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AMAZING STORIES

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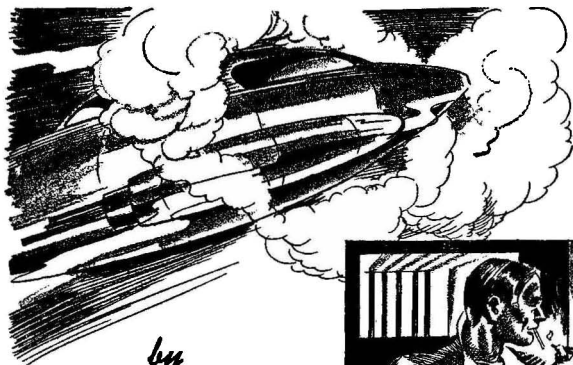
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STORIES
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Volume 16
Number 1



by

P. F. COSTELLO

MY SON is a worthless, yellow-bellied young scamp!" Bull Harker thundered. "And it's all my fault, y'hear? All my fault!"

I was sitting in Bull Harker's magnificently furnished main office as he strode up and down the thick carpet, his big body jarring the floor with each step. Looking at his powerful, dynamic features it was easy to understand how he had battered and fought his way to the supreme control of Interspace Transport Co. But it was difficult to understand how this man had raised a son whose only interest in life seemed to be the quantity of Venusian rum he could put away at one sitting, and how many space ships he could burn out every month.

Every one who worked for Interspace knew what a wild young hellion the boss' son was. It was also conceded that it was just a matter of time before the Old Man would lose his patience and do something drastic about it.

This seemed to be that time. While I was out on a scheduled run, young



REHEARSAL FOR DANGER

The idea was to make a man out of young Harker, but not with a stunt as real as this one was . . .



Young Harker lashed out with his fist and hell broke loose

Harker had filled a passenger transport with a mob of drunken kids and arced off into the void on a pleasure jaunt. When he brought the ship back, four of its six forward rockets were burned to a black crisp.

Now—the rumor was flitting about the Base—the Old Man was fed up. But definitely.

He had called me in and, as I sat in his office watching him stamp up and down the carpet, I had an uneasy hunch what he had in mind for me.

He stopped abruptly in front of me and glared at me as if I were the cause of his trouble.

"You've been with Interspace eighteen years," he said abruptly. "You've seen that son of mine turn into an insolent, disagreeable, spineless scamp in that time. Now what the hell's wrong?"

"You put your finger on it," I said grinning. Knowing Bull Harker for eighteen years I wasn't afraid of him. I think that's what he liked about me.

"What d'you mean?" he demanded.

"It's your fault," I said. "You admitted that a while ago. There's nothing wrong with that kid of yours. He's just restless and bored because he's never had any kind of a job to take care of. No responsibilities to put a weight on his head. He's wild and careless because he's never had to be otherwise. Now if he was to get kicked into the world and discover that it was a pretty tough place to get along in, he might settle down a bit."

Bull Harker strode to his desk and sat down, frowning. Finally a glimmer of a grin touched his mouth.

"I had the same idea," he said, "when I called you in here. It was my idea for you take the kid with you on your next trip to Base Eleven. Eleven, as I recall, is still pretty rough and unsettled. Out there things might hap-

pen," he paused and glanced at me meaningly before continuing, "things might happen that would make him appreciate the more serious side of life. I wouldn't have to tell you what those things might be."

I kept a perfect poker face.

"That's right," I said. "You can never tell what might happen to a young fellow on Eleven. Native trouble, poisoned food, attacks by space pirates. Any of them things might happen just like that."

"I see we understand each other," Bull Harker said gruffly. "I've tried everything else with that kid, but maybe this'll work. If he gets scared badly enough it might make him fight. That's what I'm hoping for."

"I can promise you," I said, getting to my feet, "that all and several kinds of hell will break loose on Eleven when we get there."

"I don't want him hurt, you understand?" Bull Harker snapped quickly. "I'm holding you responsible for that, Bill. But give him a thorough going over. Maybe there's a real man hiding behind that insolent, drunken face of his."

I had my doubts about that, but I didn't say so.

"We'll see," I said. "We surely will see."

ABOUT a week later I was standing with Bull Harker next to the Interspace mooring tower. The sleek length of my space cruiser was resting in the auxiliary rocket tube and I was all set for the trip to Eleven.

There was only one thing missing. And that was Bull Harker's son, Danny. He was scheduled as my assistant and he should have arrived at the mooring tower long before this, but there was not a trace of him.

"I'll break him in two, myself," Bull

Harker roared for the dozenth time. "I told him to be here in time. Does he think I'm running a suburban commuter service? Doesn't he know that five ships are waiting to use that auxiliary?"

"If he does," I said, "it isn't bothering him much."

For the next ten minutes Bull Harker panthered back and forth before me in a sulphurous silence. Then came an interruption. An interruption that skyrocketed the Old Man's blood pressure to the boiling point.

Through the main gate roared a glistening, bullet-like land car, headed straight for us. It was one of the super-powerful types powered with U-235. They were too fast almost for anything but the clearest stretches, but this one was flashing at us at about two hundred miles an hour, straight across the crowded mooring field. It was traveling too fast for me to recognize the occupants, but I knew the car belonged to Danny Harker.

About fifty feet from us the low slung car slewed with a protesting scream and slid to a shuddering stop not four feet from the ramp the Old Man and I were standing on.

In the front seat of the car was Danny Harker, a slim, sullen looking young fellow with light blonde hair, and bloodshot blue eyes. Alongside him was a gorgeous redhead, her head lolling against his shoulder. In the back seat were two more girls, asleep.

All of them reeked of Venusian rum, and plenty of it.

"You crazy fool!" Bull Harker grated. "Where have you been? And who are these girls?"

Danny Harker looked at the girls and shrugged.

"I don't know," he muttered. "Met 'em somewhere last night, I guess. All got drunk. Farewell party for promi-

nent young no-good."

Bull Harker opened his mouth, but I tapped him on the arm and shook my head. It wouldn't do any good to read the riot act to the young kid now. In his condition it would only make him more resentful.

"Come on, Danny," I said quietly. "Let's get started."

He looked up at me sourly, then climbed out of his car.

"Okay, wet nurse," he grumbled.

We said goodbye briefly and climbed into my ship. The kid was sullenly silent, but when I cut in the power and we zoomed up and out of the tube, he gasped and turned slightly green. I thought he would be sick, but by the time we whizzed out of Earth's atmosphere into the void, some color was seeping back into his face. I set the controls for Eleven, threw a careless glance at the visa-screen to check the course, then relaxed against the back of my pilot's chair.

"We're going to have a great time on Eleven," I said, with what I hoped was a hearty ring in my voice.

The kid looked at me sourly, then closed his eyes and leaned his head against the *duralloy* wall of the control room.

"Isn't that just ducky," he said sarcastically.

Then he went to sleep.

AS WE rocketed on through the blackness I did a little speculating on my somewhat disagreeable charge. In spite of his sullenness and rotten manners, I felt that he couldn't be all bad. No son of Bull Harker could be. But the kid had led a pampered, lazy existence, and you could hardly blame him for developing into a spoiled, soft brat.

I decided grimly there would be nothing soft or easy about his stay with me

on Eleven. As a rule I'm against the rough treatment generally handed to greenhorns, but this was a case where I would have no scruples.

I was so busy with my thoughts that I hadn't kept an eye on the screen before him. Now, when I glanced at it perfunctorily, I saw that a small black dot had appeared in the right top corner.

Straightening up I watched the dot interestedly. It grew in size until finally I could see the miniature outlines of a dead black space ship, flashing along behind me. It was fitted with atomic cannons and this bothered me. Passenger and freight ships were not usually armed, and I couldn't see any military insignia on the ship behind me to account for the heavy arms it carried.

The strange ship following me suddenly disappeared from the front screen. I shot a worried glance at the side screen and saw that it had appeared there. Now it was coming up on my side, flanking me with its superior speed.

I didn't like it at all.

I tried more speed, but it didn't help. The black ship kept up, even pulled a little ahead of me. It was only about eighteen thousand miles from me now, and any ship that creeps up *that* close to another in the limitless expanses of the void does it with a reason.

What reason? I asked myself.

I soon found out. From the fore atomic cannon of the black ship a puff of smoke appeared, and simultaneously an orange bolt of scorching flame streaked across the front of my ship.

So that was their game! Obviously the black ship was one of the fast disappearing freebooters that preyed on shipping in the void. The blast from the cannon had been a signal for me to cut my speed to 460/460 which was the speed established by the Space Fed-

eration for inter-locking in the void.* That meant they intended to board us.

I shook the kid roughly, until he blinked his eyes and straightened in his chair.

"What's the big idea?" he grumbled.

"Maybe trouble," I said briefly. Even then I was able to appreciate something of the irony of the situation. Bull Harker had instructed me to create some phony trouble for the kid, and here was the real thing, dangerous and on the level.

The kid glanced up at the side screen, studied the black ship carelessly.

"What's up?" he asked yawning.

"We're going to be boarded," I answered tersely. I had already cut my speed to 460/460. There was nothing else I could do. "We aren't carrying anything valuable," I went on, "so I can't figure out why we're being stopped. Maybe they'll let us go after a search."

"And maybe not," the kid said carelessly. He didn't seem to be scared, just vaguely interested in what was going on. It was too soon though to know how he'd react when things got tough.

He leaned back in his seat then and closed his eyes.

"Don't forget to wake me up when they get here," he murmured drowsily. "I'm kind of interested in meeting a real live pirate."

Then, to my complete surprise, he dozed off again.

"I'LL wake you," I muttered grimly. I strode into the body of the ship

* This means simply that a set speed of 460 miles per minute was indicated for direct inter-ship contact in space; each ship cutting down to exactly that speed while traveling in a parallel direction, and then cutting in toward each other until contact was established. The signal "460/460" was used to indicate a wish to board a vessel in space.—Ed.

and prepared the hatchway for the locking of the approaching ship. It had disappeared from the screen altogether so I knew it was practically alongside now.

In about another couple of minutes I heard a metallic *bang!* Then a shuddering jar traveled the length of my ship and I knew we were locked to the side of the black raider.

Another five minutes passed while I knew air was being pumped into the hermetically sealed compartment created by the locked hatchways of the two ships.

Then I heard a metal clamp release, a door open. Then a heavy fist was pounding imperiously on the hatchway door of my ship.

I opened the door and three men with drawn electric guns in their fists shoved me aside and stalked into the ship.

They were all hard looking specimens of the space marauder type. One of them covered me with his gun while the other two made a swift search of the ship. The one with the drop on me was tall and lean with a viciously hooked nose.

"We aren't carrying cargo," I said quietly. "In fact there's nothing on board of any value."

"Shut up!" Hook Nose snapped.

The two other bandits returned then, ushering young Danny Harker before them. He still looked sleepy and uninterested in what was going on.

"It's him, all right," Hook Nose said. "Take him to the chief."

One of the men behind the kid nudged him with his gun.

"Get movin'!" he snapped. "Into the other ship."

The kid looked at him with sleepy irritation.

"Supposing I don't?" he asked.

The man behind him hesitated for

an instant. Then his mouth hardened.

"If you don't you'll feel something very, very hot right between your shoulders."

"You wouldn't shoot me," the kid said, "but I'll go along anyway. Just to see how far you simpletons are going to carry this thing."

He disappeared through the connecting hatchways followed by the two men. Hook Nose turned to me, an ugly smile on his face.

"So there's nothing of value on board, eh?" he jeered. "Suppose Bull Harker's son ain't pretty valuable cargo, eh?"

It hit me then. Somehow this band must have learned that Danny Harker was riding with me to Eleven. Their object was of course to shake down his dad for everything they could.

"What happens to me?" I asked Hook Nose bluntly.

He shrugged.

"Depends on the chief."

I noticed that his thick index finger was curved lovingly about the trigger of the electric gun in his hand. There was no doubt in my mind as to my fate if Hook Nose had anything to say about it.

But in a few minutes one of Hook Nose's comrades stepped through the hatchway.

"Chief says to bring this fellow along," he said, in an unpleasant nasal voice.

Hook Nose relaxed the pressure of his finger on the trigger disgustedly. His close set, glittering eyes gleamed with frustration.

Obedying a motion from the thug in the hatchway I followed him into the black raider, Hook Nose trailing close behind me.

AS I was led down a corridor of the big space craft I noticed a half-

dozen more bandits, all as tough and ruthless looking as the first three I had encountered. I've knocked about the tough spots of the universe most of my life and it takes more than a unpleasant mug to worry me. But I was thinking about the kid. With his environment and friends, such as they were, I knew all of this would be strange and terrifying to him. Or so I thought.

The bandit ahead of me stopped at a door and knocked. I heard a gruff shout from within the room. Hook Nose prodded me forward as his comrade jerked open the door and stepped back. I stepped through the door, and the first thing I saw was the kid. He was lounging in a comfortable chair, in the act of politely covering his mouth with his hands to hide a sleepy yawn.

There was another person in the room. A tall, heavily set man with a heavy black beard and unwinking cold blue eyes. His face was flabby with fat, but not enough to cover the jutting angle of his massive jaw. Hair like stiff bristles, black and short, covered his round head. There was something about him, something of complete ruthlessness that raised the hackles at the back of my neck.

Without taking his eyes from mine he seated himself carefully behind a metal desk, one of the few items of furniture in the sparsely furnished room.

"You look like you been around," he said finally. His voice was husky, almost soft, but there was a faint rasp to it.

"Thanks for the compliment," I said drily. "Now what goes here?"

He jerked a thumb at Danny Harker, who was still lounging wearily in the chair, paying little attention to what was going on.

"He's young Harker," the Chief said. "His old man will part with a lot to

get him back. And we're goin' to see that he does."

I watched and listened carefully as the man spoke. There was something about him that teased my memory.

He noticed my scrutiny and smiled without humor.

"You don't know me," he said. "But maybe my name is familiar to you. The Federation Police calls me the Angel."

The name *was* familiar. While not the biggest of the remaining space buccaneers, the Angel was considered tops in ruthless, merciless cruelty and callousness. A cold sweat beaded my palms as the realization of our plight struck home.

The Angel grinned wolfishly and stood up.

"You know you're not playing with a minnow," he said in his strangely soft voice. "You're doing business with a shark. And don't let me have to warn either of you twice that my word is law on board this ship and at my base. I'd as soon burn a man down as blow my nose."

There was a tense silence in the room for an instant and then the kid—young Danny Harker—laughed. An amused, indifferent chuckle that brought a quick flush of rage to the Angel's face.

"My, my, but aren't you the blood-thirsty fellow," the kid said sarcastically.

THE Angel's fists clenched into meaty mallets as he stepped around the desk and strode to the chair the kid was lounging in.

"You're a wise guy, are you?" he growled, and the rasp in his voice was a file on steel.

The kid surveyed him insolently.

"Wise enough," he said casually.

The Angel's face worked spasmodically. His big fists clenched until the knuckles whitened.

"Get up!" he barked.

The kid stood up nonchalantly. There was no trace of fear or anxiety in his face. His eyes mocked the Angel. With his hands stuck negligently in his pockets, a funny grin on his lips, he seemed to be defying him to do his worst.

The Angel grabbed the kid's shirt, jerking him close to him. His right fist drew back like a sledge:

"Go ahead," the kid said softly. He still hadn't taken his hands from his pockets. "Hit me. And when you do I can promise you that you'll regret it more than anything you've ever regretted in your life."

It sounded absolutely incredible coming from that slim, drunken playboy. But he meant it. There was no doubting the sincerity in his voice or the flashes of angry color in his pale cheek.

The Angel paused uncertainly.

"Go ahead," the kid prompted.

The Angel dropped his fist and shoved the kid away from him. There was a puzzled expression on his face as he wheeled and strode back to his desk. As if he had seen, for the first time in his life, something he couldn't quite understand.

"Get out! Both of you," he said, his voice again soft. "My men will take care of you till we reach the base."

His words were directed at both of us, but his cold eyes were staring straight at the kid. I couldn't tell definitely, but I thought I saw an uneasy uncertainty in them.

When we had left his quarters, Hook Nose was waiting to take us to a small, practically unfurnished room with a barred door. When this had slammed behind us, he leered at us and said.

"I'm kind of hoping you'll give me a chance to use this little toy."

He shoved his electric gun through

the bars and flexed his trigger finger suggestively. What happened then was too fast for my eyes to follow.

For the kid, with a wide grin on his face, leaped across the room and ripped the electric gun out of Hook Nose's hand. Turning it around he shoved the muzzle within an inch of the amazed and terrified bandit's head.

"Open up!" he said briskly.

I felt my nerves squirming like a basket of snakes.

If Hook Nose let out a yell the kid's daring game would be over. But Hook Nose was too scared to think of that. His eyes were rolling wildly as he jerked open the door of the cell and cowered back as the kid sauntered out.

"Simple, isn't it?" the kid asked nonchalantly.

I FOLLOWED him out, flashing a look in both directions. Fortunately the corridor was clear. The kid's audacity had left me stunned. I have seen desperate men in all the crummy nooks of the universe, but there were few who possessed the calm resourcefulness Danny Harker had shown in the pinch.

As far as nerves were concerned, he didn't have any. He stood there in the corridor twirling the gun idly in his hands, a sardonic grin on his face.

"Well?" he asked, amusement in his voice. "What next?"

What might have happened next was anybody's guess, had not a sudden interruption occurred in the form of the Angel and two of his men appearing abruptly around the angle of the corridor.

They took in the scene instantly, and in a tenth of a second their hands were streaking for their gun belts.

But the kid turned and faced them, his gun resting loosely in his hand. He didn't have them covered for his hand

was hanging at his side carelessly.

"Go ahead and shoot," he grinned. "I dare you. In fact, I'll give the first man with enough guts to draw his gun, my wallet with everything in it."

The silence in the narrow corridor was terrible. The tension was something tangible, something you could actually feel.

The Angel's cold eyes locked with the kid's for fully ten seconds, then his hand slowly withdrew from the holster at his side. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in a snarl, but there was fear in his eyes.

The men at his side followed his lead. Their hands slipped away from their belts and dropped nervously to their sides.

"I ain't committing suicide," one of them muttered.

I suddenly found it difficult to breathe. The sight of the slim kid daring three ruthless pirates to draw their guns left me dumbfounded.

He actually looked disappointed. I decided then that the kid was a killer, as cold as the void itself, infinitely more dangerous than the Angel or any of his murderers.

"I hoped for a little fun," he said, still smiling. "I was getting ready to enjoy myself. But if none of you care to oblige me, I'll just have to wait for another opportunity."

With a contemptuous gesture he tossed the electric gun at the Angel's feet, turned—and strolled back into the cell!

My knees went suddenly hollow. I was too stunned to move. So was the Angel and his men. For perhaps five seconds the kid's terrifying effrontery held us stupidly motionless. Then, coming to life, the Angel drew his gun and pointed it at me.

"Get back into the cell," he said weakly. His voice was trembling

slightly, and beads of sweat were popping out on his brow.

I was still too dazed to think clearly. Like a sleep walker I stumbled into the cell, and I didn't even hear the door bang behind me. The kid was lying on the narrow cot gazing up at me with cool nonchalance. He actually looked as if he had been amused by the entire episode.

"You crazy young fool!" I managed to gasp weakly. "What did you do that for?"

He shrugged his slim shoulders and yawned.

"No sense spoiling their fun," he said lightly. "I'll have the last laugh anyway, so they may as well enjoy themselves now."

His confidence in himself was amazing. But from what I had seen it wasn't misplaced.

"Of course," I said drily, "you've got it all figured out to make a last-minute escape. All the details worked out and everything."

"I believe I could make an escape," he said slowly, as if the idea had just occurred to him. "But," he grinned again, "I haven't got all the details figured out."

I didn't say anything more. To tell the truth I didn't have the nerve to try and tell this amazing kid anything. It was obvious, terribly obvious to me, that he had been woefully misjudged all of his life. He had been set down as a namby-pamby young punk, when actually he was one of the most potentially dangerous men I had ever seen.

FOR the rest of the trip to the Angel's hidden base the kid slept like an innocent baby. And I stewed. I couldn't even begin to see a way out of the hellish situation. For I knew that the kid and myself would never be allowed to

live after the ransom was collected. We would be eliminated as soon as the money tickled the Angel's greedy paw. For dead men make somewhat unreliable witnesses. The Angel knew that.

I knew all this and I couldn't close my eyes for worrying about it. But it didn't bother the kid. He slept straight through the trip until Hook Nose and three of his cute chums opened our cell door and ordered us out. I knew we had moored for I felt the shock of the deceleration rockets, but *where* we were was something I wouldn't even guess about.

The kid climbed to his feet and stretched. Then he sauntered out of the cell, bestowing a contemptuous glance at Hook Nose as he passed him.

We were led out of the black ship into cold sunshine. Climbing down the hatchway ladder I saw that the ship was moored in a fenced stockade against which green, luxuriant jungle foliage pressed hungrily.

Maybe we were on Venus. But the atmosphere seemed light for Venus. Also it was too cold. I noticed then that my two-passenger had made the trip with us, stuck to the black raider like a barnacle to the side of a liner.

The Angel was on the ground waiting for us. A gun was clenched, nervously I thought, in his big right hand. It was not trained on me, but on the kid. It was apparent that the Angel recognized the more dangerous of his captives.

"I want no funny business," he purred. "If you make any attempt to escape, you'll be shot down like dogs."

"It won't be just an attempt," the kid said lazily.

The Angel's dark face purpled with anger. But there was a frightened expression mingled with the rage. He looked like an angry man who was afraid of the object of his anger.

"I'm warning you," he said thickly. "Don't start anything."

"I'm warning you," the kid said softly, "not to try and stop anything I start."

It was crazy and wild, but there *was* a convincing chill to the way he spoke and looked at the Angel. Several of the bandits had guns in their hands trained on the kid. The Angel had his own gun out and yet—he backed uncertainly from the slim, youthful-looking kid who was slouching lazily with both hands jammed in his pockets.

"Get to your cells," the Angel said harshly, breathing hard. "Follow my men and—*and* don't start nothing!"

Two of his men motioned us forward with their guns, but the kid remained motionless, smiling at the Angel.

"Don't worry," he said softly. "I won't start anything."

He started after the Angel's men, but stopped and glanced back, smiling easily.

"I'll finish it!"

Then, with me trailing along bewilderedly at his side, he sauntered along behind the two bandits to a thick, squat wooden hut that was equipped with barred windows and a heavy windowless door.

INSIDE was nothing but two hard cots and two chairs. When the door slammed behind us, imprisoning us as tightly as rats in a trap, the kid broke out chuckling.

"Did you see his face?" he chortled. "He didn't know what to do or say. I tell you I haven't had so much fun in years."

"I wish I had your sense of humor," I said glumly. "How in Hades are we going to get out of here?"

"You got me here," the kid said complacently. "We'll just have to wait and see what's next on the program."

We didn't have long to wait.

That night two of the Angel's men ordered us from our cell and led us to another building of the same construction, but larger and without the barred doors and windows.

It turned out to be the Angel's office. He was waiting for us as we entered, blinking a little at the glaring illumination.

"We are ready to inform Mr. Har-ker," he said in his silky voice, "of the sad plight of his son. I have written the communication. All it requires is the signature of the young Mr. Har-ker."

My eyes flicked to his desk. There was an unsigned letter resting prominently on its surface. Glancing about I saw that several of the Angel's little helpmates were lounging against the wall, hands conveniently near their guns. But in spite of the apparently cut-and-dried order of things; in spite of the fact that we were outnumbered and unarmed, there was a definite tense nervousness on the faces of the men watching us.

I understood their feelings. Handling a man such as the kid had proved himself was no light matter. I wouldn't have cared particularly to be in their shoes.

As the Angel finished his little speech, the kid flicked a cool gaze about the room.

"And if I don't sign?" the kid asked insolently.

"We have ways of persuasion," the Angel purred. "They are not pleasant, but they are highly effective."

This seemed to amuse the kid. A mocking grin touched the corners of his mouth.

"How melodramatic," he said lightly.

The Angel pointed to the letter and the electrostylus lying next to it.

"Are you going to sign?" he asked,

the rasp in his soft voice grating on our ears.

Young Danny Harker, the punk out of whom I was supposed to make a man, smiled, folded his arms carefully and said,

"You can go to hell!"

THERE was a stunned silence in the room, broken only by the Angel's hoarse breathing.

"All right," he grated. "You've asked for it."

Without taking his eyes from the kid he motioned to two of his men.

"Get the necessary persuaders."

The two men left the room hurriedly. The kid sat down and yawned, leaning back in the chair.

I have never seen such magnificent indifference. Lounging there you'd think he was waiting for a waiter to bring him a cold drink before he dozed off for a little nap.

It got on the Angel's nerves. Badly.

He panthered back and forth in front of the kid, shooting vicious glances at him. His big fists were clenched tightly, his flabby face was twitching nervously.

"Damn you!" he suddenly roared. "Don't sit there laughing at me. You won't be laughing in a few minutes. You're scared to the core, but you're trying not to show it. Damn it! You must be scared!"

"Must I?" the kid asked innocently. "I'd like to oblige but somehow I just can't do it. Maybe if you'd try making faces at me I might react a bit more satisfyingly."

The Angel stopped in front of him, eyes glittering coldly.

"I've handled some cool customers in my day," he said softly, "but nothing like you. These men in the room I used to think were dangerous. But compared to you they're a lot of school

girls playing with posies. You'd cut my throat and be telling your friend a joke over your shoulder at the same time.' "

"No, I wouldn't do that," the kid said very seriously. "When I cut your throat I promise you that I'll devote my complete attention to the task. Nothing could distract my mind from anything so pleasant."

The Angel snarled something unintelligible, but his hand crept furtively to his neck and massaged it carefully, as if relieved to find it still intact.

The two pirates returned then, each carrying a bucket in his hand. One bucket was filled with water to the rim. The other was filled with glowing hot coals.

They set them down close to the kid and stepped back.

"Before we make you wish you were never born," the Angel said harshly, "are you going to sign?"

With the arrival of the implements of torture, the Angel quickly resumed his confident, swaggering manner. For it was his ferocious cruelty that had made his reputation, given him his power and leadership.

The kid leaned forward.

"I told you once, Angel," he said, "where you could go."

The Angel's face twisted brutally. He stepped forward, and his men followed him, forming a tight semi-circle about the kid.

The kid was grinning again, a glint of puckish humor glinting in his eyes.

"I said," he repeated slowly, "that you could go—to—"

He bent quickly, jammed his hands wrist deep into the bucket of cold water. Then, before the startled Angel could move, he scooped a double handful of live coals and flung them into the circle of faces ringing him in.

"Hell!" he completed his sentence.

THE circle about him broke as the Angel and his men scrambled frantically away from the shower of hot coals. With a powerful boot the kid kicked the red hot bucket into their midst. The angrily blazing coals cascaded in a fiery stream about them, singeing, searing, blinding.

Two men leaped for the kid, but I stepped in and swung twice. A right and a left with every ounce of my weight behind them. They went down, sprawling queerly.

The kid leaped forward and kicked the scattered coals into the faces of the Angel's disorganized crew. A few hit their mark, but that was enough.

The Angel ducked out the door, and his men, leaderless and terrified, scuttled after him. I jumped to the door, slammed it and bolted it.

The kid was laughing uproariously when I turned from the door.

"Did you see their faces," he gasped between chuckles. "Never so surprised in all their lives!"

"Cut that," I snapped. "We've got to figure a way to take advantage of our break. Got any ideas?"

I knew that the Angel and his men would surround the house, waiting for us to make a break. They wouldn't have to be in any hurry to get us. They could afford to wait. We couldn't.

The kid pointed to a lead receptacle beside the desk.

"Looks like electron grenades might be kept there," he said indifferently. "A couple of those would discourage everybody."

"They'd blow us to hell, too," I said. Electron grenades had been outlawed on Earth because their destructive power and their instability were both practically limitless. You could never tell when a slight jar was going to set the things off. And when they went off the blast was like nothing you could

imagine.

The kid however had pried the lock on the leaden receptacle, disregarding my warning. My legs suddenly went hollow as his hands emerged from the box holding a light silver ball, about two inches in diameter and smooth as an egg.

"Take it easy," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. I was frankly scared as hell. Why the Angel kept one of those pills of danger around, I couldn't guess. Unless it was to stifle a possible mutiny. He'd stifle himself in setting an electron grenade into action, but maybe he didn't care. I did though.

"Handle that thing carefully," I warned the kid. "Put it back and forget about it. We want to leave here in one piece."

The kid grinned at me. He rolled the grenade around in his hand like an apple.

"Watch it!" I shouted, half hysterically. Anyone who has seen the effects of an electron grenade has a more than healthy respect for them.

But the kid strolled to the door, still smiling. With one hand he unbolted it and swung it open. Then he stepped through the door into the illuminated stockade.

I jumped after him, expecting a sizzling inferno of electric pellets to burn into him, but nothing like that happened.

For the Angel and his men, grouped in front of the house had seen the electron grenade in the kid's hand. They were backing fearfully away from him, their guns hanging limply in their nerveless fingers.

"D—don't!" the Angel pleaded hoarsely. "Y—you'll blow us all to atoms."

THE kid followed them slowly, juggling the grenade carelessly in his

hand.

"I've never seen one of these go off," he said casually. "It might be worth watching."

"No, no," the Angel screamed, saliva frothing his lips.

The kid tossed the grenade into the air and caught it in his palm as it dropped. My heart had absolutely stopped beating. It often took less than that to set one of those unpredictable balls of condensed fury into violent action.

I spotted my two-passenger ship then, resting in a small tube. I headed for it, the kid following me leisurely.

He continued to toss the grenade from one hand to another as if it were a rubber ball, and I expected to be blown into oblivion any instant. Sweat was pouring from my face and my knees were watery as I staggered on to the expulsion tube.

"We seem to be leaving," the kid said insolently to the huddled group of pirates. "Any objections? Or is the little show all over?"

"For God's sake," the Angel gasped, his face pallid with fear. "Get out of here. I—I made a mistake in bothering an inhuman machine like you. Just leave me alone. Please!"

His voice almost cracked on the last word.

I released the valve on the hatch door of my ship and swung it open. Clambering in, I set the take-off rocket and the course adjuster. Flicking on the asteroid screen I was ready to blast off. But the kid was still standing in the hatchway, surveying the stockade and pirates moodily.

"Come on!" I snapped. "We haven't got a second to spare. These scum will blast after us the minute we leave."

The kid looked at me and grinned mirthlessly.

"You can relax, Grandpaw," he said

sarcastically. "I'm on to the little game. I have been all along. Did you think you actually had me fooled?"

"Fooled?" I shouted. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I heard you and Dad plan the whole thing," he said triumphantly. "I was right outside the office door listening when Dad and you cooked up this scheme to scare the pants off me. But it didn't work, Mr. Smart Guy."

I was suddenly dizzy. My knees almost buckled as the kid's words crashed into my brain. Having heard the conversation between Bull Harker and myself, he had believed this entire business was a fake staged for his benefit. Naturally he hadn't been scared. No wonder that he had behaved like a hero. My mind flashed to his cool amusement, his dauntless daring, his mocking disregard of the Angel's threat. Those things had been his natural reaction to a situation that he believed phony.

He had just been playing a game, secure in his knowledge that nothing serious was going to happen to him.

I STARED at him incredulously.

"So," I managed to gasp weakly, "you think this is a frame-up?"

"Of course," he grinned. "I had a hard job to keep from laughing in your face. You tried so hard to convince me that you were really worried that it was pathetic. From start to finish the whole thing was obvious. Even if I hadn't been tipped off I would have caught on. For one thing this phony electron grenade was a dead giveaway. No one in his right mind would leave one of these lying around. So I knew it was just another one of the props you had planted to frighten the little boy."

He tossed it carelessly from one hand to the other as he spoke.

"You fool!" I stormed. "Watch

what you're doing. Do you want to be blasted into bits?"

He smiled at my wrath.

"Still carrying on the act, eh?" he said cynically. "Well maybe this will convince you that I'm not worried about a phony grenade."

He turned and tossed the grenade high in the air.

The Angel and his men broke, screaming madly, and I jerked the kid into the ship with a brutal heave and slammed the door shut.

I was leaping for the control lever when a mighty roar broke like thunder in my ears, and the ship shuddered under a sledge hammer blast. For a second I was too stunned to crawl to my feet.

But I was able to stick one hand up and shove the rocket lever forward. A sputtering crackle sounded behind and, with a giddy rush, the ship rocketed upward into the void.

When I had righted its zooming course and set the controls I turned back to the kid.

He was still lying on the floor, but his eyes were open and there was an expression on his face unlike anything I have ever seen.

"It—it was a real grenade," he said weakly.

I nodded grimly. If dead men could testify, the Angel and his men would corroborate that.

"Then," the words trembled on his lips, "the whole thing—kidnaping and all—was on the level. Not a fake?"

I nodded again.

I thought surely he would pass out. His face turned an absolute green as his thoughts flashed backward. It must have been a bad moment for him. But at the core there was good stuff in the kid.

"I've been a hopeless fool," he said shuddering.

"When you get around to admitting it," I said, "there's hope for improvement."

The kid was doing a lot of silent thinking as I set the course for Earth. As we arced through the limitless black expanses of space he said wistfully:

"If I *hadn't* thought it was all a fake, if I really had been a hero, Dad would be pretty proud of me, wouldn't he?"

"You bet," I said. I was silent for an instant. Then: "We might forget that you overheard a certain conversa-

tion. We'll just both forget that you thought it was all a fake."

The kid was silent for a long moment. Then he said:

"No I can't do it. I'm no hero and it would be cheap to try and pretend I was. We'll tell the truth when we get back."

I drew a relieved breath. I had been afraid he might have fallen for my bait. He was right. He wasn't a hero. But I'll fight any man who says he hasn't got the makings of one.