

ROCKET STORIES

JULY, 1953

Vol. 1, No. 2

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\$2.00 per year in U. S. A.

 178

35¢ per copy

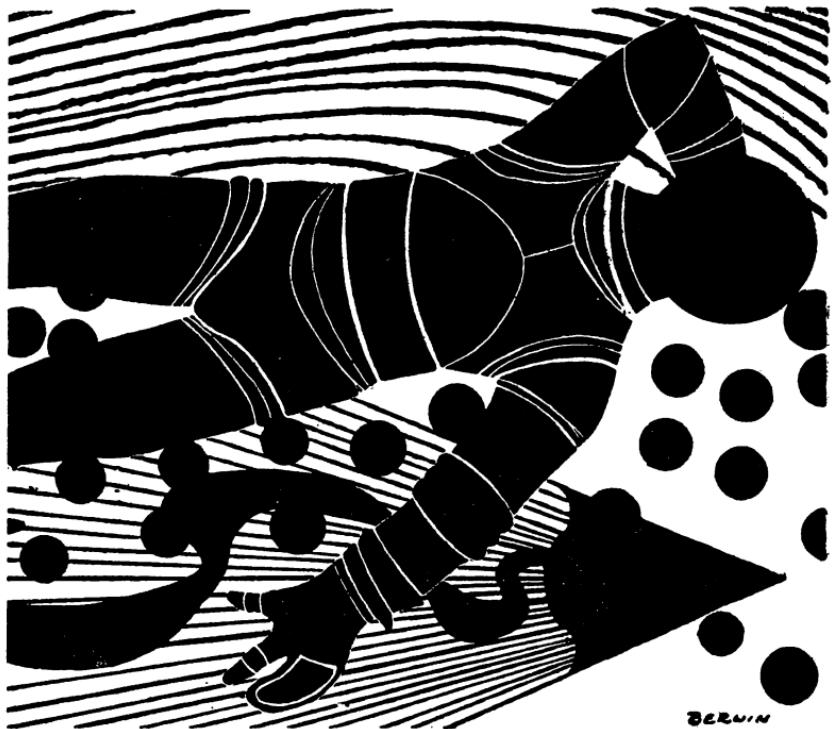


Segue!

BY BEN SMITH

ILLUSTRATED BY BERWIN

Jubil had had his chance. But he'd washed out of the Academy while his friends went on to greatness—and to death. He'd missed the boat at every turn. But now there were no turns left, with raw space around him and death waiting on a lonely asteroid....



BERNIN

Jubil drifted slowly, alone except for the phosphorescent star shine that filtered through the face-plate of his suit. He was resting, conserving the oxygen that hissed steadily and quietly through the valve near his neck. It was time for peace; there had been too much violence already.

Once, as his body continued its involuntary and aimless turning, Jubil saw the dark hull of the *Mercury II*, the outer access door firmly closed now and the stern beginning to fluoresce with

the secondary radiation that betokened the firing of the drives. Still, Jubil could feel no anger at Radik.

When the crew had conspired to mutiny, when Radik, Olgan and the rest had decided to take over the operation of the *Mercury II*, at that time had been the need for honest anger. Jubil had hesitated weakly instead, had chosen to be a bystander and had suffered the fate of the average non-participant; he had been outcast from the closed circle of

both friend and enemy. Kane, once Captain of the *Mercury II*, was now dead and his discharred body drifting somewhere in the spatial wilderness.

"Have you changed your thinking, Jubil?" It was Radik's voice in the helmet phones and Jubil could almost see the heavy face with its fringe of space-black beard. Jubil rested, listening to the cosmic interference in his R-link equipment.

"Jubil! Jubil Marken! Have you changed your mind?"

"Radik—" Jubil formed the words slowly, using his lips only and breathing shallowly. "Piracy suits you, Radik. You are one of the ruthless . . ."

Jubil could hear Radik's throaty chuckle. "A dead man of honor is still dead, Jubil." The communication circuit went silent except for the buzz of voices in the background. Jubil drifted on, conscious of the fact that he was moving but so full of the lethargy of the moment that he neglected it. What would it be like, this bit of time that was left? It had been an hour since Jubil had been forcibly ejected from the access door of the *Mercury II*; the flask at his back carried oxygen for four. Three hours of life—while around his slowly turning body was the agelessness of endless space. Jubil smiled, just a little, conscious

of the fact that he felt no fear. The die was cast now; he had made his decision finally, and he did not regret it.

"There is space-craft in Sector 180, Jubil," it was Radik again, "Racon has just reported it. But they'll miss you by at least ten parsecs. Have you changed your mind?"

"No."

"Very well." Jubil could see the pulsing of the *Mercury's* drives, now. Radik was taking no chances on the strange ship still light years away from his stern being patrol. "Good news for you, Jubil. You are in the gravitational field of an asteroid. You can't see it, yet; it's directly above you. But you'll drift to it and cling like a snail on a stone for as long as time itself. Good-bye, Jubil."

Strange, Jubil thought, that there was no anger in him now. There should be oxygen enough for a good two hours yet, so this eerie ennui could not be the prelude to a rising carbon dioxide quotient. A normal man would be bitter, perhaps even hysterical in his anger and his fear of death. Yet there was only this peaceful drifting toward the still-invisible asteroid that hung in space above his own head. Jubil closed his eyes, shutting out the phosphorescence of the velvet that was space. The exhaust

of the *Mercury II* might still be in sight. If so, it was not visible through the restriction of the plastic face-plate of Jubil's suit.

Jubil found himself wondering where Kane could have drifted since the captain's inert body had been shoved out of the *Mercury II*'s access door. Perhaps, even now, it was bound, like a rudderless ship, toward the self-same asteroid that would be Jubil's last and permanent home.

Thinking of Kane, Jubil remembered also Schoenbirk, the erratic genius whose mathematical theorizing was used in the design of the Schoenbirk-Halsted De-Fouling Gear. Had it been years, or lifetimes ago, when the three of them had been undergraduates together at the Academy?

Schoenbirk, working with the high electrostatic potentials necessary to insure the exhaust of opposite-sign waste from the complex guts of the atomic drive had been blown to pieces by the accumulation of the very thing his device was designed to prevent. Random electrical forces gathering around the discharge ring until their workable mass became great enough to enter and initiate a chain reaction in the fuel storage tank. Along with Schoenbirk had gone even the tremendously heavy concrete walls of the laboratory. All that,

however, had been after Jubil had washed out of the Academy and gone into the space-freighters as a Drive-Engineer. In the intervening years, Jubil had become thoroughly familiar with the perfected Schoenbirk-Halsted

Kane! There was a man who had made the Academy his own playground. Kane had passed with the greatest of ease, worked his way through astro-navigation, the Allen Drives, space-time computations

Jubil grimaced wryly. It had been the latter with its advanced mathematics that had been his own downfall. So Kane had gone on to the first officer berth in a gilded passenger liner while Jubil developed radiation scars on his hands from "in the hole" engineering on decrepit freighters.

And the great leveller had met and conquered them all

Schoenbirk, even in the explosion that took his life, had accomplished a great thing: the discovery of the final flaw in the De-Fouling Gear that had lived after him. For without proper removal of the ionized waste from its drive engines, the largest freighter became an ever-accumulating and treacherously unstable fissionable pile.

Kane—one of the legendary

figures of the history of astrogavigation. Kane with his Academy background and his proud but personable air had become one of the most talked-of Space captains who had ever lived. Jubil could still, in memory, see Kane, standing spread-kneed on the bridge of the *Comet*, one of the first; later the *Wanderer*, the first of the luxury space liners. The *Mercury*, and the *Mercury II*, the super-ships that made week-end excursion flights that spanned from galaxy to galaxy.

A misplaced decimal point and a misplaced trust and the greatness of Schoenbirk and Kane lay behind them. Even as his drifting body, cumbersome in the space-suit, touched the asteroid, Jubil was aware of a strange weariness that invaded every part of him except his mind. At least, the waning oxygen would leave him his thoughts.

He rested, conserving his strength. For what reason? The thing that was to happen was as certain as Fate and as unavoidable by the machinations of man. Was it, after all, because Jubil was prey to anger? No. He was now too near death for anger to seem important.

The face of the asteroid was cold and Jubil lay against it, held as lightly as a maiden's kiss by the ounce or so of gravity.

He was smiling as the darkness of space was suddenly brilliantly lighted. Spears of bluish flame, each with its tip of crimson, spread across the warp of time, and subconsciously Jubil found himself waiting for the shock wave. Then he laughed. In space there was no atmosphere; he would never be buffeted by the blast that had destroyed the *Mercury II* and the mutineer Radik.

Jubil thought again of the hellish radiation to which he had exposed himself. There was no other way. To destroy the delicate regulating linkage of the Schoenbirk-Halsted, a man must enter the combustion chamber where the pilot-piles idled. There had been just time enough for that, before Radik had sent for him.

Had there been ample oxygen, Jubil Marken knew that he would only have lived until his radiation-seared heart painfully failed to function. But, thanks to Radik, Jubil had been spared both the disintegration of the *Mercury II* and an agonizing death from slow radiation burn.

He was, Jubil reflected, as effective in his own way as was Schoenbirk and Kane. In the end, he was still an Academy man with them. He was peacefully smiling as he twisted tight the oxygen valve at his throat.