

# PLANET STORIES



VOL. 6, No. 3 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • NOVEMBER, 1953

► *Four Star-Flung Novels*

- HIGHWAY J** . . . . . **Charles Eric Maine** 4  
 He was Ingram of 1953, inventor of J-rotation . . . and along with his lightweight bicycle, directly responsible for the most gigantic nuisance of the 25th century.
- THE PRISON OF THE STARS** . . . . . **Stanley Mullen** 30  
 To head out beyond Pluto a venturer needs more than a super-spaceship . . . he needs men as super-desperate and freedom-mad as himself . . . people strange and daring. Wilding, the trespasser, found them on Alcatraz, the rogue asteroid . . . the prison of the stars.
- PURPLE FOREVER** . . . . . **Jack Lewis** 62  
 Three men on Venus . . . lolling about in their shirt sleeves and breathing an atmosphere of chlorine and ammonia that was certain to kill a man in thirty seconds. The pictures lied . . . they must lie. Trick photography? . . . Or the greatest hoax ever staged?
- BEYOND THE X ECLIPTIC** . . . . . **Fox B. Holden** 86  
 Earthman was dying slowly of boredom. Hope had become folly; work a means to avoid insanity; and death was the great reward . . . until Cragin, step-son of darkest space, dared the Barrier; dared to soar beyond the dread X Ecliptic where The Owners grimly governed all the fading galaxies.

► *Four Exciting Short Stories*

- THE GOLDEN APPLES OF THE SUN** . . . . . **Ray Bradbury** 21  
 Toward the sun . . . south toward the vorest of all burning hearths sped the refrigerated, ice-sheathed rocket . . . run by proud and vain men hoping to sting the lion and escape the maw.
- SLAY-RIDE** . . . . . **Winston K. Marks** 25  
 It was a great cosmic joke when the wholesale triggerman, the pirate of the spaceways, became the victim of a simple, webbed nylon garment known as spaceman's underwear.
- PASSWORD** . . . . . **J. W. Groves** 55  
 Professor Medcalfe had it. And he meant to keep it. For all men were fools . . . and only the Lanyiah deserved the Earthen jackpot.
- THE FATAL THIRD** . . . . . **Theo. L. Thomas** 78  
 Huge, violent Webster was moulded for war—but he lived in an age of peace. So he huffed, and he puffed, and he blew down Uranus . . . and smiled at his victory.
- THE VIZIGRAPH** . . . . . **2 & 110**  
 Of mice and men and affectionate fen.

T. T. SCOTT, *President*                      JACK O'SULLIVAN, *Editor*                      MALCOLM REISS, *Mgr. Editor*

PLANET STORIES • Published bi-monthly by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 1658 Summer St., Stamford, Conn. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1953, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Reentered as second-class matter September 30, 1952, at the Post Office at Stamford, Conn. Additional entry at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. Price 25¢ per copy. One-year subscription: \$1.50; additional postage for Canada, 15¢; foreign countries, 30¢. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.



PRINTED IN U. S. A.



VESTAL



# PURPLE FOREVER

By JACK LEWIS

*Three men on Venus . . . lolling about in their shirt sleeves and breathing in an atmosphere of chlorine and ammonia that was sure to kill a man in thirty seconds. The pictures lied! . . . they must lie! Trick photography? . . . Inquisitive Carl Keating found the true answer even stranger.*

**T**HE envelope was addressed in a bold sprawling hand that barely left room for the seventy-five cent special delivery stamp in the upper right hand corner.

It was a nice stamp—a blue one commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Harvey's first landing on Mars. Carl Keating tore it open. Inside was a single sheet of good

paper, typewritten on one side. The message read:

Dear Mr. Keating;

Must see you at once.

Norman Hamlin

He'd barely slid the letter back in its wrapper when the desk phone rang. Automatically he pushed the view-plate to a respectful fifteen inches and threw in the video. The screen swirled for a moment in a milky blur, then abruptly a man's head and shoulders jumped into focus. He was a lean, angular-faced man, with thin shoulders and thinner lips, which at the moment were set in a Lincolnish smile.

"I'm Dr. Hamlin," the face in the screen announced. "You got my letter?"

Carl nodded. "I have your letter doctor, but I'm afraid you have the wrong man. I can't imagine what you'd want to see ME about."

The image on the screen expanded as Norman Hamlin leaned toward the view-plate. "You are Major Carl Keating, retired?" the mouth asked.

Carl pushed the instrument back hoping the other man would do the same. "Retired as of last Tuesday," he said, "at the tender age of thirty-six. What's on your mind, doctor?"

The mouth got bigger till it filled the entire screen. "Major Keating, would it be possible for you to come out to Long Island tonight?"

"It would not!"

"Please it's . . ."

"Dr. Hamlin," Carl said not bothering to keep the annoyance out of his voice, "in the first place I don't even know who you are; in the second place I'm packing for a vacation in Paris; and in the third place if there's anything I detest, it's talking down someone's throat. Now if you don't mind . . ."

"Wait!" The image on the screen diminished, till over the narrow shoulders Carl could make out a book-lined study, and beyond that a sunken living room. "It's important—very important."

"So's my vacation."

"Suppose I were to make it worth while to postpone your vacation?"

"I'm afraid my while is worth more than you could offer," Keating said bluntly.

"I can offer five thousand dollars," Norman Hamlin said. "It's yours just for coming out to Wading River tonight and listening to what I have to say."

"You mean you'll pay five thousand dollars just for the privilege of talking to me?"

Hamlin nodded. "You listen to what I tell you. Then, if you aren't interested, you pick up your five thousand and leave. It's as easy as that."

Keating reached across the desk and scanned the envelope. "I have the address," he said. "I'll be right out."

IT WAS the peak of the rush hour when he left the apartment. Overhead, a congested swarm of copter traffic buzzed like an angry beehive. A block away was a monorail kiosk. Ever conscious of the strange feel of his new civvies, Keating entered it and boarded a Huntington express. From there it was only ten minutes to Wading River by copter-cab. Dr. Hamlin had left the lawn lights burning, and even before he'd paid his fare, was standing at his elbow. He extended a hand in greeting. "You made good time," he said.

Keating gripped the other man's hand. "You made a good offer."

Hamlin gestured him through an opening in the dura-glass ell of the house. The room was a library, the same one he'd seen over Hamlin's shoulder during the phone conversation. In the center of the book-bordered room was a rectangular table. A man sat at the head of it.

"Sit down," the man said.

Carl sat down. The man at the head of the table was robust, almost to the point of flabbiness. He was probably in his late twenties, but the pink flush on his cheekbones and a pair of broad-arched eyebrows gave him a mannequin appearance.

"This is Mr. Stewart Ferguson," Dr. Hamlin announced.

"Not THE Mr. Stewart Ferguson?"

"I take it then you've heard of him?"

Carl studied the man whimsically. "Yeah, I've heard of him," he said. "All the way from here to Mars and back I've heard of him."

Stewart Ferguson lit a cigarette. "Am I to

understand, Mr. Keating, that you don't approve of my so-called behavior?"

Carl shrugged. "Who am I to comment on your behavior? If I had your money I'd probably act the same way you do. Who doesn't want to sleep with a video actress?"

Dr. Hamlin coughed. "There are times when, perhaps the newspapers have exaggerated Mr. Ferguson's escapades. Furthermore, I hardly think his private life is any concern of ours."

"I'm not concerned," Carl said. "If I'm being paid five thousand dollars to listen to an evening's chatter I'd as soon listen to Ferguson's autobiography as anything else . . . might even come down on my price a bit."

Stewart Ferguson dug into his coat pocket and came up with a sheaf of bills. He threw them across the table. "That takes care of our agreement," he said, "now suppose we get down to the business you're being paid to listen to."

Carl picked up the bills and rapped them across his knuckles. For just a moment he toyed with the idea of throwing them back in the playboy's face. He didn't. Not only was five thousand dollars a lot of money, but his curiosity was aroused. "I'm listening," he said.

Norman Hamlin braced his bony elbows on the table and leaned toward him. "Mr. Keating, in the course of the three trips you made to Mars with the military, what was it that stood out foremost in your mind?"

"Men's emotions vary," Carl said carefully. "An architect would probably admire the beauty of the Martian cities, while a gourmet would savor the taste of candied encomms. Probably the thing that impressed me most was the friendliness of the people."

Hamlin drummed his fingers on the table. "I see," he said. "You'd say, then, it was a reasonably nice place to live?"

"Reasonably nice," Carl agreed. "Certainly nicer than the science-fiction writers had pictured it."

"Better than Earth?"

Carl shook his head. "Not as far as I'm concerned. My tastes run to sandy beaches and women with real eyelashes. That's just my personal opinion you understand."

5—Planet—November

There's almost eighty-thousand people who disagree with me—I believe that was the latest migration figures."

Hamlin thumped his pipe against the edge of the table. "I understand you've just returned from Venus, Mr. Keating. Can you give us a short briefing concerning your reactions to that planet?"

CARL eyed the man warily. "I'll be as brief as possible. There's been four landings on Venus in almost forty years. All these have been made by the military. That to me is a pretty substantial indication that no one would go there unless they were ordered to!"

Hamlin smiled. "I didn't mean quite as brief as that, Mr. Keating. I had rather hoped you'd be a little more explicit."

Carl frowned. "I find it a bit hard to understand just what you're driving at Dr. Hamlin. After all, there's been over a hundred books written on the subject. What can I add to the books? Maybe I could cram in a few more ghastly adjectives, but even then it wouldn't explain what the place was really like. You'd have to go there to find that out."

"How can you explain to someone sitting in a comfortable drawing room, the terrors of plodding through a swamp, knee deep in green fog, and wondering when a forty foot reptile is going to sink its teeth into your leg. How can you explain the sheer mental fatigue of waiting for a needle-nosed scorpion to puncture your space jumper, knowing that the atmosphere right on the other side of your face-plate can kill you in thirty seconds. How do you explain an atmosphere of chlorine and ammonia for that matter—or a color. I say purple-brown to you and it don't mean a thing. But look at the angry purple-brown landscape of Venus for two years like I did and you'd know what I mean."

"It's a primitive planet, Dr. Hamlin. Right now, according to the geologists, Venus is just like the earth was ten million years ago. Life is forming on it—primitive life. Take the chowls, for example—you see replicas of them in every department store window. They look a little like teddy-bears, especially when they walk. Still they have ten fingers and ten toes. Archeologists tell

us they're humanoid. Yet only half-a-million years ago they crawled out of the oceans. Maybe in another two million years they'll be living in houses instead of thatched hovels and pointing guns at people instead of running like a star-bound flame buggy every time they hear a noise. But right now they're scared. They're out of their natural element and they're scared, the same way our own Neanderthal man was scared before he found out how to fashion a rock-hammer."

Dr. Hamlin lit his pipe. "You're quite sure then, Mr. Keating, that man will never be able to live there?"

"Live there! Man can't even breathe there! There's less than one tenth of one percent oxygen in the air."

Dr. Hamlin pressed his fingertips together. "Mr. Keating," he said, "just how much do you know about the three men who were lost on the first Venus expedition?"

"Only what's in the history books," Carl said. "It's more or less of a legend, how Edgerton, Rhind, and Mitchell, were separated from the main party and never seen again."

"Died contributing to man's conquest of space," Ferguson said with mock drama.

"It wasn't a pleasant death," Carl said quickly. "I'd bet on that."

"Mr. Keating," Hamlin said, "do you have any ideas as to just why these three men should have disappeared at this time?"

Carl shook his head. "Could have been anything, I guess. They could have got lost and ran out of oxygen. They could have gotten snake bit. I wouldn't know. The whole thing happened before I was born."

## II

DR. HAMLIN got up. "No, there was more to it than that. In spite of the fact that it happened almost forty years ago, I happen to know that the situation didn't occur exactly as the history books would have you believe. The army, it is true covered up for them and made them heroes, but Edgerton, Mitchell, and Rhind, in reality, took off on their own. They took off without orders or permission, just a few hours before take-off-time, with nothing

except a six week supply of oxygen, a portable air-blister, and a few supplies."

Carl studied the man's face. The story was true. In his cadet days, old spacemen had spilled the story too many times for him to doubt its authenticity. "Suppose you tell me what all this is getting at?" he hedged.

Hamlin crossed the room. From a desk drawer he removed a palm-sized photo-cartridge and inserted it in the video adaptor. The room lights dimmed as the three dimensional screen brightened, dancing in a kaleidoscope of color. The colors merged.

He was staring into a vivid reproduction of a Venusian landscape. The picture had been taken from a small hill. Below was the violet-brown monotony of a saroo forest, visible only in small islands, where the roof of the trees stabbed out from the swirling green fog. And beyond that, almost lost in the haze, was the outline of a pair of reddish-brown spires, that reared out of the jungle, rising, till they were lost in the ever present layer of upper clouds that shrouded the planet. It was an ugly scene—ugly, yet strangely beautiful.

The camera swiveled in a 180° arc. They were looking up the hill now—looking up to where the hill tore itself loose from the green-fog level, rising for perhaps half a mile, then disappearing in the white ocean overhead. Halfway up the hill was a cluster of flare trees, their purple-brown leaves drooping in the ammonia-soaked air, and underneath the trees, a house—not the blister-type oxygen tents used by the military, or the thatched hovels of the chowls, but a real earth-style house with a peaked roof and pillar supported porch. Abruptly, the picture widened into a sharp closeup, revealing an open doorway. A man—an earthman—stood framed in the threshold. He was a clean-shaven man, probably in his early twenties. Two other men slightly older, lolled in a pair of rustic chairs set on the open veranda. Apparently none of the men were aware of the camera that recorded their every move.

Carl was aware of his hands gripping the chair arms. Except for the weird backdrop of flare trees and raton vines that flanked the house, he might have been looking at a peaceful summer resort in the Canadian

Rockies. But it wasn't an earth picture. These men were on Venus lolling about in their shirt sleeves and breathing in the atmosphere of chlorine and ammonia that was sure to kill a man in thirty seconds!

It was trick photography. It had to be. Quickly, he flicked a look at Dr. Hamlin, then looked back at the screen. One of the men was elbowing himself out of the chair now. He walked to the edge of the porch railing and stared directly into the camera. There was something vaguely familiar about the man—about all the men.

Suddenly, Carl tensed forward on the edge of the chair, conscious of a cold icicle of movement that snaked the length of his spine. The picture on the screen flicked out, abruptly. The room lights were on again, and Stewart Ferguson was studying him with detached insolence.

"Well?" Ferguson asked.

Carl ignored him, and turned to Norman Hamlin, "Did I see what I think I saw?" he asked.

Hamlin nodded.

"But those men!"

"You recognized them?"

Carl swallowed, hard. The highball he'd had three hours before churned up in his throat. "Of course I recognize them," he said thickly. "They've been commemorated on postage stamps and cut in stone at every spaceport in the country. But they're dead! Been dead for forty years!"

Hamlin turned up his palms. "You saw the pictures," he said evenly.

"Possibly the military has been deceiving us for forty years," Ferguson drawled. "Maybe they only made up that story about the poisonous atmosphere."

Keating felt a hot flush rise to the back of his neck. "That's not true," he said with obvious restraint. "I was there—for two long years I was on Venus, and it's bad, every bit as bad as the army says it is. You'd have to smell the stuff yourself to know what I really mean. It's so bad that even after you drop your jumper in the airlock and shower, the stuff follows you inside and stinks the ship up from here to Pluto and back again. The army's not lying. Not about that they're not!"

"How do you account for the photos then?"

"I don't know," Carl said wearily. "All I know is that for forty years, no man . . ." He stopped suddenly, as all at once the full enormity of the situation dawned on him. Those men on the screen. He'd recognized them of course from their pictures. But how about those pictures? The pictures he'd seen of Edgerton, Mitchell, and Rhind, were old pictures. . . . Pictures taken almost forty years ago!

AS IF from far away, Hamlin's voice was droning in his ears. "Perhaps it's not quite as ridiculous as you may think, Mr. Keating. There's a widely recognized theory that the very air which gives us life, also gives us death. In fact, one of the chief reasons for the high migration to Mars is the fact that man's life expectancy on that planet is almost thirty percent greater than on our own. Now let's suppose that the three men who deserted the first Venus expedition had in some way found a way to breathe the air of that planet. Is it so inconceivable that the atmospheric content might be conducive to extremely high longevity—perhaps even immortality?"

Carl wanted to say something—anything. "When—when were these pictures taken?" he finally managed.

"Just a little over four months ago."

The voice had an oddly nostalgic ring to it. Carl turned. The man had apparently entered the room unnoticed. He was a big block-shouldered man, with brown eyes and a mat of inky-black hair that all but covered a low sloping forehead. He could have passed for a cargo hand at the Montauk Spaceport, except that Carl knew different.

"No need to introduce myself, is there?" the man said.

Carl shook his head. To Hamlin he said: "Paul Spero just got back from Venus too. We were discharged together—as if you didn't know."

"You should have stuck around Keating," Spero said. "Right after you left, I tied in with a three-day party. You missed out on a good time."

"I'll bet," Carl said. "I take it that you were the one who brought back the pictures?"

Spero forced a grin that didn't quite make the width of his mouth. "That's right,

While you and the rest of the crew were entertaining yourselves collecting fossils I did some research on my own."

"Did it ever occur to you that the military might want these pictures?" Carl asked.

The other man made a noise with his nose. "Just what did the military ever do for me, Keating?" he asked "Fifteen years I spent as a crewman on every flame-buggy from here to Titan and back, and after all that, I get pensioned off a miserable second lieutenant."

"You'll have to admit," Carl said, "there were times when your conduct fell something short of exemplary."

Spero tossed him a sloppy salute. "Yes, Major," he said with mock formality. Abruptly he strode over to where Carl was standing. "I don't think you quite get it yet, Keating," he said thickly. "Try using your imagination. Forget about the griping we did when we were stationed there. It's different now. Edgerton, Mitchell and Rhind have found a way to breathe, and the secret of breathing is also the secret of immortality. Suppose I'd been sucker enough to turn this information over to the high brass? Inside of half-an-hour, those men would have been interrogated. Inside of a week, the information would have been radioed back to Terra. And by now, every one on this earth and his great maiden aunt would be selling their soul to get passage to Venus. And where do you think all this would leave us Keating? I'll tell you where . . . we'd be right here sweating out a priority list long enough to stretch from here to Pluto and back!"

Carl studied the man's face. "I take it then you didn't talk to these men when you took the pictures?"

Spero shook his head. "No," he said carefully. "At first I had all I could do to keep from running up to them, but then I figured that if they saw me, they'd know there was a spaceship on the planet. All kinds of things went through my head; one of them was that maybe they were sick of Venus and would try to make contact with the ship and spill their story. In the end, I just hid behind a clump of saroo trees and took the pictures."

Carl let his gaze wander about the room. He had to think. Then, almost as if it had

been prearranged, he found himself looking into a full-length mirror on the far wall. The reflection he saw wasn't old—the hair, while slightly lighter at the temples, was still for the most part dark-brown. He had a good build too, and except for a few creases radiating from the corners of his eyes, his skin had the smooth sort of thickness that many men in their middle-thirties would have envied. He'd kept himself well. It would probably be fifteen or twenty years yet before the almost invisible lines in his cheeks and forehead would begin to widen into deep grooves. But it would happen. It would . . .

And it didn't have to.

He knew what the proposition was now. He turned to Dr. Hamlin. "Let's see if I have it figured," he said. "You want to go to Venus and look for this fountain of youth. Ferguson's financing the trip, and Spero is the Ponce de Leon who knows where to look. All you need is a pilot. Right?"

"Think it over carefully, Mr. Keating," Hamlin said. "Don't be hasty in your answer."

Spero too had noticed the note of rejection in his voice. "You'd better grab the chance, Keating," he said. "Right now I'll admit I don't like Venus anymore than you. But we're going to change all that. Right after the migration starts there'll be cities, and parks and railroads. And we'll be the ones responsible for all of it. We'll be heroes—not just for ten or twenty years, but forever!"

"Did I hear someone say forever?"

The voice had a resonant, almost musical pitch to it. It was deep and throaty, more like an adolescent boy's voice than a woman's. She was standing at the arched entrance to the library, one hand balanced on the jade statue flanking the threshold. She had finespun taffy-blond hair and a complexion to match. She wore a gray-green krylon dress, the same color as her eyes. It looked good on her. A space jumper would have looked equally well.

"I don't believe you've met my daughter," Dr. Hamlin said. "Diane, this is Mr. Keating."

Diane crossed the room. The pressure of her fingers was quick, and warm and sug-



gestive. "Hello, Mr. Keating," she said.

Carl was aware of mumbling something polite. Across the room, Stewart Ferguson had derricked himself out of the chair. Spero remained seated, caressing the girl with his sultry brown eyes.

Diane flicked an imaginary wisp of hair back from behind her ear. "Have you decided to join us, Mr. Keating?" she said.

"Us?"

She searched his face. "Why, yes. Didn't Dad tell you there'd be five of us. After all, who'd want a slice of immortality more than a woman."

"Immortality for a goddess," Ferguson said blandly.

The soft, red mouth twitched almost imperceptibly. Then the brief look of annoyance was gone. "You will come, won't you?" she said.

Keating avoided her eyes. Again he found his gaze wandering to the wall mirror; looking at his own face, coarse and ruddy looking against Diane's soft white shoulder.

"Count me in," he said quietly.

### III

**K**EATING opened his eyes slowly, dimly aware of the familiar throbbing headache and a dull racking pain around the chest. Hazy-looking behind a galaxy of dancing spots was the instrument panel. He shook his head sideways—hard. The spots dissolved and the big panel board jumped into focus. The ship was two hundred miles above the Montauk Spaceport. He flicked a glance over his shoulder, half expecting to see the familiar blue uniforms of his fellow crewmates. Instead he saw three men and a girl—a girl with long shapely legs and taffy-blond hair.

So it was true then. It hadn't been a dream after all.

After the passengers began to stir, he turned. "Have a nice sleep?" he asked.

Diane shot him a pale smile.

Stewart Ferguson pretended to applaud. "Splendid Captain," he said contemptuously. "A momentous speech for a momentous occasion. Come, say something more for the history books!"

There was an awkward silence. Then

Spero guffawed. Carl bit off the angry reply that jumped to his lips. "All right, I will," he said. "How about someone brewing a pot of coffee?"

Diane got up and disappeared into the galley. Minutes later, she returned with a tray of containers. She stopped momentarily when Spero, leaning against one of the ports at the end of the companionway, said something to her, then abruptly, she quickened her pace. When she handed Carl the coffee her face was a deep scarlet.

Carl Keating stared vacantly out of the blister window watching the fleecy-white rim of the earth roll up toward them. The trip, less than one hour old, was already a hotbed of smoldering emotions. Worst of all, was the fact that things were almost sure to get worse before they got better. Under the best of conditions, space does strange things to individuals cramped together in the confines of a ship. Army records are crammed full of case histories where men, failing to adjust themselves to existing conditions, have reacted in ways which are probably best left in the files. But military men are schooled and conditioned for space, and while complete and mutual understanding seldom exists, there is usually, even as there was between Spero and himself, an unwritten live-and-let-live policy among crew members.

But they weren't in the army anymore, and no one seemed more aware of it than Paul Spero. Never a model officer, Spero in his new-found freedom, had become almost unbearably obnoxious. Nor could he expect any cooperation from Stewart Ferguson. He could handle him, he hoped. All of which brought him to the big question. What about Diane?

It was probably a paradox that while the more unsavory military case histories were due to men being without women, the proximity of a long-legged taffy-blond in this case was a factor more conducive to mutiny than harmony.

And curiously enough, it was Diane Hamlin herself, who came up with at least part of the answer. She was smart—whether or not she'd been around was a question to ponder over while staring into the star-studded blackness beyond the blister ports. But one thing was certain: the girl had an

almost uncanny knowledge of the working's of men's minds an insight of psychology which she applied diplomatically if not ruthlessly to all aboard.

With just the right amount of good-natured tolerance she either ignored or subtly evaded the bluntly-pointed remarks of Stewart Ferguson and deftly sidestepped the impulsive hands of Paul Spero. On several occasions when a crisis seemed imminent, she disappeared—always good-naturedly and on a new logical pretense—into the small cubbyhole to which she'd been assigned. So tactfully was all this accomplished that they'd already passed the halfway mark before Carl realized that he hadn't spoken to her alone since during the preparations.

HE WAS mildly surprised therefore, when while spelling Spero at the controls during the sleep period, he became suddenly aware of someone standing at his elbow. She was wearing a robins-egg-blue dressing robe, loose-fitting except around the curve of her breasts. She sat down in the co-pilot's seat next to him.

"Mind if I keep you company awhile? I can't seem to get to sleep."

"A pleasure," Carl said with genuine enthusiasm. . . . He stopped awkwardly, wondering what to say. . . . Impulsively, he ran his open hand across the width of the blister glass. "Want a hunk of space, baby. Say where to cut and I'll slice it for you."

She smiled a little. "You sound a little like Ferguson when you talk that way."

Carl pretended to check the dials.

"Carl?"

On his forearm he could feel Diane's fingers. He turned.

"What makes a man like that?"

He moved his shoulders. "I don't know, unless it's because he's always been able to buy anything he's ever wanted. As far as I know, there's only been one thing he hasn't been able to buy, and he's working on that."

"You mean immortality?"

Carl ignored the question. "Why ask me about Ferguson's mind anyhow?" he asked suddenly. "You're the psychologist of this expedition." He watched her nibble on her lower lip for a moment, then went on: "You don't have to admit it. I just want

you to know you've been doing a good job. I don't know how long you can keep it up or what happens after we get to Venus, but up till now you've been doing all right. There's only one thing wrong with the setup as far as I can see, and that's that this arm's-length policy apparently applies to me as well as it does to everyone else. I know it's necessary to the plan, and I know it's a selfish argument, but it bothers me!"

She turned and faced him. For a moment it occurred to him she was angry, but when she spoke, her voice was soft, and deep, and lingering. "I'm sorry, Carl, but you can see why it has to be this way. . . . I mean—"

Carl leaned over suddenly and kissed her full on the lips. She didn't pull away. Neither did she respond the way he'd have liked her to. After a brief interval he felt the pressure of her hand against his shoulder.

"Please Carl, not now."

"When?"

She turned away. On the starboard port he could see the reflection of her finely-moulded face. She looked wistful, almost on the verge of tears.

"I don't know, Carl," she said wearily. "Maybe after we're settled on Venus. Maybe after the migration starts."

Keating hacked up a laugh. "Just what makes you so sure there's going to be a migration, or for that matter any little men who never grow old as long as they have their daily diet of ammonia and chlorine?"

He watched her turn, felt her eyes bore into him. "You don't believe it, do you?"

"I'm not sure," Carl said carefully, "I want to believe it, only I've listened to so many bug yarns in my time it's probably warped my sense of values. The whole thing just sounds too fantastic."

"But the pictures?"

"The pictures were real enough," Carl admitted. "I'd vouch for that. It's just that if you'd ever caught a whiff of that stuff like I have, you'd know that no one could breathe it and stay alive for sixty seconds, much less forever."

"What do you think we'll find?"

Carl shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe the story's true. Sometimes I find myself wondering what it would be like to be immortal—I mean after all the willful-wishing's over

with, and you get down to thinking about it in terms of 'what's-in-it-for-me.' Most of us think of immortality as being something we could have on our own terms. But suppose everyone were immortal, the way they'll be—or could be—after this so-called migration starts. How much will people have really changed. They'll have just as many problems—bigger ones in fact, 'cause they'll be living on what to me is just about the God-awfullest hunk of crud in the galaxy. And the only thing they're getting in the way of compensation is the knowledge that these same troubles are going to go on forever."

She was staring at him now—attentively with her lips slightly parted. "You feel this way, and you still agreed to come," she said evenly. "Why?"

Carl forced a smile. "Like I said, maybe I can have it on my own terms. It's a gamble, but if it pays off it'll be worth it."

Diane got up. "I'd best be getting back," she said.

He watched her till she disappeared around the corner of the companionway. Then he fixed his gaze on the marble-sized disc to the right of Polaris.

"Immortality, and thou," he murmured.

CARL KEATING nosed the ship into a standard satellite maneuver, circling the planet twice before he cleaved into the unbroken ocean of ammonia clouds that shrouded the planet. Then they were falling—falling through a smoky whiteness that boiled against the portholes, settling in spots, and condensing into tiny rivulets that ran the length of the amber glass. The ship shuddered sharply three times as its powerful thrust engines reached out, challenging the herculean fingers of gravity; fighting them—fighting them to a draw. Then the misty ports cleared, and the ship settled with a gentle bump in the center of a broad meadow.

Not till after the controls had been checked, and the atomic reactor switch set to recharge, did he look at the passengers. They were standing in the companionway, their faces pressed against the ports. He crossed the control room and peered over the bony shoulder of Norman Hamlin.

> Dismal-looking, even through the amber

glass, the miserable panorama rolled away from them. A quarter-mile away, the meadow ended at the rim of a small ridge, beyond which a hill dipped down—down across the roof of a purple-brown saroo forest that merged with an abyss of swirling green fog that swallowed up the horizon. In the foreground, a few packing cases lay scattered about in front of a large white hemisphere topped by a radio antenna and American flag. It was all there, exactly the way it had been left by the military almost six months ago.

"That's a permanent building," Carl said to no one in particular. "Just before we evacuated, Colonel Brophy stocked it up with all our excess supplies, just on the chance someone might be crazy enough to come back here. We even left the separator running when we left. So take a good look at it, 'cause inside that bubble is the only breath of air on the whole planet."

"Very nice of the military," Ferguson commented dryly.

"Let's hope we won't have to use it long," Dr. Hamlin said.

Carl looked out the port. Rain, that doused the planet almost twenty hours a day, had started to fall, settling in small puddles at the base of the ship and drenching the broad-leafed saroo trees.

"I wouldn't bet on it," he said.

As if in a trance, Diane continued to stare at the melancholy landscape. "It's more that awful color than anything else," she said finally. "It makes everything seem so angry looking. How about the rest of the planet? Is it all like this?"

"No," Carl said, "it's not all like this. That's the trouble. This is one of the more livable spots. That's why it was chosen by the military. Roughly ten percent of the planet lies above water, but out of that, only five percent of the terrain is in the visual belt."

"I'll play the straight man," Ferguson said. "Tell us, Captain, what is the visual belt?"

"The visual belt represents the altitude from approximately three to four thousand feet above sea level," Carl told him. "Below that you have the green ground haze you see over the tops of those trees, and above it is the ten-mile-thick layer of clouds that

never lift. Both are so thick, that except around the fringe areas, you can't even count your own fingers."

"Nice place to take your girl for a walk," Ferguson said, looking at Diane pointedly.

"Is anyone interested in what I think?" Spero said suddenly.

"Think away," Carl said. "Who's there to stop you?"

"That's exactly what I'd like to talk about," Spero said grimly. "It seems to me that for a fellow who left his rank back at the separation center, you've certainly been assuming a lot of authority around here."

Carl felt a warm flush rising to his cheekbones. "We've been in space," he said. "The pilot of a ship is responsible for the actions of everyone aboard."

Spero jerked a thumb at the blister port. "I've got news for you, Keating," he said. "We're not IN space anymore, so you may consider yourself relieved of your authority. For five weeks now we've watched you swagger around the ship like the hero of a grade-B space-opera, and frankly I think we're all a little sick of it!"

"Aren't you dramatizing this a little heavy," Diane said suddenly.

"Shut up!" Spero said harshly.

Stewart Ferguson sat down, folding his hands in his lap. "My, my," he said. "A real live mutiny, just like one reads about. Tell me, when does Jack Jupiter come crashing through the lock door?"

"I wasn't aware that anyone in particular was in command," Diane persisted, "but if you think we need someone, I'd suggest we take a vote."

Spero grinned. "No, honey. We all know who your money's riding on. That's why you can forget all those dreams about you and Keating settling down in a saroo covered cottage for the next three or four thousand years. You see, I've got different plans."

From the slash pocket of his tunic Spero suddenly whipped out a snub-nosed needle gun, waving it carelessly across the width of the cabin. He flicked a glance at Ferguson.

"Surprise," he said. "Jack Jupiter just crashed the lock-door. I'm Jack Jupiter!"

"You'll never get away with this," Carl said.

The smile on Spero's face broadened. "Oh, come Keating. How corny can you get? I have gotten away with it. Since I'm the only one who can lead you to immortality, what's more natural than for me to take command? My first official act will be to detail you, Ferguson, and Dr. Hamlin to go outside and activate the blister. You'll find space jumpers in the airlock. Diane and I will stay here and figure out a plan of action."

Carl took a step forward. "I'm afraid we can't go along with your plan," he said quietly.

Spero leveled the lethal end of the weapon against his chest. "You're acting stupidly, Keating. You know you can't stop me, just as you know I'll kill you if you try. You above all people should know that."

There was a stagnant silence, during which Carl held his ground. Violently he was aware of the beating of his own heart. The tapping got louder as he watched Spero's finger tighten on the trigger. Then suddenly he realized it wasn't his heart. **SOMEONE WAS TAPPING ON THE THICK GLASS INSIDE THE CONTROL ROOM.**

Spero heard it, too. For a confused moment, his trigger-finger relaxed as he tried to flick a quick glance toward the source of the sound.

Then the world exploded in his face.

#### IV

**C**ARL left Spero lying on the floor where he dropped him. Stopping only to scoop the gun off the floor, he ran to the control room. The tattoo on the glass stopped when he entered. A face peered in at him—a face curiously without emotion. It was a hairy-face, except around the eyes and mouth, where three patches of yellow skin peeked through, giving the appearance of three yellow bull's eyes.

Carl stared at the creature, fascinated. In his entire stay on Venus, never had he observed a chowl at such close range. For perhaps five seconds the chowl stared back at him, then quickly bounded off the ship and disappeared toward the forest.

He turned. Diane, standing at the entrance to the control room was regarding him curiously. "They look almost human, don't they?" she said.

"They are human," Carl told her. "Humanoid anyhow according to the people who are supposed to know about these things. We don't know too much about them really. They're so timid, it's a novelty to get within half-a-mile of them."

"This one wasn't."

Carl scratched his head. "I know. It's the first time I've ever got that close to one. I guess he didn't know what a spaceship was. You notice he didn't wait very long after he saw us through the window."

"What are you going to do about Spero?" Diane asked suddenly.

Carl walked over to the gun cabinet where he poked around a moment, then returned with the key. "I don't know," he admitted. He placed both hands on the girl's shoulders. "Just how much does this immortality really mean to you?"

Diane appeared to think about it a moment. "I'm not sure. I'm not sure at all. Sometimes I find myself wondering if I'm not more interested in finding out how it's accomplished than I am in applying it to myself. Do you feel that way, too?"

Carl looked out the window.

"I've always felt that way," he said.

**S**PERO, aided by Dr. Hamlin, was just beginning to stir when they returned. He shook his head dazedly for a moment, then sat up massaging his jaw.

Keating regarded him with a questioning stare. "What do you think we should do with you?" he asked bluntly.

Spero patted his pockets and came up with a cigarette. After it had been lighted, he blew the smoke in Carl's direction. "If you were smart, you'd kill me," he said. "Only you're not smart. You know you won't, and I know you won't. So suppose we all relax and stop trying to build up suspense."

Carl dropped his hand inside his pocket, allowing his grip to tighten around the butt of the needle gun. "What makes you so sure I won't kill you?" he said. "I could, you know. The fact you know where Edger-ton and his cronies are wouldn't stop me.

I could probably find them myself if I wanted to. And I'm not even sure that I want to."

Spero took a drag on the cigarette and derricked himself to his feet. "I wasn't thinking of that," he said quietly. "I just happen to know that you haven't got it in you to kill a man in cold blood, Keating. I could do it but not you. You got too many principles. The worst you could bring yourself to do, Keating, would be to put it up to a vote. And if it came to that, everyone here—probably you included—would vote to let me off on the promise that I wouldn't do it again. Go ahead, put it to a vote. See if I'm not right."

Keating let his eyes wander across the cabin. . . . To Stewart Ferguson, white-looking, and curiously without comment. . . . To Diane, outraged amazement on her face—but still a woman. And to Norman Hamlin, wondering what made the man tick—but still a doctor. He looked back at Spero, blowing small curls of smoke at the ceiling.

No, he didn't have to take a vote.

Impulsively, he waved the gun in the direction of the cubbyhole where Diane had been sleeping. "Get in there," he said tightly.

Spero stubbed out the cigarette, swiveled a tight-lipped smile across each member of the party, then shrugged his shoulders and shuffled into the room.

Carl locked the door and stuck the key in his pocket along with the key to the gun case. While neither of the locks were built for durability, at least Spero would have to make a noise opening them.

To the others he said: "I'd suggest we make our future plans without figuring on Spero's cooperation."

"But how can we," Dr. Hamlin said. "We'll have to find Edger-ton, Mitchell and Rhind first. They're the only ones who know the answer to what we're after."

"The secret of immortality is nothing more than the secret of breathing the air here," Carl said crisply. "Let's not kid ourselves about that."

"Well, what is the secret?" Hamlin said impatiently. "I'm sure I haven't the slightest idea."

Carl studied the man intently.

"Haven't you?"

Diane shot him an odd look.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hamlin said hotly.

Keating ignored the question and jerked a finger at the window. "Suppose we leave Spero here and go over and activate the blister. It's much more comfortable. It'll be a nice change after being cramped up here for six weeks."

"Suppose you explain that statement first?" Hamlin said.

"There's jumpers in the airlock," Carl went on. "I'll explain after we're settled over there. Who knows, maybe by that time I'll be ready to apologize."

"I certainly hope so," Hamlin mumbled. "I can't understand what's got into everyone all of a sudden."

"This way," Carl said.

Inside the lock, he helped each member of the party into a jumper and adjusted the air valves. When everything was in order, he pressed a switch, and the lock-door hissed open.

Another moment, and they were wading through the purple-brown, ankle-deep slush of Venus. The blister-building was only about three hundred yards from the ship, but the rain—coming down in torrents now—had turned the ground into a soft-slimy ooze that was sometimes knee-deep.

Carl led the way, shouting instructions through the speaker-unit encased in his helmet. Once when Diane fell, he went back and helped her to her feet. Through the helmet glass, he could see her face for a moment. Then she jerked her arm free and plodded on. Behind him he heard Stewart Ferguson swear.

It took a full twenty minutes to reach the building. It was big. Two hundred feet in diameter at the base, it sloped out of the sea of mud like a giant stemless mushroom. Carl led the party around the base to the far side where the lock-door was situated. Then he stopped.

The rest of the party had caught up with him now. They stood in a restless semi-circle in front of the great doors. From behind mud-splattered face-plates, three pairs of eyes were regarding him curiously. He didn't answer their solemn stare. Instead he continued to stare at the great lock-doors.

They were open.

FOR a full minute he stared into the darkness, then he touched the switch of his helmet lamp. The beam, seemingly thick enough to walk on, stabbed into the cave-like interior. He went in. First, he'd have to get the pumps working. Then, after the lethal gases had been pumped out, start the separator motors. Even then, the place wouldn't be livable for three weeks. He swore.

Abruptly, from behind him, he became aware of three flickering beams of light. Diane and the two men were following him inside. He turned, waving his arms backward. "Stay back!" he called. "Wait till I get the lights working."

He watched them stop.

And then, the lights WERE working. They came on all at once, illuminating the big structure with dazzling brilliancy. From behind him, he was aware of the staccato crackle of a squawk-box being readied for use. Then, like a bass drum in a brick tunnel, a voice boomed out of the stillness:

"Welcome! Welcome to Venus!"

He stepped back, trying to peer over the row of packing cases. The voice had originated from the control room at the far end of the building. He flinched when something touched the sleeve of his jumper, then relaxed when he saw Diane peering at him through a mud-stained face plate. The men had joined him, too, looking at him and shifting from one foot to the other.

The squawk-box was silent now. Impulsively, Carl allowed his gloved hand to brush against the butt of the needle pistol holstered in the webbed-belt of his jumper.

"The gun won't be necessary, I assure you. I'm unarmed!"

The speaker stood at the far end of a corridor of wooden cases, spotlighted in the glow of an overhead lamp. He was a young man, with close-cropped sandy-blonde hair. He wore a blue spaceman's uniform—obviously salvaged from one of the cases.

He remained motionless a moment, like a man waiting for the press photographers to finish, then walked slowly toward them, his bare hand extended in greeting.

"I'm Raymond Edgerton," the man said.

Awkwardly, Carl grasped the bare hand

with the thick glove of his jumper. "I know," he said. He was suddenly at a loss for words. What DID one say at a time like this? Certainly not the time-worn Dr. Livingston cliché.

Stewart Ferguson said it anyhow.

Carl studied the man carefully, watching the rise and fall of his breathing. The man WAS breathing—breathing the lethal gases that should kill him in thirty seconds.

"You find it hard to believe, don't you?" Edgerton said suddenly.

Carl nodded. "I have a nephew who collects stamps," he heard himself saying. "He has one with your picture on it. It's a rarity now, 'cause it's almost forty years old, but the picture on the stamp looks just like you—just like you do NOW!"

"How is it done Mr. Edgerton?" Diane asked pointedly. "Why is it that you can breathe this air when it kills everyone else?"

Edgerton's eyes narrowed when he heard the voice. Then he leaned over and peered into the mud-stained face-plate. He smiled. "I'll be damned," he said. "A woman. A real live woman! Pretty too."

"How is it done?" Diane persisted.

Edgerton's grin faded. He turned to Carl. "You mean you don't know?"

Carl eyed the man, his lips set in an aggravating silence. Then: "Yes, I know. Or at least I think I know. Furthermore, Dr. Hamlin knows too. He's known all the time. Obviously, this girl is the only one who's still in the dark. I think it's about time someone told her."

"Wait!" Dr. Hamlin said.

"Say, what's this all about?" Edgerton said suddenly. "Where's Paul Spero anyhow? Rhind and Mitchell are waiting!"

Carl flicked a look at Diane, then turned back to her father. "Are you going to tell her? Or should I?"

"Tell me what?" Diane said. "How does he know about Paul Spero? Spero told us . . ."

## V

"SPERO told us a lot of things," Carl said thickly. "He told us he'd taken pictures without speaking to anyone. It served his purpose better to keep us in the dark about how this immortality thing was

really worked until after we got here. After that, he figured he'd take over and we'd have to go along with him whether we liked it or not. Furthermore, Ferguson and your father were in on it from the beginning, weren't you?"

"Please," Dr. Hamlin said nervously. "It's not near as bad as you're making it out to be. It's only a minor adjustment."

"Minor adjustment!" Carl grasped the arm of Diane's jumper, pulling her along with him through the long corridors of boxes. At the far end of the structure, he found what he was searching for. Three boxes—slitted in front like a zoo cage. And inside the boxes, peering at them through sad yellow-rimmed eyes—were three chowls.

"There's the answer to your immortality," Carl said grimly. "Rhind and Mitchell were both doctors—surgeons. Do you get it now?"

Raymond Edgerton and Norman Hamlin had joined them now. "Mr. Keating," Edgerton said, "I'm sure if you were a doctor, you wouldn't be so squeamish about a thing like this. After all, what's a simple operation?"

"Simple operation!"

Carl reached over clamping his gloved hands on Edgerton's shoulders. Quickly, he raked the steel-tipped fingers of both hands down the man's back. There was a tearing noise, as the open-collared shirt ripped apart at the seams, revealing a broad fleshy back—smooth-looking except for where an angry gash dipped in a deep U between the shoulder blades.

He jerked his thumb back to where the chowls were chattering restlessly in their cages. "In case you don't know it," he said, "chowls are humanoid. They're the only things on this planet with any sign of intelligence. Killing them's not only murder. It's worse than murder. It's genocide! All that has to happen is for this story to get back to Terra, and you'll have every quack who can yield a scalpel up here cutting the lungs out of these poor creatures!"

Alongside him, he was aware of Diane getting sick inside her helmet. Ferguson coughed.

"Since you were apparently aware of this all the time, Keating, just why did you come along?" Ferguson asked.

"I wasn't aware of it all along. It wasn't till I saw Dr. Hamlin nursing Spero's jaw that I began to wonder why he wanted a doctor along in the first place. He needed you to finance the trip, and he needed me to pilot the ship. But why Dr. Hamlin unless there was some need for a surgeon? Then I remembered the chowls, and everything began to fall into place."

Ferguson sat down on one of the wooden cases. "As usual Keating, you're not being very logical. As a matter of fact, he didn't need the good doctor at all. He had two doctors right here. Remember?"

Carl nodded. "Yes, I remember," he said grimly. "That was the part of the puzzle that didn't fit. But now I think I've even got the answer to that."

"Do tell?"

"Yes, I'll tell you," Carl said ruthlessly. "It was because with all the build-up these would-be-gods gave you about this immortality gimmick, they were sick to death of it. They were sick of the loneliness, sick of the rain, sick of the color of purple. In short, they were sick of this foul planet and were willing to trade it in for whatever the earth had to offer them! That's where Dr. Hamlin came in."

Doggedly, Carl spun on Edgerton, trying to draw the tatters of his shirt back across his back.

"Who's lungs were you going to take, Mr. Edgerton? Mine, or Stewart Ferguson's?"

"He was aware of Diane pulling on his arm. He turned to the two men in the mud-splattered jumpers. "We're leaving for Terra in an hour," he said crisply. "Are you coming, or staying?"

Ferguson and Hamlin stared at each other.

"Make up your mind!"

Abruptly, Dr. Hamlin walked over to where Diane was standing. "I'm an old man," he said. "All I have back on Earth is twenty years at the most. Stay with me, Diane?"

Breathlessly, Carl watched the girl—watched her shake her head, slowly. "How about you?" he asked Ferguson.

For a long moment, Ferguson appeared undecided. Then he looked at Dr. Hamlin. "I'm in trouble back home," he mumbled.

"Bad trouble. They're going to find out about it any day, if they haven't found out already. . . . I—I'd better stay."

WITH Diane grasping his arm, Carl started down the long corridor of packing cases toward the open lock door.

"I'm sorry it turned out this way," he said. "As soon as we ready the ship I'll go back and talk to them again. Maybe they'll change their minds."

Diane didn't answer. Instead she turned a last backward glance toward her father. It was a long glance. Too long. He was aware of her steel-tipped fingers digging into the sleeve of his jumper. He wheeled. Ten feet away, standing in a niche between the wooden cases, was a man. He wore a regulation space jumper and helmet, and was regarding them curiously over the barrel of a Westinghouse-chain-rifle. The man spoke:

"I'm interrupting something, I hope," he said evenly.

The man was Paul Spero.

Carl eyed the man warily. Diane choked out a heavy gasp.

"You should have killed me back in the ship like I suggested," Spero said smugly. "Now I'm going to have to kill you instead."

Carl flicked a quick look at Diane. "What about her? Are you planning to kill her too?"

The overhead light sparkled briefly across the rifle barrel as Spero snapped the weapon to his shoulder. Across the sights he said: "Diane will stay here with me. That's the way I planned it and that's how it'll be."

"I know I'm interfering with your plans," Carl said with mock-concern, "but I don't think she is. Not unless she wants to of course."

From behind the face plate, Spero flashed a double row of teeth. "Stop stalling for time, Keating. You had your chance on the ship, and you muffed it. Now it's my turn!"

Carl waited—waited while Spero's gloved hand tightened against the trigger-switch. The bolt coil snapped back. There was a dull click—nothing else. . . .

"Did you really think I'd be stupid enough to leave you alone with a casefull of live guns?" Keating said thinly.



Bewildered, Spero snapped the rifle down to chest level, fumbling awkwardly with the trigger assembly.

"It won't work," Carl said indulgently. "Before we left the ship I removed the anodes from every gun in the case. It's an old army trick, in case you haven't heard."

With Spero glaring at him, Carl allowed his arm to brush against his own needle gun. He didn't bother to draw.

"I think your friends are waiting for you," he said.

Back in the control room, Carl went through the motions of readying the ship for take-off. Back in the galley he could hear Diane sobbing softly.

Idly, he glanced out of the amber blister ports toward the big sphere-like structure that rose out of the sea of purple mud. It looked evil, and ominous-looking against the rain-sodden backdrop of the saroo forest.

Then from the edge of the tree line, moving shapes suddenly began to make an

appearance. He rubbed his eyes. There were hundreds—no, thousands of them. Slowly and curiously they poured out of the rain-soaked forest, deliberately converging on the open lock-doors of the huge, white building. Some were carrying sticks, some stones, some nothing. It was as if the mystic forces of evolution had chosen this exact moment to endow the chowls with an emotion hitherto lacking in their makeup. Call it hate; call it self-preservation; call it anything you like, it was something they hadn't had before, yet needed badly.

Quickly, he bit off the half-formed cry that rose to his throat. Diane was still back in the galley. He was glad she wasn't watching. Actually there was no need for her to know about it ever.

Silently he made a vow never to tell her—even as a few moments ago they'd both vowed to keep another secret: The secret that could spell the life or death of an entire planet.