

# PLANET STORIES



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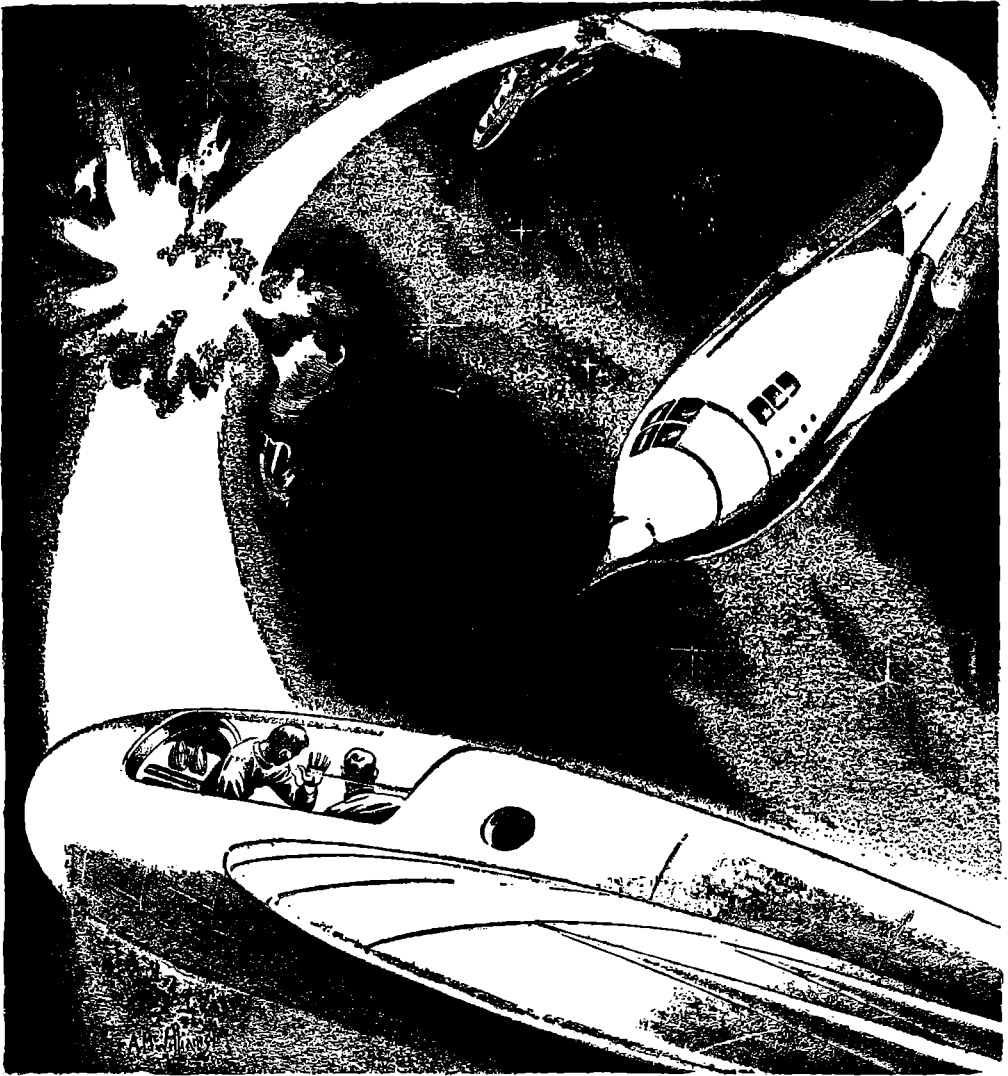
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*Like a vengeful comet, she sought us out.*

# **RUNAWAY**

**By ALFRED COPPEL, JR.**

**Ripped by an asteroid stray, the space-ship drifted helplessly . . . until suddenly, across the shuddering deeps, a strange voice called to her.**

**I** RECALL THAT WHEN I WAS just a boy hanging around the old Mojave space yards, there was an old timer there who used to sing an old song. He learned it from his father and he from his grandfather who used to prospect for gold in the Death Valley country.

*Oh, my darling, oh my darling,  
Oh, my darling Clementine,  
You are lost and gone forever,  
Dreadful sorry, Clementine! . . .*

The old timer was really ancient when I knew him, because he could remember

the war with the Federal States that used to be called Germany and Japan. There was a strangeness about him, or so it seems to me now. Listening to him sing those pioneer ballads caught at the imagination and woke dreams. Of course, I was young then, and impressionable. But his tales were my gospel. There were some among the yard hands who claimed he was a survivor of the first crew back from Luna, but that was probably loose talk. In those days every yard had its "Selenite man."

It was from him, though, that I heard my first spaceman's yarns. Yarns about the ships that were built when Venus and Mars were the outposts of the system . . . the frontier.

He used to tell of the strange ways in which those old ships took on personality . . . character, if you like . . . in the eyes of the men who crewed them. When he spoke I could almost feel the thrill of those punishing vertical takeoffs, and I could smell the stink of gasoline and feel the icy nimbus of liquid oxygen. I could feel too the throbbing of the first crotchety atomics under my feet and the quivering sense of aliveness it gave . . .

Somehow, I don't believe the old man was embroidering fantasies for me. I think even then he knew.

I grew older and left Mojave for a dozen berths on as many ships, but I never forgot the old timer and his stories. And it's odd that the ship that proved his claims to me should bear the name he used to sing in that pioneer ballad of his. My first command . . . the R. S. Clementine.

**I** KNOW that you'll not believe what I'm going to say about that ship. The Spatial Academy had filled you with book-learning and covered you with gold braid. But it's killed your imagination. Academies have a way of doing that. To you this will be an old spaceman's shaggy dog story. But no matter. I know what I know. I was there when Clem was born, and I watched her as she went home.

Fortunately, atomic drives are outdated now. The new warships are the regular thing. Atomics didn't last long, and in

a way it's a good thing. At least no crew will ever have to go through what mine went through, and no ship turn into a fey thing like Clem did.

The strange thing about it is that I cared for that ship. I cared for her from the first moment I saw her lying somnolently among the rusting hulks in the graveyard near Canalopolis.

Remember, this was a long time ago. Even then, the old timer of the Mojave yards must have been fifteen years dead and gone. Canalopolis was a desert outpost on the edge of Syrtis Major cowering under the lash of the everlasting sandstorms, but just then it was a boomtown.

A lot of the vital force had drained away from the urge to colonize when Mars and Venus had turned out to be so inhospitable. That's why there were old ships and to spare in the Canalopolis yards. It looked as though the outward flood of humanity had reached its limit. The Asteroid Belt made deep space too dangerous to reach for mere colonization. A catalyst was needed.

It was supplied when Carvel's exploratory crew reached Europa and found gold.

Gold! In the same way that the cry from Sutter's Mill had brought a flood of new life out to the wilderness that was California centuries back, so Carvel's news brought men out from Terra to seek their fortunes in the darkness of deep space . . . on that tiny, unknown world-let spinning close to the bosom of mighty Jupiter.

The ink on my Master's ticket was barely dry when I jumped the Centurion as she dropped gravas at Canalopolis. I was set for a ship of my own. With a few carefully hoarded dollars in my overalls and a lot of brass I figured that I could get me a command. A few trips through the Belt would put me in velvet. Of course, I new it was dangerous and uncharted, but the canal city was full of grizzled sourdoughs and eager youngsters all willing to pay plenty for transport to Europa. I figured I couldn't miss .

That's where the R. S. Clementine came in. I bought her with a few dollars cash and a whole lot of credit. During those hectic days a man with a space pilot's lic-

ense and a Master's rating could just about write his own ticket.

I signed a note for fifty thousand and took possession of the ship. The fueling took five thousand . . . inerted plutonium came high on Mars, and the victualling took another two thousand. It didn't bother me. Ink and paper were cheap enough.

Then I spent two days rounding up a crew on a share and share alike basis, and another day lining up fifty passengers at two thousand a head. I was in business.

My Second Officer was a grizzled old rum-dum called Swanson. He was a laconic old soul who loved spacing only a jot better than he loved Martian alky. But he was a sharp man for the firing consoles; I never knew a better one.

I was lucky to get a physicist, too, though it turned out unlucky for him. He was a green youngster just out of Cal Tech who fell prey to the gold fever and found himself stranded on Mars a few million miles from the lode. I talked him into signing on for a minimum of three trips on the promise that his share of the take would make him a fine grub-stake out on Europa. When I think of it now, I feel as though I personally killed him. He didn't want to help crew Clem, but he was on the spot and I talked him into it. Green as grass he was. But he had brains. Brains for working atomics . . . nothing else. Holcomb, his name was. I'll never forget it.

The R. S. Clementine . . . it was shortened to Clem even before takeoff . . . was an atomic multiple pulse three hundred footer. The pile that drove her was housed in a long sheathed tube shaft that ran from just aft of the Control deck to the nozzles along her longitudinal axis. It was an inefficient system, but to me it looked like pure beauty. After all, she was my first command.

At 22/30 on 2/13/49 Mars date, we blasted off for Europa with fifty passengers, nine crewmen and a hold full of mining equipment. In that three hundred foot hull we were like sardines packed in a can. Sure, it was profiteering, but have you ever seen prosperity without it?

3—Planet—Spring

THE trip out was almost too uneventful. We found a clear channel through the Belt and came through without a change of course. In those days no one had ever heard of deflectors, and a free passage through the Belt was a one in a thousand chance. Yet, being young and a bit cocky, I was willing to attribute it to my own spacemanship. I imagined that the trip back would be even easier.

The greeting we got at Europa didn't do much to teach me humility, either. Not many ships were getting through, and those miners wined and dined us in true frontier style.

It took six hours to unload our passengers and their gear, and another hour to round up a payload for the hop back to Mars. It was mostly ore and mail, but we did get two passengers.

We refueled out on the airless, rocky plain that served Europa as a space yard. Jupiter seemed to fill the sky. Deep space was a new experience to us and never had we grounded on a planet or moon so near to so large a primary. There were several cases of vertigo caused by the crazy feeling that we were upside down when we looked up at that hellishly big orb in the sky. That was one of the everpresent dangers on Europa. Enough of it and you found your mind going.

One passenger was a miner that cracked like that. The other was an attendant from the Triplanetary Medical Mission that had established a small base on the moonlet. In other words, his keeper.

The psycho came aboard in a straight-jacket and a blank bewildered look twisted his face as he climbed woodenly into the ventral valve. The attendant didn't look a great deal saner. Still, I was supremely confident, and my passenger's afflictions didn't worry me at all.

I was busily counting my imaginary profits as soon as we blasted free. To say that I was pleased with myself would be an understatement. Clem sought the sky like the proverbial homesick angel, her atomics throbbing beautifully under the care of Holcomb and his tube gang. Swanson and I set her into a hyperbolic trajectory with a couple of flourishes of the graphites and Jupiter moved into the

proper position dead astern. It was all too easy. . . .

A week passed before we crossed the outermost periphery of the Belt. Clem slipped between two small-sized mountains and we were in. For several hours the screens showed clear sky, and then came the deluge! There was no one in a thousand clear channel waiting for us this time. I learned what crossing the Belt really meant, but fast. Swanson and I sat at the consoles, eyes glued to the screens, sweat oozing off our ribs. Icy sweat, smelling of fear.

Clem shuddered and jolted as we slammed her about, twisting and dodging as those chunks of rock came hurtling at us out of nowhere. Hour after wrenching hour it continued, until we ached all over from the beating we were taking.

We were almost through when the hatch behind us flew open with a crash, and a screeching, wailing mass of humanity threw itself upon us! In a flash I knew what had happened. The jolting of the ship must have knocked the attendant out and the crazy miner had somehow managed to free himself. He'd found his way to the Control deck, sobbing with mixed rage and terror. He connected the gyrations of the ship with the men who were handling her and he was wild with terrified fury. For five hideous minutes Swanson and I struggled with him, trying to protect ourselves and at the same time keep Clem away from those ever-present asteroids that swam continuously into the range of the screens!

Finally, Swanson got a clear shot at him with one of those ham-like fists of his and the psycho banged backward across the Control, his head crashing with sickening force into the sharp edge of the pressure-suit lockers. He oozed down to the floor-plates like a sack of wet mush. I knew without touching him that he was dead. . . .

But the damage had been done. The ship had blasted around so that she was slewing sideways to the axis of her trajectory and in no position to maneuver. I leaped for the firing consoles as I caught sight of a small asteroid spinning in toward us. I caught the proper key, but

I was too late. There was a rending, tearing crash as the missile sliced into Clem's flank. The lights flickered and went out, and there was a whoosing sound as air gushed from the ruptured compartments. The automatic damage control system cut in then, and there was the sound of airtight doors banging shut throughout the ship. The glowing meters on the panels danced crazily, and the power dial's needle banged hard against the peg and back to zero in one movement. Then there was silence. Clem was dead in space. . . .

FOR a few stunned moments Swanson and I sat on the deck staring at one another. There was an expression of shocked disbelief on the rummy's face. There was one on mine, too, I know. No matter how many times you brush with the violent ending, no human mind can accept the true inevitability of unsolicited death. We can't ever really accept the fact that "this is it!" Always some corner of our minds keeps thinking that the end is not yet.

That's the way it was with us. We simply did not believe the thing that had happened to us. Our ship was a pierced derelict and we stood practically no chance of getting through now, but we couldn't accept it.

A semblance of sanity returned and Swanson dragged two pressure suits out of the locker. In tight silence we donned them and started for the locked hatch. I had no idea just how badly Clem was hurt, but hope always remains after everything else is gone, so I had to find out.

We forced the hatch and watched the air vanish in an icy cloud down the dark corridor. The break in the hull was large. I knew, because the sonar in my suit didn't pick up any hissing.

The tube shaft with its precious pile was our objective. If that was unhurt, there was still a chance. Fortunately we had been almost through the Belt when the collision came, so except for an occasional small bit of rock banging against the hull, space around us was clear.

On the way down toward the shaft we looked in on the medic. He was dead

from asphyxiation, his face blue and bloated with internal pressure. The psycho had jammed the airtight hatch of their compartment with a piece of luggage so that the safety device had failed when the air went.

We left him there and continued down the companionway. After a bit, we met three pressure suited figures, and I breathed easier. It was Holcomb and two of his crew from the shaft. Off watch, they'd been in the forecandle when the asteroid hit. Now they were trying to force their way into the shaft through a badly warped and fused hatch.

From the condition of the walls and deck-plates, I could see that we must be very near the spot where the missile cut into the ship. And even out where we were our wrist-geigs were clicking pettishly, showing that the thing had hit on or at least near the pile. Near enough to warp the insulating plates.

I sent Swanson and one of the tubemen down to the equipment locker for torches, and as soon as they returned, we began cutting into the shaft. Even with atomic torches it took us a long time, because those walls were foot-thick leaded steelumin.

Finally the glowing section of hatch fell away and a wave of vertigo swept over me. It seemed that I was about to step through the cutaway into eternity. Close to the hatch was a jagged hole that knifed through one half the ship's girth from the shaft to free space. It was as though a mighty hand had punched a steel forefinger halfway through a cylinder made of butter. The jagged edges of the hole were fused and melted into grotesque stalactites. And beyond gleamed the stars against a backdrop of diffuse nebulosity that was the Milky Way. As we watched, they moved lazily across the irregular patch of sky. Clem was turning slowly on her axis, one with the mindless drift of the cosmic dust cloud that was the Belt.

I stepped through into the shaft. The damage had to be ascertained, for the three lifeships would never take us all the way into Mars. They were not atomic and their range was sharply limited . . . five hundred thousand miles at most.

The remains of the asteroid was a congealed mass of aa filling the lower end of the shaft, and bits of machinery and shards of plating were scattered about the deck. The tubemen who had been in the shaft at the time of collision might have been the charred lumps stuck to the wall-plates . . . I didn't want to know.

The pile itself had been ripped open in one place, and a threatening glow emanated from the torn place setting our geigs whirring. I knew we could stand the radiation in small dosages, since our suits were insulated. But not for long. Repairs had to be made quickly . . . if they could be made at all.

Using the pieces of plating that lay about, Holcomb, Swanson and I set about mending the break with the torch.

**T**HAT was the first time I became conscious of the strangeness. Not many men even today have looked into a plutonium pile. It was eery, that light within. It was like . . . well . . . like the essence of life. Mindless, unknowing, but vibrantly alive beyond any human comparison.

The break was almost healed when the . . . the thing . . . happened. I don't know of any other way to express it. The slow rotation of the ship brought the hole in her side into line with the Sun . . . and for a long moment the brilliant light burned down on us . . . and into the pile.

In that timeless minute I felt the interplay of forces greater than the human mind can conceive. The pile and the Sun glared at one another. There is no other way it can be said. They *looked* at each other . . . and something happened. The Sun called to that mindless life that was the essence of Clem . . . and she answered! She did! And all the others felt it too! In that instant the atomic fire in Clem's heart . . . that fire spawned of the Sun . . . awoke! And there was *oneness!*

The sunbeam passed and darkness fell once again in the shaft. All of us stood about in silence. All of us convinced of what we had seen and felt, and yet each afraid to give voice to it. Colloidal life is too vain, somehow, to admit another, more vital sort of life into our neat little

cosmos. Even when the proof of it happens before your eyes, you pass it off as . . . imagination. We did. Or tried. The pile subsided into a sullen glow, and we pushed the thing from our minds. We had *seen* nothing. And men in danger are sometimes confused. That's the way we rationalized it.

Quickly, then, we finished the repairs and Holcomb tested for power. The meter snapped to life eagerly. We had our ship again and we could proceed. An hour before we had felt doomed, but now Mars and safety seemed near at hand.

The passengers, of course, were both dead. Three tubemen had perished in the shaft. That left six crewmen and three officers. And Clem . . .

We retreated from the shaft because of the radiation that still leaked through the sprung shielding, and somehow or other all of us managed to stay out for the next two weeks.

Living in suits was hard on the nerves. One doesn't often think of all the inconveniences involved. But having your beard grow in your helmet, for instance, where you can't get at it to use depilatory, is hard to take. Even the most elementary body functions become fantastically complicated. And the result is always shattered nerves. But the terrific breach in the hull made it necessary. Only the Control deck was truly airtight after the collision, and the men were quarreling continuously about who should get the long watches there. Then too, every time the hatch was opened, new air had to be pumped in and the pressure tanks were dangerously low.

That's why we called it imagination born of jangled nerves when we began to notice a difference in the way the ship handled. There was a certain recalcitrant sluggishness about her responses to course corrections, and she showed a marked preference for sunward trajectories rather than for the hyperbolics I computed Marsward. Yet we chose to ignore all the symptoms.

On the fifteenth "day" after the collision, I was in the dorsal blister checking our position by means of bubble-tetrant and star shots. Mars already had begun to

show a definite disc, and I felt better than I had in days. My flight of fancy was short-lived.

Three sights told me that we were off course. Unaccountably, of course, for we had made no major corrections in the last week. Instead of pointing at the spot in space where we would intercept Mars, we were five degrees sunward.

I triggered my suit radio and called to Swanson in Control.

"Swanson here, Captain," his voice came back in my ear phones.

"We are five degrees sunward of our plotted course, Swanson," I said. "Correct immediately."

He sounded miffed as he replied: "Mars is right in the crosshairs of the course scope, Sir. Right where she's been for the last week . . ."

I told him to stand by and checked my star-sights again. I had made no error. We were a full five degrees off course, and the deviation was growing larger momentarily. I could easily detect it with my tetrant out here in the seldom used blister, yet in the course-scope in Control Mars showed centered in the crosshairs. Why? Even as I asked myself that question my mind flashed back to the awful moment in the tube-shaft. Almost wildly, I thrust the thought away from me. Yet if that *thing* I had felt really lived and was intelligent . . . could it control the images that showed in instruments that were an integral part of the ship . . . of its own body? Could it control those so that such an error as this could not be discovered except by the off chance that someone should make a direct check with starsights outside the ship itself? There was a craftiness about the disparity that frightened me.

I forced myself to relax and I laughed half-heartedly at my imaginings. The weeks spent living under trying conditions in a crippled ship had made me susceptible to vaporings. I gave Swanson the correction again.

"There must be something wrong with the scope relays, Swanson. Maybe the jar of the crash bollixed them," I said. "Correct with five point five to port. Plane is okay."

"Aye, Sir," grumbled Swanson.

I laid the tetrant in its rack and turned to leave the blister just as the ship began to throb under the impact of the correcting thrust from the nozzles. I glanced back over my shoulder for a last look at the sky, and . . .

The hair on the nape of my neck stood erect!

**I**NSTEAD of correcting the course, the blast had veered Clem's nose a full ten degrees farther to starboard so that she pointed straight at the Sun!

My voice was shaky as I called Control again. "Swanson, you rummy! You gave her starboard blast instead of port! Damn it man! You've taken us another ten degrees farther off arc!"

"But Captain!" protested Swanson, "I gave her what you ordered!"

"I ordered five point five to port!" I shouted angrily.

"I gave her five point five to Port!" Swanson howled.

Holcomb cut into the conversation from his metering station near the shaft. He sounded shaky with fright. "He . . . he . . . called for five five . . . to port, Captain, and that's what I . . . I gave him! But something's . . . wrong! She's not responding.

"Cut all power!" I ordered sharply. "We'll have to check all the controls."

There was a moment of tense silence before Holcomb's voice came back, more frightened than before. "She won't cut off! I can't kill the drive! She's got . . . the . . . bit in her teeth, and . . .

"Holcomb!" My voice filled the plexiglas bubble of my helmet. I was afraid the youngster was going to say the very thing I had been thinking a few moments before and I didn't want to hear it.

The physicist subsided for a minute, and Swanson cut in. "Mars shows properly in the course-scope now, Captain! Way off to one side!"

Holcomb's laugh made cold chills run up and down my backbone. "She doesn't care now!" he bubbled, "She doesn't care if we know now . . . because we can't control her! She . . . She's going home . . . and we can stop her!"

I dove through the blister hatch and ran down the ramp toward the metering station shouting for Swanson to get into a suit and join me there. Fear followed me like a writhing black shade down the dark companionways. I was afraid for Holcomb's mind, and I was afraid of something else. Something that had no name or shape. I was afraid of Clem . . . of the thing I knew for certain now she had become.

When I reached Holcomb he was calm. His outburst seemed to have sobered him, and for that, at least, I could be thankful.

We waited for Swanson to join us, and then we went into the shaft. Soberly, we stood near the pile, feeling the strangeness of the alien life that lived as hellish atomic fire in the shielded tube nearby. We could feel a probing in our minds, alien fingers fishing about curiously, but with cautious reserve of . . . a precocious child.

It was Swanson who put it into words finally. Simple, prosaic words. "The blinkin' can has come alive!" he muttered. That tore it. Swanson hadn't an imaginative bone in his body, and if *he* felt it . . . it *was*.

My mind flashed back across the years to the old man of the Mojave yards and his stories about living ships. The living thing that was the Sun, the thing that had given birth to Clem's soul had gleamed in on that soul through the break in the plates, and in doing that it had posed on Clem awareness. Awareness that she was part of the mighty life stream of the cosmos . . . part of the living fires of the stars. In a way that human minds could but dimly grasp, the Sun had spoken to Clem . . . called her. And *this* was the result. . . .

Understand . . . there was nothing malign about her . . . not just then. She was almost childlike. Pure, brilliant, willful . . .

We jerry-rigged a control set right there in that shaft, hoping to cut across the linkages from the top deck; but it was futile. I had the insane notion that she was laughing at us and our pestering efforts to re-establish dominance over her.

We tried withholding fuel, but that was



no good. There was enough plutonium already in the pile to take us across the system. Certainly enough to take us where she wanted to go. We didn't want to guess about that!

Holcomb and I tried slipping the cadmium emergency dampers into the pile. The first one slipped in easily. But the moment the drop in activity registered, the second rod fused in the slip shaft. It was the same with all the rest. We could not insert them. Clem would not be anesthetized. She was protecting herself . . . calmly, almost reproachfully. I really believe she was learning about men and their will to command even things they can never really understand.

**T**HAT'S the way it went. If the crossing of the Belt has been nightmarish, the next weeks were insane. Our every attempt to re-establish control was thwarted easily by the mind in the pile. Mars fell astern and Clem swung inward toward the Sun. For a while Terra blazed green and bright off our starboard bow, almost at eastern quadrature. Then she, too, began to fade behind us as the possessed ship drove ever Sunward.

I think we were all a little mad during those terrible days. We lived with the knowledge that we were helplessly at the mercy of the ship. Gradually we admitted to ourselves where she was taking us. We realized where "home" was . . .

We took to sitting dully in the Control room, still clad in suits that we were too lethargic to remove, and staring at the silvery disc of Venus that daily grew larger in the forward screens.

We were sitting so when the tension broke Holcomb. One minute he was as morosely silent as the rest of us, and the next he had seized a spanner and burst screaming out of the room.

His voice was like nothing human. "I won't let her do it!" he was shrieking. "I won't let her take me!"

Automatically, the rest of us got to our feet and started after him. It was as though none of us really cared, but we felt that we should do something. Just what, no one seemed to have figured out. We clumped heavily down the compan-

ways after him toward the open hatch that led to the tube shaft. In our helmet radios his voice was a continuous tinny and distorted harangue.

"The Sun! The Sun! She's going to it. It called her and she's going to it! But she won't take me!" and then laughing wildly, the gibbering mirth of a madman.

His laughter woke me. "Holcomb!" I yelled, "Come back!" Jammed in the narrow corridor, we struggled after him.

"She won't take me! I won't let her take me!" Holcomb was screaming. "I'll kill her! I'll tear the rotten life out of her! Kill! Kill her!"

We reached the hatchway in time to see the crazed physicist tearing at the moorings of the pile with his spanner. Already he had one of the safety latches loose and was banging furiously at the second. Instinctively, we reeled back, for our wrist geigs whirred as deadly amounts of radiation fanned out from the bent housing. Holcomb, bathed in a rain of invisible death, was too engrossed in tearing the last latch free. The latch that would free the pile and send it spilling out of the nozzles into space.

Then Clem struck. How can I describe the horror of it? Insensate metal came to life . . . became enraged. And it killed. Deliberately and without conscience. The overhead crane that carried the plutonium ingots to the pile moved. It swung its claw down to pick up a sharp shard of steel that lay on the deck. Like a hand, it picked it up . . . aimed . . . struck!

Edge first, the jagged fragment caught Holcomb across the shoulders, shearing his slender body in two and leaving the two uneven halves twitching on the dark floor. An aura of pure, ravening hate filled the shaft. Clem had showed her teeth.

Swanson laughed, and the sound chilled me. I knew then that we were all going mad. The intricate system of checks and balances that nature built into our brains could not stand another hour of this.

I slapped Swanson's face with my gloved hand and he stopped laughing, but his face was a frozen, distorted thing. I knew mine was the same, for utter terror was choking the breath from me, and I wanted to run screaming from the terrible

hate that filled the shaft and from the bloody, mangled thing on the deck.

I managed to make my voice understandable only by biting hard on my lips until the pain steadied me. I gave the order to abandon ship. With only a little luck we could make Venusport, but I would have abandoned ship if we had been halfway between here and Centaurus.

I divided the men into three groups. Two men and an officer to each lifeship except the last. Two tubemen alone in that one. I took the controls of the first one myself after setting the finders of the other two on my own ship so that I could do the astrogation for all three. Then without another look at our accursed ship, we slammed out of the jetisoning valve into free space.

The cool stars and the nearby silvery disc of Venus calmed me somewhat. The tremendous vistas of space were something familiar and real. And we were free . . .

But we had bargained without Clem. The encounter with young Holcomb had changed her. He had tried to kill her . . . tried to sunder her body. The childish core of her had become that hateful thing we had felt in the shaft. She had been attacked and her reaction was quick and dreadful.

**A**LMOST before we were out of her shadow, she turned in an impossibly short arc and charged us, atomic hell blazing from her tail. Like a vengeful comet, she sought us out.

I called to the other ships to scatter and they leaped away from us like arrows. One went up and to starboard, the other went down and to port. I gave my own tiny boat full throttle and headed straight for the bright crescent of Venus.

Clem would not be denied. One of the lifeships was caught in her tail-flare and I saw it vanish in an incandescent blot as the heat detonated the tank of monoatomic hydrogen it carried. Debris fanned out from the scene of the explosion, banging against our ship's flanks.

And still the infuriated metal monster was not satisfied. She caught the second lifeship . . . Swanson's . . . about fifty

miles astern of us and gored it to death with her needle-sharp prow.

Clem swung in a wide circle and bore down on us. At her speed I knew she would run us down in seconds, and there was nothing left to do. I closed my eyes and waited.

Death did not come. Instead there was a wave of something like emotion. It was disgust and impatience and sharp command. A mighty . . . *something* . . . was talking . . . not to us . . . and not in words or even symbols we could truly understand. But the power of it was so great that we could catch the overtones, the emotional nuances that sur-charged it. Something was talking to Clem . . . commanding her to forget her childish wrath and . . . COME!

As though jerked around by a cosmic leash, the crazed ship veered about, her tail flare blinding us. When we could see again, she was a spark far Sunward and driving at incredible speed.

In tight silence, the two crewmen and I watched her for hours until she vanished into the bright glare of the Sun. After that we followed her with the radar, eyes intent on the golden blip steadily moving inward toward the yellow mass of Sol. We drifted in space, just watching and waiting. And then at last the fleck of golden light blended with the Sun.

I knew even as I watched her that she did not die. No. There was maturity and satisfaction and ineffable pleasure flooding out from the spot where she vanished . . . but no nuance of death!

We turned away, emptied of emotion or even thought. In a numb trance we found our way into Venusport. We did not explain. By unspoken consent we said nothing about the thing we had witnessed. It was too new, too fresh. And it was too unlike life as we know it. The port authorities listed us as shipwrecked by collision with an errant asteroid, and we got passage back to Terra . . . and sanity.

It was a long time before I ventured into space again. And every time I look up at the Sun I have the feeling that I have seen something no human should.

I saw Clem go home.