.P.I. was set at Green Nine Zero. The Captain had to jockey his ship, coming ahead and astern as necessary, so that the black line of the thin wire coincided exactly with the upright of the "D", so that the range from the nearest beacon was four thousand yards, no more and no less.

In the gyroscope room Dillon spoke into his telephone. "All ready, sir," he reported. Came the answer, "Stand by, Mr. Dillon. I'll let you know as soon as she's on . . ."

"I'm used to gyro compasses," said Lacon. "But this . . ."

"It's simple, really. A gyro compass works on Earth because a gyroscope can be converted into a North-seeking mechanism. It is rigid in space, on Earth as anywhere, and will remain so—but tilting and turning relative to the Earth's surface as Earth turns under it. The mercury ballistic keeps its axis parallel with the surface—and at the same time applies just enough force to make it precess back to the meridian . . ."

"I know . . ." began the Fourth, but Dillon gave him no chance to continue. He enjoyed acting as Mentor. He said reasonably, "You've got to walk before you can run."

"Well, as you probably know, Venus does not rotate on her axis. Some day, when the Sun tides have slowed her up still more, she'll rotate once with every revolution around the Sun. They reckon that Port Threfall in the Belt, where we're bound now, will have perpetual noon

—and a solar altitude of ninety. That'll dry the swamps out! Won't be in our time, though. Anyhow—here we are now with day half a Venus year long, night likewise, no axial rotation and no gyro compass. Magnetic storms are far too common to let the magnetic compass be any more than a standby that'd never be used in any case. But all the routes and courses from port to port, from headland to headland, have been worked out. With Dubonnet right abeam, distant four thousand, we have to come seventy-five degrees to port. Then it's a straight run of twelve hundred forty-nine miles to Cape Gilbey, seeing nothing till we hit it. Then . . ."

"But . . ."

"Bring her round now, Mr. Dillon," came Porter's voice.

"Ay, ay, sir."

"So," explained the Second Officer, "I just precess the gyroscope seventy-five degrees, as shown on this scale on the base plate. So . . . And I leave her tilted up, looking aft, about thirty-five degrees. She'll have levelled off by the time we're half way. She'll be tilted up forward when we get there . . ."

He shouted into the mouthpiece of his telephone, "Right on now, sir!"

"Thank you!" came the answering hail.

On the bridge, in the wheelhouse, the repeaters clicked over steadily from 075° to 000°. In the gyroscope room Dillon and the Fourth watched the heavy instrument swing, on its vertical axis, relative to the ship. It was hard to believe that it was not swinging, precessing, whilst the ship remained steady on her original heading. Both officers felt the desire, the absurd urge, to precess the mechanism back to its original zero on the base plate calibrations. Then they felt the ship roll as she came beam on to the heavy swell setting down from the nor'ard. She lurched heavily. The gyroscope cover, that Dillon had carelessly left propped against a stanchion, overbalanced and fell. Dillon moved, fast, and caught it just in time. He lost his own balance, himself almost fell against the gyroscope. Lacon grabbed him and held him.

The Second grinned at his junior. Then, airily, "Things will drop," he explained. "Just a manifestation of the natural cus-

sedness of the inorganic . . . But thanks, anyhow. I should have been very unpopular with Pop if he'd had to line her up all over again!"

The next day—or, to be more precise, twenty four hours later on a world whose days were sixteen weeks long—the weather conditions had not changed. There was little wind—although there was a heavy beam swell—and the ship was still boring steadily through an opaque yellow fog. The air was saturated, so moist as almost to demand gills rather than lungs. But, in the wheelhouse and in the accommodation, it was comfortable enough. In the convict quarters—separated by airtight bulkheads from the human's part of the ship—it should have been comfortable enough for those living there. Ports and doors and hatches should have been open to the moisture laden air, to the fog, to the sea's exhalation of sweet corruption.

Porter, accompanied by his Chief Officer, by Major Kemp and the Orderly Room Sergeant Major, made the rounds above deck first. He tested the tightness of the lashings of the big bales of fat grass, made sure that the greasy, oil-exuding vegetation showed no signs of slipping free of its bonds. He wrinkled his nose with disgust as a vagrant eddy brought him a pungent whiff from the convict galley ventilators. There an unsavory stew of this same fat grass—together with sundry creeping things, fresh and very long dead, was being prepared. He wanted, as he always did when that odour hit him, to throw up. But, in front of the two soldiers, he had to maintain his seamanlike dignity. They, obviously bored with the whole proceedings, would have welcomed a diversion.

He swallowed hard, said, "Everything seems to be satisfactory up here. We will inspect the convict decks now, Major."

HE LED the way to the nearest companionway. The stout double door was shut. Porter raised his eyebrows, stood back and waited for the Sergeant Major to step forward and open them for him.

There were two guards on duty at this entrance, lounging at the foot of the stairway. They straightened to attention slowly and reluctantly. Again Porter's eye-

brows went up. Then his nose wrinkled once more. He had been prepared for the sickening stench of slimy, moisture exuding bodies, for the corrupt, hothouse atmosphere of the convict decks. But this was worse. It was not hot, it was not moist — it was dry, dusty decay and somehow evil. There was death in it.

The Captain, shocked into alertness, glared around him. He saw the ports screwed tight shut, the closed doors, and, overhead, the dogged skylights. He walked to the nearest hygrometer, saw that temperature and relative humidity were well down. He heard the droning of the air-conditioning unit.

Porter grabbed Kemp's arm. He dragged the protesting Major to the nearest cell, forced him to look through the grill. Sprawled on the filthy matting were the two occupants. Their eyes were covered with a dull film. Their skin, that should have been moist and glistening, was dry and scaly. They were panting heavily. One of the Venusians raised himself on his elbow, looked straight at the two men. He did not know the Captain — but knew enough of the ways of men to recognize that four gold bars on the shoulder denoted authority. He said something in a dry, sibilant whisper, spread his webbed, clawlike hands imploringly. His lack-lustre gaze shifted to Kemp. The eyes, behind their translucent coating, glared redly. And the thin, hissing voice was that of a snake, with all of a snake's venom.

"What do you want to do, Kemp?" demanded Porter. "Kill them all?" Then, to his Chief Officer, "Get your men down here at once, Mr. Whitbread. Get everything opened up. Stop the air conditioner; put a padlock on the controls and bring the key to me."

"I'll not tolerate this interference!" blustered the Major.

"No? Let me tell you this, Kemp—I'm Master here. Humanitarian grounds apart, my responsibility is to deliver these — slaves—to Port Threlfall in good order and condition."

"They must be taught discipline. They're straight from the jungle, some of them. There are one or two murderers among them as well as mere tax evaders. That swine who looked at you so imploringly—he's got life for killing a trader.

His cell mate assaulted a missionary."

"I will decide what conditions are to be inside my own ship."

"But my guards, man. You can't expect them to stand a four hour shift in a stinking hothouse."

"I can, and do, expect it. That will be all."

And when Porter said "that will be all" in that voice—it was all. The soldier tried to argue and some of his men, sullen of being deprived of their comfort, joined in. But it made no difference. And Whitbread's working party opened doors and ports and skylights, and a sighing sound went up from the packed cells, and the yellow life-giving fog surged and billowed in through every aperture.

And Quassa, Kemp's big Venusian servant, came in from the deck and stood behind his master. Porter looked at him a little uneasily, noticed how the native's regard flickered from the military officer to himself. There was something ironical behind those bulging eyes, a grim amusement. And Porter thought—*I'm a bloody fool. I should never have bowled Kemp out in front of his own men, in front of the convicts. The man's a ruine, and deserved it, but . . . The white man's burden and all that . . . oh, well . . .*

He left the sullen Kemp, the perspiring resentful guards, and walked slowly back to his own quarters.

AT THIS TIME of the year—or day—you can never be certain what the currents will be," declared Dillon.

He, with young Lacon, was standing aft, on the poop. It was dark. It was blowing a gale from the eastward. The sky was overcast, but there was no fog. Instead there were frequent flurries of hail and sleet. A big floe, thin, brittle, breaking up still further with every sea, slid by, gleaming pallidly in the glow from the stern light.

Lacon turned up the collar of his greatcoat, pulled the attached hood more securely over his head. He complained, "I never thought that Venus was like this."

"You're seeing a side of Venus that very few people do see. Not every Master likes making a voyage to the edge of the night—even when it means cutting off a couple of hundred miles. But this Old

Man loves it. Says it reminds him of Cape Horn . . ."

"Me too," agreed the Fourth, shivering. "But I still don't like it."

"This'll thicken your blood, man! I believe that if some of you young fellows really lived here, and had no means of transport, you'd do what some of the more backward tribes and most of the Day Side animals do—hibernate . . . And that reminds me—one thing you *must* see is the Day People migrating away from the sunset. There's a couple of reels of film in the ship's library—I took 'em myself with the infra-red camera. Whacking great twin canoes, decked over, with big square matting sails, scudding before the gale . . . One thing I've never got yet, although I'm still hoping, is the people of the thirty fourth parallel on the move. *They* don't go in for sail. They have big, fish-lizard things, sort of marine draught horses, to tow their boats for them . . ."

"And the people round our settlements?"

Dillon spat over the rail.

"They've had it," he said flatly. "They're fast becoming no more than parasites, hangers on. If they want to shift—or if the Powers That Be want to shift 'em—the likes of us get the job . . ." He continued, after a pause, "It's a pity. They hadn't a bad sort of culture—for their world. And now, whether we're humane or not, that culture is dying. But this isn't buying the baby a new frock!"

He busied himself with the machine by the taffrail, pulled a fathom or so of fine wire from the big reel, bent a large, heavy grapnel to the end of it. Lacon, however, was still more interested in Venusian ethnology and biology than in navigation.

"Is it true," he asked, "that there are Night People?"

The Second did not look up from his task. "Yes," he replied briefly.

"I was just asking," said the Fourth a little huffily. "As a matter of fact I was yarning to Major Kemp just before I came aft—and I didn't know whether to believe some of the things he told me or not . . . You know his servant, Quassa . . . Did you know that he's a murderer? It seems that he broke into the hut of some woman scientist who was gathering data among the tribes, and he . . ."

"I don't want to hear it," growled Dillon. "Although it's just the sort of gentleman's gentleman that Kemp would have . . . Now . . . Stand by for a demonstration of streaming the log. I suppose you had a Chernikeeff back on Earth,"

"Yes."

"We have one here, too—as you know. And, as you know, the most efficient log ever made can't give you more than your speed through the water. That's all very well on Earth—your seasonal current charts are pretty reliable. They should be, too, with hundreds of years of data to work on. Here—we can never be sure. Luckily the seas are mainly shallow. As a matter of fact this technique was first tried out back on Earth, way back in the time of one of their World Wars. It was used by mine-layers and mine-sweepers, who had to navigate pretty accurately and closely in minefields. And they, as you know, were always in relatively shallow water . . . Here goes!"

Dillon went to the weather, the star-board rail of the poop. He took good care to keep his body forward of the grapnel and its trailing tail of wire. He poised the grapnel like a harpoon, threw it like one, out and forward. The reel and the lead block whined as the wire ran out. It was only leading towards the bows for a matter of seconds, then it pulled the lead block along its curved track on the taffrail until it was stretching astern.

The Second Officer ran aft. He snatched up a little feeler, an "L" shaped rod with a wooden handle. He brought the angle of the "L" down over the fast outrunning wire. He pressed down, hard. The wire sagged visibly. There was no real weight on it. Suddenly it straightened with a jerk. Dillon removed his feeler, said — "She's holding!" He drew the Fourth's attention to the dial on the framework of the reel—"There! Nineteen point four over the ground. And we're doing sixteen eight through the water, by Chernikeeff. And that's not all . . ."

He showed Lacon how the wire made an angle with the fore and aft line of the ship, how the reel swivelled, following the direction of the travelling lead block. He showed him the pointer and the calibrated plate at the base of the reel. "There you are," he said. "Nineteen four over the

ground, sixteen eight through the water, course made good twelve degrees to port of what we're steering. Something for you to work out."

"How do you get the grapnel back?"

"We don't. They're expendable. They're the one thing I can drop without bothering to pick 'em up again. When I put on the brake the weak link will snap, and all we recover is the wire. That's why we don't do this more often . . ."

THE wind was coming aft now, veering fast and increasing in force. There was no longer any shelter abaft the poop house. A sea broke over the star-board quarter—nothing heavy, luckily, but showering the two officers with frigid spray and tinkling fragments of thin ice.

"To hell with this!" decided Dillon. "This is too much of a good thing." He slammed on the brake of the reel, then started the little electric motor that would recover the wire. He stood with Lacon, his body swaying to the lift and scend of the ship, watching the gleaming filament snaking up over the rail. He cursed as an unusually heavy lurch sent him staggering. He clutched Lacon, put his mouth close to the other's ear and bawled — "We'll inspect the lashings on the deck cargo on our way back to the bridge. They may have worked loose."

"Wouldn't surprise me!" shouted the Fourth. "Not in this weather!" He looked forward to the big, humped mass of bales on the after hatches, looming in dim, black silhouette against the dark sky.

The end of the wire came up, clicked through the guide block. Dillon stopped the motor, then replaced the cover over the reel. The wind caught it, almost wrenched it from his hands. He had to fight to get it down.

Just before he straightened the Fourth shouted, his voice full of sudden apprehension, "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"A scream. And shots."

"Rubbish. Just the wind. And something rattling somewhere. We'd better see what it is."

Nevertheless Dillon got up from his knees, clutching the cover of the log for support, stood and listened. But there was no sound that was anything more than the

noises of wind and sea. Yet he wasn't happy. "Damn you, Lacon," he growled. "You've made me as nervous as a cat with your screams and phantom gunfire. And, talking of guns, have you got yours?"

"Afraid not."

"You should have it. You know very well that the regulations say that officers should go armed at all times whilst convicts are being carried."

"Have you got yours?"

"I don't see how that has anything at all to do with it."

"No? Well—there's one maritime rule the same on Venus as on Earth. Don't do as I do—do as I say . . ."

Dillon laughed. "All right, Fourth, you win. But I always feed such a bloody fool weighted down with lethal ironmongery. Things always happen to other people's ships—never your own. . . ."

"True," agreed Lacon. "It can't happen here." He added—"We hope . . ."

He switched on his torch, started to swing the beam along the wet, gleaming deck. Dillon struck his hand down. "Careful!" he warned. "Maybe you heard things, maybe you didn't. But with the wind where it is now the turbines could explode and we'd hardly hear them here. We'll proceed for'ard with caution — just in case . . ."

Abruptly, blindingly sudden, the darkness of the fore part of the ship was torn with long streamers of flame. Lacon gasped, started to ask what it was. Dillon knew. Covering the ladders giving access to the boat decks were jets—fed, when the right valves were turned, by the blazing exhaust gases of the blast turbines. The fact that the right valves had been turned meant one thing—*mutiny*. It meant that the after part of the ship was in the hands of the convicts. It meant that Dillon and Lacon, unless they could win to the relative safety of the midships island, were as good as dead.

"Quick!" cried the Second. "The after escape!"

III

FOLLOWED BY THE FOURTH, he climbed up the short ladder to the top of the poop house. There was the cowl of the big ventilator communicating

with the motor room. There was a ladder inside the ventilator shaft so that, in the event of shipwreck, anyone trapped in the motor room had still one means of escape left.

Apparently the engineers on duty were alive to the possibility that this means of egress might be used as an entry by evilly disposed persons. The aperture of the cowl was sealed with a closed iris diaphragm of steel.

Dillon cursed. He ran to the box which housed the after telephone. He turned the pointer to the Engineer room position, pressed hard on the calling button. He bellowed "Hello!" into the mouthpiece for what seemed like several minutes. There was no answer. He twisted the pointer to Bridge. Again—there was no answer.

He said bitterly, "I wish that the idiot who wired this ship was here!"

"Why?"

"The telephone cables run through the after convict decks. I don't suppose that the mutineers have had the savvy to cut 'em on purpose—but they might have been torn down in a spasm of general destruction and bloody mindedness . . ."

"D'you think they can see us here?" asked Lacon apprehensively.

"No. At least, I hope not. The flame-throwers are making enough light — but we're in the shadow of the deck cargo. Look!"

He pointed. Atop the humped mass of bales appeared the black silhouettes of struggling figures. Firearms were in use—the two officers could see the orange flashes, faintly hear the detonations as they drifted aft against the roaring gale. It seemed that both sides had firearms. It seemed that one party, the smaller, was retreating aft over the uneven, treacherous surface of the bales.

And then it was overwhelmed by a wave of dark figures that surged up and over from forward. The black silhouettes of arms rose high in air, the black silhouettes of clubs and knives descended with sickening viciousness. There was a faint, high screaming that died abruptly in mid note. But arms and weapons rose and fell still, like working parts of some machine running wild, out of control. Then the snow came down, thick and blinding, turning all the world into a swirling white opa-

city. White, that is, in the rays of the sternlight. On either beam it was grey. And forward, where the flamethrowers guarded the midships castle, glowing with a ruddy glare.

"Come on!" bawled Dillon. "This is our only chance!"

He jumped recklessly down from the deckhouse to the deck, slipped on the treacherous, unsteady surface and fell heavily. But he scrambled to his feet. Lacon saw that he was holding his torch so that it could, if need be, be used as a weapon. He himself did not risk the jump, but scrambled down the ladder. Dillon cursed him for his tardiness, growled—"Come on!"

"Not so fast. Those flamethrowers..."

"There's bound to be somebody on the boatdeck. If we can only get as far as the ladder without being knocked off..."

The snow was thinning now. Lights showed as lights, not as vague, haloed blurs. The two officers could see, forward, the intermittent flashes from firearms and—for they were now on the starboard side of the poop and out of the shadow of the deck cargo—the roaring, jagged swords of fire guarding the boat deck ladder.

Dillon led the way. He hugged the hatch coamings, the darkness down the side of the high-piled stack of bales. He ran lightly and easily, staggering ever so slightly with the motion of the ship. Lacon, following, did not have his senior's confidence, his intimate knowledge of the layout of the vessel. And once he tripped over something soft and fell heavily. He started to get to his feet—and then saw what it was over which he had fallen. He stayed there on his hands and knees, retching, lacking the strength and the will to come erect. The Second looked back, hastily retraced his footsteps. He grabbed Lacon's arm and pulled him away from the body. He put his face against the Fourth's and almost shouted—"Snap out of it, man! He's dead—and we can't help him!"

"But his face . . . And the way they've . . ."

"I don't want 'em to do the same to us. Come on, now!"

Once Lacon was no longer staring at what had been Major Kemp he was able

to move. The immediate memory was bad enough, but it wasn't as bad as the actuality — the smashed face, the gouged eyes, the ingeniously obscene mutilations. The dreadful weakness, the urge to vomit, were not past — but they were under control. Dillon heard the Fourth muttering, over and over, "*They won't take me alive . . . They won't take me alive . . .*"

THE SECOND renewed his grip on Lacon, shook him hard and brutally. "Are you coming with me?" he demanded, "or do you want to jump over the side now? It'll be quite quick — especially if you remember not to strike away from the ship's side, if you let the screws get you . . ."

It was sound psychology, and it was enough. To every seaman, on every world, perhaps the ultimate in horror is the idea of falling overboard, of seeing the ship diminishing steadily and uncaring over the pitifully circumscribed horizon, or — perhaps worse — to be drawn into the vortex surging through the threshing screws.

Dillon started forward again — more cautiously now, for Kemp's had been only the first of the bodies. There must have been large scale slaughter on the after deck—of both Humans and Venusians. It seemed that all, or almost all, of the guards must have died—some fast, some slowly. Dillon stopped once or twice, conquered his repugnance, searched the corpses for weapons. But there were none to be had. Judging from the volume of fire coming from where the mutineers abaft the midships island were replying to the marksmen on the boat deck they were all in use.

The two officers could see now what was happening. Bales had been torn down from the cargo, were stacked as a rough barricade from the hatch to the rail. Behind this crouched the convicts. On the boatdeck, above the flaming barrier to the ladders, were the defenders of the midships castle. They were taking what cover they could, were using their ammunition slowly and sparingly. It was the natives who were responsible for the ragged, crackling volleys. Execrable marksmen, handling weapons that they had seen used but had never before used themselves, they sought to compensate for their ex-

erable marksmanship by sheer weight of fire.

And it worked. Inevitably, it worked. Dillon saw two of the crew leap convulsively from behind their inadequate protection, slump and crumple in a conclusive sort of way.

"Who's that in charge up there?" asked Dillon suddenly.

Lacon strained his eyes, strove to pierce the veil of fire and snow and steam. He said, uncertainly, "It's the Third, I think . . ."

"Stand by to rush!" barked the Second. Then, raising his voice, he bellowed, "Carter! Carter! We're making a run for it! Turn off the flamethrowers when we get to the ladder! Turn off . . ."

The dim, heavily muffled figure that was Carter raised a hand in acknowledgment, shouted and gestured to his men. With the wind aft, blowing the sound away from them, the two in the rear of the mutineers could not hear his orders, but they saw a man run to the little, protected hutch in which were the master valves. And this they saw as they were running forward, towards the barricade of bales and the surprised natives manning it.

It was the surprise that saved them. The Venusians knew that they had swept the deck clear of human life. To them this was an attack in force, from the rear. Perhaps they remembered the tunnel escape, right aft, that they had omitted to guard. Or, if they knew nothing of these things, they assumed that there was some below-deck way from bridge to poop open to the defenders amidships.

Dillon and Lacon were among the massed, slimy bodies before pistols could be brought to bear. Some of the mutineers did fire — but the vicious little rocket projectiles caused death and casualties in their own ranks. It was fists and feet—and teeth and claws. Except for the torches carried — and soon lost — by the officers, poor makeshift clubs, neither knives nor the crude bludgeons were used.

On the boat deck Carter literally danced in an agony of apprehension. He dare not fire into that mass of struggling bodies. And he knew that if he did not do something about it he would be the witness of

a slow, gruesome dismemberment — such as he had seen befall one of the guards. He wanted to lead a sally to rescue his two shipmates — but he had strict orders not to leave his defense position. He called a quartermaster — "Brown! Run up to the bridge, tell the Captain that Mr. Dillon and Mr. Lacon are down on the after deck. Ask if we can go down to save them . . ."

But salvation came from an unexpected quarter. Dillon and Lacon were buried under a squirming pile of stinking, slimy bodies, unnaturally and unhealthy hot, waiting for the talons at their eyes, the knives at their joints. Lacon managed to gasp, brokenly, "I wish . . . I'd taken . . . your advice. It would have been . . . better . . ." Dillon made no reply. He relaxed, then put all his energy into one last effort. His muscles cracked as he heaved himself into a sitting posture, as he fought to free his arms. And then, amazingly, he was free. He glared around him wildly. He saw that a tall, big Venusian was pulling his compatriots up and away one by one, contemptuously tossing them to one side as if they were puppies. At first he did not recognize this strange, doubtful ally—then saw from the belt with its tawdry ornamentation that it was Quassa.

The Venusian looked at him, showed all his needle-sharp teeth in what must have been meant for an ingratiating smile. "Bad Venies kill Master," he croaked. "Come!"

HE reached out a webbed talon, jerked Dillon to his feet. He kicked at the still struggling pile of bodies over Lacon, grasped that officer's exposed shoulder with the long toes of his right foot, pulled him clear of the melee.

Dillon went to his hands and knees, bent over his shipmate. He was still alive, but groggy. "Get up, man!" shouted the Second. "Quassa's saved us. I don't know for how long he can hold his friends off . . ."

And that, indeed, was a doubtful factor. The big Venusian had turned to face his bemused compatriots, was haranguing them in his incomprehensible language. Or—he could have been cursing them. It seemed almost certain that they were cursing back. It was almost more than Dillon could do

to turn his back on the scene, but he did so, dragged the half-conscious Lacon up to and over the barricade of greasy bales. He looked back when he had boosted the Fourth over the barrier, was in time to see Quassa draw his knife, bring it slashing down on the head of a Venusian who was threatening him with a pistol. The body, green blood and brains oozing from the split skull, fell to the deck. The mob surrounding the loyal servant—or the renegade—drew back a pace. Pistols were drawn, but not used. And, still facing the mutineers, still loosing his stream of hissing, crackling invective, Quassa backed to the barricade, got over it somehow without turning, followed the slow, limping Dillon and the crawling Fourth to the foot of the ladder.

"Off!" Carter bellowed.

The jets of screaming fire dwindled and sagged, died. On his hands and knees Lacon reached the lower tread, put out one hand, screamed as the hot metal burned through glove and skin and flesh. Carter shouted orders. Two men hurried down, careful not to touch the glowing handrails, lifted Lacon and half hoisted, half carried him to safety. From the port side of the boatdeck came a hail of fire as the marksmen there covered the retreat of their shipmates, sent their projectiles along the face of the barricade.

Dillon didn't wait for assistance. He went up the ladder fast, in spite of his stiffness and weakness. That way the incandescent metal didn't have time to burn through the thick soles of his boots. That way his feet weren't actually burned—only half roasted. Nevertheless—he was whimpering a little when he got to the top.

He took a firm grip on himself, fought down the childish noises that rose in his throat. And yet—strangely, unnaturally—they continued. They were loud enough not to be drowned by the hissing scream of the flamethrowers when somebody opened the valves again. Dillon turned. There, just behind him, was Quassa. The Venusian put out his hand to steady himself. The Second Officer did not shrink back from the contact as he ordinarily would have done. It was not gratitude to the native for having saved his life. It was pity. Quassa's feet were no more than stinking, charred lumps of flesh. Every

step he took must have been agony.

"Shoot him!" somebody was screaming hysterically. "Carter! Shoot him! He did to Kemp what he did to the woman . . ."

Dillon looked from the Third, his pistol raised uncertainly, to Lacon, sprawled on the snow-covered deck, weakly blubbering. Carter motioned to Dillon, with the pistol, to stand to one side.

"Hold it!" ordered the Second. "You can't. He saved our lives. What will these people think of us if this is the way we repay our helpers?"

"Perhaps you're right. But . . . The Fourth says . . ."

"The Fourth saw as much as I did—and that was damn all. His nerve's gone and small wonder. Better get him along to the Quack. And this poor devil, too."

"Don't you think he'd better see the Old Man first? He may be able to tell us something. And, just in case, we'd better disarm him . . ."

Quassa seemed to understand what was being said. Slowly, so slowly that there was no chance of his action being misconstrued, he pulled his broad bladed knife from his belt. He reversed it, offered it, hilt first, to Dillon. The man hesitated, then took it. He slipped it through the belt of his coat.

Two sailors had picked up Lacon, were carrying him to the surgery. Barclay had hurried aft again, was once more engaged in his task of defense. The brief lull in the firing had come to an end, and the part of the boat deck where Dillon and Quassa were standing was dangerously exposed.

"Come," ordered the Second. Then—"Can walk?"

"Can . . . walk. But feet . . . all burn . . ."

"Bimeby fix. First, see Captain."

"See Captain . . . Good."

IT WAS NOT a pleasant journey from boat deck to bridge. Some of Dillon's pity had evaporated, most of his repugnance had returned. The native was almost incapable of walking by himself, had to be helped every step of the way. Even through his thick, winter uniform the officer could feel the sliminess. He could smell the fetid breath—its unpleasantness enhanced by some cause; pain, fear, or

the unnaturally high temperature that Dillon had noticed during the scuffle on the after deck.

Captain Porter, a big bulk looming out of the snow-swept darkness, hurried forward as Dillon and the native climbed the last few rungs of the bridge ladder.

"Dillon!" he cried. "I thought you were gone, man! And who's that with you? Lacon?"

"No, sir. Lacon's been taken to the hospital. This is . . ."

"A prisoner?"

"No. It's Quassa, sir—Kemp's servant. He saved our lives."

Porter whistled incredulously. He said—"The others must have had it in for him badly."

"I'd like to get him down to the hospital, sir. His feet were charred to stumps on the red-hot ladder."

"I'd like to question him first. There are things I'd like to know. I'm sorry about his feet—but my Chief officer's dead, and half my crew wounded, not to mention Kemp and his worthless bunch of gutter scourgings. They let us down! They thought they could take things easy in this cold weather—according to all the rules the convicts should have been torpid, on the verge of hibernation. But there's a drug—the Night People make it. It's used in the labour camps on the edge of the night. And that's what these Venies have got hold of!

"You, Quassa! You savvy no-cold-sleep-medicine?"

"Me savvy, Captain master. Major Kemp master, him keep little all time, give me suppose go Night Side. He no keep much. Mebbe cooks . . . Mebbe put in stew . . ."

"You no savvy?"

"No, Captain master."

"Sir!" cried Dillon. "Look at his feet!" He shone the torch that he had taken from the wheelhouse on the injured members. "Standing around in this snow won't help them . . ."

Porter coughed. He prided himself on being a just man, made it his boast that Human and Venusian alike could expect a fair deal from his hands. And after all, the native had saved the lives of his officers. He was alone and unarmed, and badly injured, on the bridge of a ship,

in an environment as alien as the control room of a cruiser from Alpha Centauri would have been to the seamen.

"All right," he said reluctantly. "You go. See Doctor, make feet well. Me see you bimeby . . ."

"I'll take him down through the accommodation, sir."

"As you please. And hurry back. I'm alone up here—and we should be picking up Cape Tennant at any time now."

DILLON turned to go into the wheelhouse, saw that Quassa had preceded him. And then, without warning, the doors shut. The heavy, armored screens slid up over the windows. And there was a shrill, imperative wail from the siren.

Porter drew his pistol, discharged the full magazine at the now impregnable wheelhouse. But it was too late. And, by shutting and locking the doors, Quassa had gained far more than personal protection. He had gained control of the ship. The wheel was in there—although, unless the Venusian knew enough to switch from automatic to manual helm, the vessel would continue to steer herself. The engine controls were there. The telephones were there. So were the switches that controlled every door into the midships island.

What Quassa could do didn't really matter much. What did matter was the fact that, as long as he held the wheelhouse, he effectively prevented the ship's rightful master from doing anything.

It was characteristic of Captain Porter that he wasted no time on recriminations. He was never one of those shipmasters—all too common—who would be capable of saying: "We put the ship ashore, I got her off." It was his error of judgment that had allowed the native on to the bridge. He would have rather hated himself had he behaved otherwise; after all, the Venusian had saved the lives of two of his officers, had suffered considerably whilst so doing. He had felt grateful to Quassa, he had felt sorry for him, and therein he had erred. It was because of his essential humanity that he had erred . . .

"Mr. Dillon!" barked Porter to his navigator, who was struggling ineffectually with the armoured door of the wheelhouse.

"Mr. Dillon! Go down to the boatdeck;

see if you can find the carpenter or any of the engineers. See if Mr. Carter can spare them. Tell them to come up here. If Chips can still get to his shop for'ard, he'd better bring his tools." Then, to himself, "I wonder what that blast on the siren was for . . ."

IV

PORTER WALKED ROUND THE wheelhouse, peering through the narrow slits in the armour plating of the window screens, methodically testing every possible point of weakness. But he wasted no time on futile attacks on thick metal with bare hands. He was content to wait until his engineers and his carpenter came to the bridge. He was confident that, given tools, they could soon effect an entry. And the creature inside the wheelhouse, once a door was forced, would be no more dangerous than an oyster out of its shell. Apart from the inconvenience he was causing he was not dangerous now. In the dim light from P. P. I., from magnetic compass bowl, from gyroscope repeater, Porter could see him. He was sitting huddled against the after bulkhead, looking at least half dead. The Captain was relieved. He was afraid that Quassa had, somehow, gained some knowledge of the ship's whereabouts, had planned to alter course and drive her ashore on Cape Tennant. The advance guard of the Night People, following the twilight belt in its slow march around Venus, would be there now. They were vicious, unconquered, untamed. *Probably*, thought Porter, *these fools of mutineers no more want to fall into their hands than we do . . .*

Aft, a ruddy effulgence through the driving snow, the glare of the flame throwers was more intense than ever. It was brighter now than the funnel exhaust, from which they were tapped. But it shouldn't be . . . It couldn't be . . . But it was.

Some freak of visibility, Porter comforted himself. And he paced up and down the starboard wing of his bridge, his mind busy with the strategy that he was working out, the possibility of a surprise attack on the after deck by way of the tunnel escape. The survival of Dillon and Lacon showed that it might, probably would,

work. It was extremely unlikely that the mutineers—especially with Quassa cut off from them on the bridge—would think to post a guard on the poop.

The glare from aft was brighter now. Porter stopped his restless pacing, steady and stared astern. But the snow was hoody and all that he could see was huge black shadows moving against the evil radiance, all that he could hear was confused shouting and an incessant rattle of pistol fire. Then, suddenly, long streamers of crimson flame roared along the boatdeck, driven with blow-torch ferocity by the following gale. With them came great flying masses of burning matter, Hell's witches riding flaming broomsticks down the storm. The wind deflector apron of the bridge was some protection—the flames and the blazing, wind borne grass lifted, cleared the bridge to fall forward, some in the sea, some on the fo'c'sle head.

There was a clattering of feet on ladders. Dillon appeared, beating out a smouldering coat, and Carter. Some of the engineers—those not on duty below—were there. There were three of the quarter-masters.

"Your men!" cried Porter. "Where are the rest of the men?"

"Safe, sir," replied Dillon. "More by luck than judgment. We couldn't get into the accommodation—all the doors are shut by the wheelhouse controls. We were chased along the boatdeck by the fire. But the crowd are all right. They're sheltering in the lee of the bridge house. There's a party under the Bo's'n to deal with any fires that may start on the fore deck. And the Second Engineer has gone for'ard with Chippy to get some tools."

"How did the fire start?"

"It was when that fool in there blew the siren. You know how the deck cargo was stowed—piled on after hatches and almost out to the rails, but with a sort of pit over each hatch to give clearance for the skylights. They were fighting from the pit over the Number Four Skylight; it was damn' fine cover for them. Then, when the whistle went, they started pushing bales from the forward rim of the pit to fill the gap between Number Four hatch and the boat deck. It was about fifteen feet, as you know, a little too far to jump . . ."

"Somehow the stuff caught. It didn't catch too easily; the top bales were sodden with half melted snow. A bale must have been pushed, or dropped, right into the jets from one of the flame throwers. They're down to the light stuff now—the bales that are still dry. The wind's catching 'em, rolling 'em over and over to the boat deck. And they're blazing up at the slightest spark, and . . . Well, look for yourself, sir.

"And they're quite safe unless we manage to alter course, or the wind shifts. The fire's eating back a little, but not much, and they're working like fiends to wind'ard of it to get all the cargo shifted up for'ard . . ."

IT WAS still snowing, but what fell was sooty rain, almost scalding hot. The air was rapidly becoming unbreathable. And still the ship lurched and wallowed in the following sea, still the wind, bearing ice and fire, roared upon them from dead astern. Porter wondered how long it would be before the carpenter and the engineers managed to force the wheelhouse doors, or before those shut in amidships—the engineers at their stations, the surgeon and his staff, the radio officer still trying to raise somebody on his all but useless transmitter—realized what was amiss and broke into the wheelhouse from the officers' flat. Perhaps they were trying now. Perhaps the wind would shift. Sudden changes of wind at this season of the year, at this time of the year long day, were possible. A beam wind, aided by the fire fighting parties, would soon sweep the decks clear of flame. A head wind—and the primitive engineers would be hoist with their own petard. Meanwhile, was that bloody wood butcher making the tools?

The wood butcher and the Second Engineer staggered up to the bridge. They were lugging a heavy bag that clinked metallically as they dropped it on to the deck. "A drill, I think, Second," suggested the Carpenter. "Ay, Chippy. Ha'e we any sockets tae plug intae?"

The nearest, of course, was in the wheelhouse. Failing that, there was a decklight on either side of the officers' house, just under the bridge. The switch for these lights was in the wheelhouse. Had Quassa known the use to which it was

proposed to put them he would have switched off. But all that he did know, all that he could know inside his armoured fortress-prison, was that his plan was succeeding, that the hated humans were being burned out of their own ship.

The Captain and the Engineer and the Carpenter—the latter uncoiling a length of insulated cable—went to the wing of the bridge, looked down at the light, shining behind its transparent shield, that was their only chance of salvation. The superheated wind scorched their faces, a vicious gust of sparks made them screw their eyes tight shut. But they saw how long streamers of roaring flame licked along the side of the house, seemed to impinge directly upon the spot where a man must stand to unscrew the cover, push home the bayonet plug.

Chippy started to edge reluctantly towards the ladder down to the boat deck. And then the cable was snatched from his hand. It was Dillon who took it from him. He had removed his hooded coat, soaked it in the pool of melted snow that had collected over a choked scupper in the wing of the bridge, replaced it. He had tied a saturated muffler around the lower part of his face. He had taken a wrench and a screwdriver from the tool bag.

"No, Mr. Dillon!" cried Chippy. "I'll—"

"No you won't. You're too long making up your mind."

The Second Officer ran down the ladder, his wet gloves steaming and sizzling on the handrail. He flung up his arm to shield his face, plunged into the smoke and sparks and the lurid roaring flames.

Porter groaned, "He'll never make it . . ."

ON the bridge there were only the Captain, the Second Officer, the Second Engineer, the Carpenter. And Quassa. But he, so far as they could see through the narrow observation slits, was dead.

The carpenter slipped a bit into the chuck of his drill, clicked futilely at the trigger switch. The Captain looked at the silent drill, at the carpenter's seamed face, shrugged and turned his back. The Second Engineer got a hammer and a punch out of the bag, placed the punch carefully, and prepared the face of the door around the lock to receive the drill. "Hae ye no current yet?"

The carpenter shook his head. "Get to it wi' yer cold chisel, mon," he said.

The Second Engineer looked at him, at the tempered steel door, caught his lip in his teeth and turned to the tool bag. How long would it take to chip through the metal? Six hours? Eight?

"Captain," said the engineer, "There's anither outlet below, in the shelter-deck. Let me haul in the cable, sir, an' nip doon wi' it."

"Stay where you are," snapped the Captain. "Dillon's working on the deck-light cover now, if he's alive. You want to snatch the plug out of his hand just as he gets to the outlet?"

"If he's alive, sir . . ."

THE Captain stepped aft and looked across at the hell that was roaring up the boat deck. It was no less than the inferno below, in the shelter deck, where the carpenter proposed to go.

"Get to your chiselling, for a while at least."

"Aye, sir."

Porter paced the deck—fire aft, ice forward, the skin of his cheeks protesting the extremes. A billow of fat-grass smoke swept chokingly through the group, leaving eyes streaming and hands unsteady. The steady click of hammer against chisel continued. Once it missed a beat, and the carpenter grunted as the steel struck his hand.

Porter ranged up to them, looked at the tragically small pit in the door from which the spining crumbs were being gouged. He shook his head. Dillon should have had time . . . but Dillon was gone. A good man. An expression which was almost a smile crossed the Captain's face. "Things drop . . ." Well, Dillon was cured. He'd drop nothing more.

Porter peered into the wheelhouse. Quassa had not moved. There was a puddle of ichor round the ruined feet. The creature must be dead. He must have been all but dead when he entered the wheelhouse. The Captain marveled at the native's strength of will. It was obvious now that the revolt was Quassa's doing, probably planned far ahead, from the time when a series of ugly accidents had made him Kemp's servant. He wondered how much Quassa had had to do

with the sudden sickness of Wallis, the guard officer whose place Kemp had taken.

But—the sheer ingenuity of that semi-reptilian mind! He might, in some other culture, have made a great general. He had foresight, and his action in saving the two officers in order to gain access to the bridge showed that he had the ability to think quickly, to seize the opportunity of the moment. The injury to his feet was not in his plans . . . what might he have done had he been able to move about in the wheelhouse? As it was, he had been able to lock the officers out and away from the controls, and signal his compatriots to pile up the deck cargo so that they might storm the bridge. The fire was not in his plans, either, apparently, though from what it was doing it might well have been . . .

Quassa was an unusual native, certainly, but certainly not unique. Porter, like any good commander, was capable of an impartial judgment of the enemy. He knew enough history, too, to remember that greatness is a matter for posterity to judge. George Washington was a mutineer; Sir Francis Drake was a pirate; Schott, the pioneer of the spaceways, had been a brutal megalomaniac; yet all these were considered heroes.

A race which produced a Quassa was entitled to better treatment than the herding and flogging to which it was being subjected. At long last, the pressures within the Captain that had manifested themselves in disgust and distaste for his cargoes, centered themselves on a disgust for slave-trading itself.

Totally foreign to his usual habit, he swore a great oath and smashed his fist down into his palm.

The Second Engineer looked up, startled. "What is it, Sir?"

"The trade," said the Captain. "The dirty, inhuman slave-trade. Second, be my witness. If I get out of this alive, I shall swallow the anchor before I ever again take out a slave ship."

"Ah, sir; but you are too high in the game. Too many others'll follow ye if you do that. It'll mean the end o' slavin' on Venus!"

"I'll tell that to my conscience," said the Captain bitterly, "and good riddance to the filthy business!"

HE turned and walked to the observation slit, more to present his back to the men than to see inside. He got his churning thoughts together and pushed them away. With his eye still to the slit, he spoke. "Chips."

"Aye, sir."

"Haul in the wire. Want to chance it to the shelterdeck?"

"Aye, aye, sir." The chiselling stopped. A moment later, "Captain! Mr. Dillon must ha' made fast to summat yonder. I canna budge the cable."

Surprisingly, for him, the Captain swore. "The poor devil must have secured it while he was working on the cover, and then died before he could plug it in. Who'll volunteer to follow the cable out there and finish the job?"

Both the others spoke, rushed to drench their coats. "One will do," said the captain.

The engineer held up a fist. "Odds!" he said, grinning. The carpenter returned the grin, held up a fist. The fists came down, fingers came out. Two for the carpenter, three for the engineer. "Fives, and odd it is," said the engineer. "See you at tea-time, Chippy!"

The captain turned away, back to the observation slit. Brave, brave, he thought . . . "Stop!" he roared.

The engineer, his hand on the cable, stopped at the corner of the wheelhouse. The Captain bellowed something over the roar of the flames and the wind, the hissing of ice and spray turning to steam. He beckoned.

The three pressed to the slot and stared inside.

The opposite door was a rectangle of light. Through it hurtled a dark, tottering figure—"Dillon!" breathed the Captain.

The second officer, reeling, his clothes smoking, threw himself on the wheel. The three who watched broke away together, ran for the other side of the wheelhouse and the open door. At the starboard corner they stopped, shrank back from the hot fury of the flames. "Wait!" shouted Porter. "He'll swing her!"

And swing she did. Slowly, dreadfully, the wind came around to the quarter. The flames and the smoke and the cascading sparks were shooting overside—at first

at an angle only a degree or so from the ship's longitudinal axis, but ever broadening. Now they were wide on the beam. Now they were going astern. And then, at last, the wind was right ahead, and the bows were dipping and plunging and sending up and aft great clouds of icy spray that froze as it fell—and the afterdeck was an inferno in which nothing could live—in which nothing did live. "Th' lad's done it!" cried the carpenter. "Mr. Dillon has swung the ship an' put the fire back on the devils!"

The three behind the wheelhouse sprinted over the glowing, cooling deck and tumbled inside.

Porter drew his pistol, went straight to the huddled, contorted body of Quassa. He approached cautiously at first, tried to stir the dead Venusian with a heavily boot-ed foot. Then, his fears partially allayed, he put away his gun, made a more general, more thorough examination. Satisfied, he got up slowly from his stooping position. The flicking, vicious light in Quassa's brain had gone out.

"She won't answer, sir!" called the carpenter.

Porter sprang to the wheel. Dillon lay on the deck beneath it, his eyes open and rolled up, with only the whites showing, unconscious or dead . . . The captain's eyes flicked to the Iron Mike, to the controls. Over the bank of switches which were wired to the gyro room was a clutter of sodden cloth—Dillon's coat and muffler, which he had flung off when he came in. The Captain ripped them off, and laughed aloud with the release of tension. "Things drop!" he shouted. "After he swung her, his coat dropped on the board and switched back to automatic control!" He flipped the switch to "Manual" and steadied the vessel into the wind. Then, "Take her, Chips. Watch the spray and keep her headed into the wind while we make a check."

"It dropped . . ." someone said faintly. The Captain kneeled beside the Second Officer.

"Dillon! Are you . . ."

Dillon sat up, put a cautious hand to his face. "A bit broiled, sir," he said. He sat up and weakly shook his head. From the expression on his face he deeply regretted having done so. "The mutiny—"

"Finished with," said the Captain," thanks to you. How did you get that door open?"

Dillon rose, gratefully accepting his Captain's help, flushed, and said, "I was a little clumsy, I suppose, sir."

"Clumsy, man? You saved us and the ship!"

Dillon wet his lips. "I got to the decklight, sir. Tried to hold the plug in my armpit while I worked the cover loose. It—ah—it dropped, sir."

"The cover?"

"No, sir. The plug. The cable. It dropped on the deck and the wind swept it over the side. I got the cover off the light and when I went to plug in, there was no plug. I followed the cable to the rail." He wet his lips again. "It was—hot, sir. I pulled at the cable. It was fouled down below decks, some where—probably on the Y-bracing of the davits. There seemed to be nothing I could do. I pulled at it and it wouldn't clear. It was too hot to make it back to the wheelhouse. I dived for cover, nearest place I could find."

The Captain helped him over to the chartroom settee. "Go on," he said tonelessly.

"Thank you, sir. I was standing right next to number Four boat. I opened the falls-box and jumped in and closed the cover. It was hot and stuffy there but I was out of the flame.

"There was something hard poking into my kidneys. I felt around to shift it. It was the electric screw-jack that's stowed there to lift the boat clear of the keel-blocks."

"Hold on, Second," said the Captain. "When you lost the plug from the drill-cable, why didn't you come back and report?"

"I—I couldn't," said Dillon, and flushed again. "You have told me before, sir, that one day I would drop one thing too many, and this looked like it. I'm sorry, sir, but I suppose I just couldn't face it."

The Captain's jaw knotted. "Go on."

"Well, sir, it suddenly occurred to me that the screw-jack was just what the doctor ordered. I hopped out of the box, scooped out the jack, swung it over to the wheelhouse, and jammed it between the door and the stanchion. I plugged it into

the decklight that I'd cleared before, and simply switched on."

"That jack weighs two hundred pounds!" exclaimed Porter.

"Somehow, sir," said Dillon, passing a hand over his forehead, "I didn't seem to notice that at all. Anyway, once it began to turn, something had to give. I was afraid for a moment that it would be the stanchion, but happily the lock let go first."

"Fine work," said the captain. "Ah—Dillon. Tell me—did you strip off your coat and muffer before you took the wheel?"

"Why, sir? I—let me see. No, sir I took off my coat, switched the control to 'Manual' and then took the wheel."

"Yes. I saw that." The Captain leaned back. "Mr. Dillon, things—ah—things drop. You threw your coat on the board. It fell and switched back to automatic." He threw up his hands. "After all that—if I may say so—heroic effort and ingenuity, you, Two-Oh, let your coat drop on the controls and cancelled all your efforts. When you swung that wheel it was disconnected!"

"But I—but, sir, the ship—"

Porter nodded. "The ship swung, the fire was blown aft, and—there is no more mutiny. Mister, we have work to do, but I shall expect an accounting afterward. Someone swung the ship's head into the wind, and I don't expect Providence to operate in the slave trade. Are you fit for work?"

"I think so, sir," said Dillon in an awed tone.

"Then check your gyros. Heaven knows where we are."

"Aye, sir."

TWENTY MINUTES later, the bridge phone jangled. "Second Officer, sir, in the gyro room aft. Could you step this way, sir?"

Captain Porter, in the midst of course and dead-reckoning calculations, forced his eyes from the P. P. I. and said, "Won't it wait, man?"

"I—I think it's vital, sir." Dillon's tone, in spite of its flat telephonic quality, held such a quantity of shame and tension that the captain found himself smiling. Keeping the smile out of his voice, he rapped,

"Very well, mister. Meet me at the after companionway."

Dillon reported how, carelessly, he had forgotten to replace the cover after his last routine inspection. In justice to himself it must be said that this same memory had first come to the surface, uncomfortably nagging, whilst he had been aft with Lacon, streaming the log. And then had come the mutiny and the fire and the fighting . . .

He had left the cover propped against a stanchion. It was easy to see what had happened—a roll or lurch, the quite heavy plastic and metal casing falling against the gyroscope, the inevitable precession, continuing until such time as the cover slid free. The ship was on automatic, and controlled by this gyro. When the pressure of the cover caused the gyro to precess, it turned on its gimbals; and when it turned, it swung the ship, blowing the flames back on the mutineers, who even now cowered in their accommodation, their spirit and their mutiny broken.

Scarlet faced, and acutely conscious of his own professional inadequacy, Dillon stammered out his story to the Captain. At the end there was brief flash of the old nonchalance. He tried to grin. He said, with maddening vagueness, "Things drop . . ." Then he stood, shuffling his feet like a shamed schoolboy.

Porter looked at him, at the man who had heroically entered the wheelhouse to save the ship, only to have his heroism negated by his clumsiness in dropping his coat on the switches. He looked at the master gyro, subject of the same man's clumsi-

ness; which had succeeded where the man had failed. "Things drop . . ."

"Just as well they do," Porter conceded reluctantly. "Ah—shall we forget about this?"

He turned abruptly so that Dillon could not see that he was on the verge of hysterical laughter. He stepped through the door and closed it, to lean against the bulkhead for a brief, deeply pensive moment.

Captain Porter was as hard-headed an old shellback as ever sailed. And yet, as a philosopher once said, "No man will follow the sea unless he is mystic." Porter would have blown up and withered away any man who charged him with mysticism; and yet deep within him stirred the line "*. . . in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform. . .*" He thought of his oath, and of the effect it would have on the Venusian slave-trade. He thought of Quassa, who was dead, who had failed in his supreme try, and yet who, through the miracle of Dillon's clumsiness and the Captain's decision, would win ultimately. Half-way between laughter and solemn awe, he moved up the alleyway toward his bridge, the vantage point from which he surveyed the little kingdom of which he still was king. Behind him he heard a crash, the unpleasant clamour of machinery protesting against sudden and violent stoppage. He hastened back.

The Second Officer, replacing the heavy cover, had once again proved the truth of his favorite statement.

Things do, indeed, have a way of dropping.
