

# PLANET STORIES



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# SLAY-RIDE

By WINSTON K. MARKS

*Who ever thought that Frane Lewis—wholesale triggerman, spaceways pirate—would be the sweating victim of a simple, webbed, nylon garment known as space-man's underwear?*

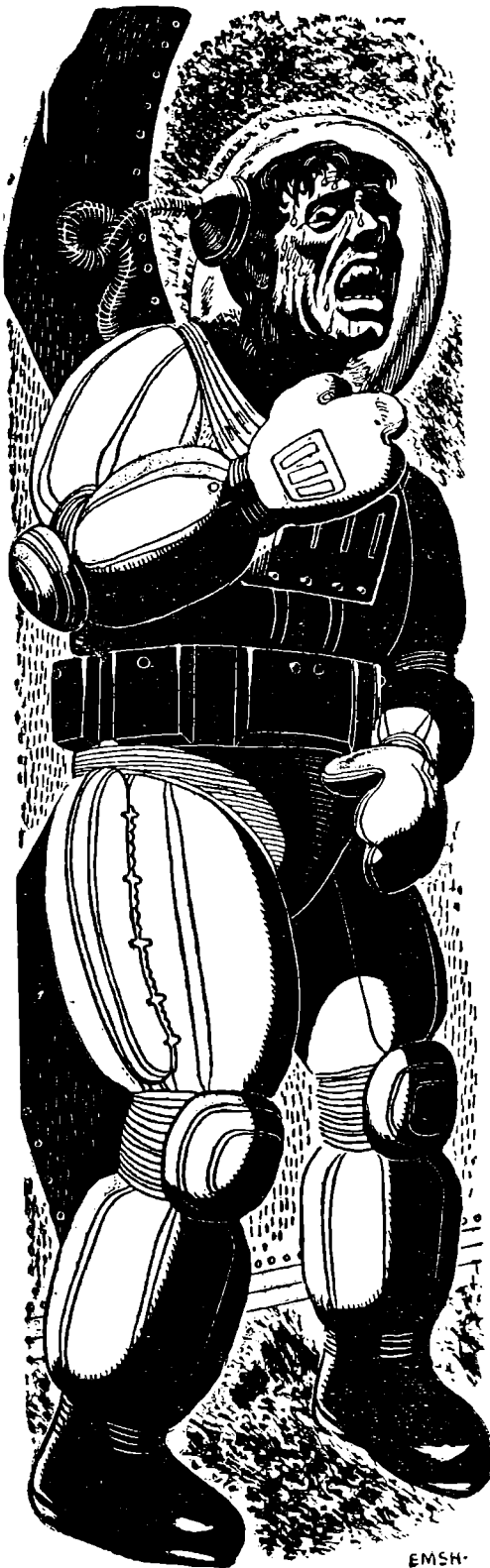
FRANE LEWIS enjoyed another sadistic shiver as he moved up the narrow passageway to the captain's control room. To his flared nostrils the warm, moist air of the small space-freighter was still heavy with the smell of death. A psychiatrist could have told him that this was a neural confusion of olfactory sensation with the perverted emotional excitement of murder. But no physicians ever attended Frane's murders, except at inquests.

Three crewmen, still warm, lay at their posts with bloody splotches staining their tunic pockets. Two more chores aboard and his pay, fabulous pay, was earned.

For Frane simple plans worked best. He rapped on the gray magnesium panel. "Your lunch, sir," he called. Inside, a solenoid thumped. The port slid aside revealing the captain's square back outlined against the white-sprinkled velvet of space. As the executive turned away from the transparent nose dome Frane's weapon spoke its final invitation to eternity. The captain's eyes clamped shut, and in the reduced gravity he buckled to the deck in slow motion.

Then Frane swore as the dimly lighted astro-pit revealed another person. What was the navigator doing up here at this time of watch? The tall, uniformed second officer reacted even as unbelieving horror swept his face.

Shoving off from the bulkhead Frane dodged the officer's lunge with a quick side-step, but the motion smashed the side of his curly head into a grip stanchion. His ears rang, and blood spurted from a forehead gash. In a cold rage he watched his opponent recover and crouch for another spring. "Sucker! you could have died nice and easy.



EMSH

Now we shall see!"

With cruel deliberation he slipped his finger off the trigger and waited for the spaceman's desperate dive. Up whipped the heavy hand weapon in a short, vicious arc that splintered jawbone with an almost crisp, wood-snapping sound.

Swiftly Frane secured the cabin door. Then he went about binding the unconscious navigator with parts of his own uniform. When he was through he stood for a moment trying to orient himself in the hemispherical room. He compared it to a chart sketch provided him on earth before he had stowed away in his special supply crate.

"Piracy!" The word hissed into the silence with a quality of unbelieving. Frane swung and saw that his victim had regained his senses.

"Yeah, piracy. Didn't think it could happen, did you? They told you space piracy was impossible, didn't they?"

"You brutal, bestial, insane—" the navigator broke off as his smashed jaw moved in spite of his gritted teeth.

"Not insane, buddy, just irritated. You caused me some trouble, see? I'm saving you, buddy." His hand came away from his face palm out and smeared with red. "I'm saving you for later."

**H**E MOVED surely now, the details of location well in mind. A low placed locker when opened spilled out the gleaming metalized space suit which was prop number one in this stage play. A little nervously Frane fumbled with the unfamiliar garment.

The officer watched with dull eyes as the killer prepared to don it. "How—how many—men alive back there?"

"Subtract three. That leaves eighteen, doesn't it? And you can write them off as soon as I get these pajamas on."

"Don't spill the air! For the love of Jupiter, don't spill the air! You have the ship. Why murder us all?"

"Orders. I don't make them, I just carry them out. For money. Big money. That's why I'm here. I'm reliable. Besides, your men might break out and pester me. They're locked in their quarters."

"You mean you're alone?"

"I'm your man, space boy," Frane said with flat boastfulness. He caught up a

strange webbed garment of nylon yarn. "What do you call this fish net? It was in the suit locker."

"You wouldn't know about that, you earthbound slug. We call it spaceman's underwear. Didn't your buddies tell you about it?"

Frane shrugged, started to discard it and changed his mind. "Better put it on me, I guess. I suppose it's pretty cold when the air goes out."

Through twisted, motionless lips, the navigator told him, "Very cold. Absolute cold. You won't live if you spill the air." Frane said nothing. The spaceman watched the killer strip off his clothes, slip into the net garment and redress himself. Wool slacks snugged in at the ankles and belted tightly to a felt jacket with a tight, soft collar. Now he proceeded with the space suit.

"With enough air a man can live for weeks in one of these," Frane lectured to dispel a depressed feeling of confinement, as he tugged the bulky space garment up and fastened it around his neck. "And I got plenty of air, see?" He uncoiled the length of silicon-plastic hose and plugged one end into the bubble helmet, the other into the wall valve of the control cabin.

"How do you intend to navigate this craft?" the officer asked with honest curiosity.

After a moment's reflection Frane could see no reason to conceal the procedure. He felt like talking. He had often talked to his victims before. Foolishly, perhaps, but his victims had never lived to repeat the conversations. Nor would this one.

"We'll be boarded in about twenty hours. They told me they couldn't trail too closely or your radar would have alerted you. They'll have their own crew to take over."

"Suppose they don't show up at all?" the officer needed.

"They will. Don't you worry your silly little head over that."

"But if they don't?" the prostrate man insisted. "You know, when you blow the main valves you can't close them again from the inside. You may have plenty of air for that suit, but how will you eat? Breathing is just one problem in a space suit."

"They'll be here inside of twenty hours, I told you."

"And you'll be dead."

"Why?"

"Because they double-crossed you good. Sure, they'll get the fattest cargo this can ever carried. But your share of it will be a shove outside. You'll be just as damned dead as I'll be."

"How did they cross me up?"

A ghost of a smile distorted the swollen face that had once been lean and handsome. "Find out," he said simply.

In spite of himself Frane checked back on his procedure. Purposely or otherwise, could they have left out some essential step in order to reduce the number of splits on the cargo? He ticked off the steps of his project and could find no reasonable omission. Carefully he fitted on the bubble, opened the oxygen valve and made the meter read what they had told him.

The hiss told him he was getting gas, but surprisingly, there was no perceptible motion of air in the helmet. Clever inlet baffles prevented the chilly drafts that had plagued pioneer spacemen with head colds and sneezes.

He was sweating already, but, he reflected, it wouldn't do any harm to store up a little body heat against the hours of this absolute zero they talked about.

HE CHECKED the chronometer which he'd strapped to the wrist of his suit. "Right on time," he shouted in order to be heard through the plastic bubble. His bulky hand paused clumsily on the master air outlet valve switch. He raised his other arm in a derisive farewell gesture.

"Quick-frozen space punks!" he shouted. "Get them cheap from Frane Lewis, wholesale triggerman." He laughed hoarsely as he jabbed the switch.

The sound of air rushing from vents never intended to be opened in space, screeched a shrill requiem even through the thick curved helmet. As the sound grew fainter his suit bulged out and threw him off balance. He toppled over and landed face down on the dying navigator. For one grisly second the swollen, contorted face with bulging eyes glared at him, then he rolled away in a convulsed panic that ripped his air hose from its connection.

The hiss stopped, and almost instantly

his rapid respiration fouled the air of his tiny headspace. Frantic, mitted hands fought the slender hose back over the nipple, struggled with the safety clamp, and once again the sweet air dribbled into his lungs.

He realized now there must have been an automatic valve in the air inlet, which had held his pressure until the connection was remade. With a trace of new respect for the breed of spacemen, he wondered about the poor fools who had suffered and died to provide the improvements of this self-contained bit of earth environment. He was now the only living speck of life on the desolated craft he had betrayed to the frigid airlessness of space.

Frigid? The exertion had sweat running down his face so freely that his snug neckband was soaked already. His hand came up and rapped the bubble in an unconscious, futile motion intended to rub out the salty sweat from his stinging eyes and tortured head wound.

Strange. The cold was not penetrating at all. Even at the several points where his body and limbs made contact with the distended space suit, no sensation of coolness struck through. His feet were moist and hot on the heavy cork soles.

He stared briefly at the two bodies near his feet. They were beyond explaining anything. The smell of death came back to his nostrils. Right through his helmet? There was no smell out there. The smell was in here. With him. Power of suggestion? The navigator had said he would die. Sure. A safe statement. Nobody lived forever. But he'd live long enough to enjoy his cut of this little deal.

His cut. The officer had said it would be a shove out into space. The death smell. His own death, perhaps. He laughed softly, and the sound of his voice thudded back to his ears like the intimate murmurings of a stethoscope. It was intimate in here. Every little whisper of breath he took rustled loudly.

Deliberately he cleared his throat and coughed. The sound was almost metallic. It hurt his ears. Mingled with the tepid moisture of his own breath was the faint odor of the powerful desiccant that ringed the base of the helmet.

His eyes dropped to the row of tiny dials set just within eye-range under his chin. Suit pressure, O. K. Oxygen, O. K. Humidity—the needle lay right on the red line. Well, when he stopped sweating from his scare that should drop off. Body temperature, one hundred one.

One-oh-one? Ninety-eight plus, he remembered from upper school hygiene, was normal. Over a hundred was not so good.

Sit down, Frane. Relax. Get your breathing slowed down. Cool off.

He took the captain's comfortable chair before the low control panel. He stared out into the incredible blackness of space, out where not the tiniest diffusion from the starlight eased the utter darkness between constellations.

Somewhere in the ship's electric generation system a moving part, brittle with the cold and contracted within its bearing, vibrated briefly and shattered. The control-room twilight flared and died out into a shadowless night.

Frane had the sensation of being projected out among the stars. Loneliness pushed in on him. He realized cynically that even the two corpses had been better than this isolation.

**A**FTER a moment his pupils expanded so widely that the stars seemed to grow larger, rushing in to meet the plunging space ship. The luminous needles and dial faces of his helmet instruments became glaring little lanterns.

Everything normal except humidity, slightly over the red line, and temperature. Temperature: 102.5 F., he read. He wished fervently that he hadn't put on that last garment. Spaceman's underwear, it was called. Or maybe it would have been better to—

An uneasy thought crept into the back of his head, and he strained his smarting eyes down at the temperature gauge. In only a minute or two it had advanced one tenth degree to 102.6 F.

Now his breath rasped more rapidly as he gasped more oxygen. Pressure was down slightly. He moved to the valve and adjusted it. On an impulse he opened it wide for a second. The pressure needle pegged, his ears popped, but no coolness came from

the baffled intake. He normalized the pressure again.

The hose must be double-walled, he thought. The air should at least have had the coolness of its own expansion. He wiggled inside his sweat-sopping clothes. Why didn't the perspiration dry off and cool him? The answer came with uncomfortable clarity. Where could the body moisture go? Where, for that matter, could the body heat go?

Temperature: 102.9 F.

Frane Lewis was no coward, but his hands began plucking nervously at the space suit. The previously tough folds of shiny, impermeable fabric were now distended into a rock-like rigidity.

He stood up suddenly, and his feet squished in his sandals. The sweat was a puddle up over his toes. He was getting weak and thirsty. Very thirsty. He felt he must have no more water in him. He stood in a trance-like state for minutes staring blindly into the heavens. His mind wouldn't work right. He hurt. He itched. He craved water, gallons of it.

Then he stopped sweating. He had been deliberately keeping his eyes off the temperature dial, forcing his mind away from a problem he didn't understand, when he felt his face go dry. The caked streaks of salt made his skin feel stiff and itchy.

Temperature: 104.3 F.

Frane now knew he was sick. At that rate of increase he couldn't last much longer. His head was buzzing, and the fantasies of fever were flashing lights across his bleared vision. He strove to fight off the hallucinations. He focussed his eyes on the dim-faced chronometer and realized with a start that he had endured over three hours of his vigil. Perhaps he could last out. Whatever the fever was, it must ease off sometime.

He staggered to the oxygen control, eased it open to full again and watched the temperature needle for minutes. He became dazed. Then his eyes came alive again, and he stared. Temperature: 104.5 F.

His hands drifted listlessly to the control again. This time he throttled it down, down, below normal pressure. Slowly, slower than the minute hand of a watch, the needle climbed on. Why? Why?

His swollen tongue licked at dry lips.

He couldn't swallow any more. Around his neck a salty puddle burned a ring of itching hell fire.

He choked down more on the air valve. It didn't make sense to him, but if more oxygen raised his temperature faster, then less should do the opposite. At 104.5 F a man doesn't always think straight.

**A**T FIRST his heart pounded loudly in protest. His breathing became quick and shallow. With staring, grateful eyes he watched the needle settle a tenth of a degree and stay there. The mental relief was almost overwhelming. Had there been moisture left in his tear ducts Frane would have cried. But now, with the strained concentration gone he became fuzzy. He slipped in and out of consciousness, and dead faces began drifting past his eyes.

This wouldn't do. He had one more job left. He looked at his chronometer. In another eight minutes he must throw the drive lever and kill all acceleration. The pirate ship's orbital prediction was based on this timed interruption of the freighter's drive. So much as two minutes off, he had been impressed, would make their search hours longer, since they were approaching from the rear at an angle.

He sagged into the pilot's chair again, but sitting down was no good. Instantly the ghost faces began their parade, and the death smell, mingled with the saturated dessicant's rank stink threatened to strangle him. The belly full of rations he had forced himself to sustain him the twenty hours of waiting pressed heavily against his heaving diaphragm.

He gained his feet, stood with his hand on the fuel lever control and stared fixedly at his chronometer. Two minutes.

The navigator's swollen face, eyes bulging, stared into his helmet.

"Get out of my way. Got to see my watch. Get—"

He brushed at the phantom as if it were a cloud of gnats. He was confident now. The

temperature gauge showed his body heat to be constant at 104.4 F. Thirty seconds now and he could give himself over to his fever dreams. Twenty seconds.

The broken jawed image persisted mistily. But now the face was repaired. It was the young tense face before he had crushed it with his blaster. It had that hard, determined look on it.

The fire in his body swept up into his brain. The bodyless image spoke softly, "You're going to die. You are going to move the fuel control the wrong way. You can't remember which way they said to move it. It isn't marked. You can't remember."

"Yes, I can!" The chronometer said twelve seconds.

"You made one mistake. You put on your clothes over the spaceman's underwear. Your body heat can't escape. Your brain is burning up. You can't remember about the lever. You will move it the wrong way."

"So what? Then I'll move it the other way," Frane screamed.

The tiny clock zeroed. Frane pressed the lever away from him. That was the way to stop any earth vehicle—pressure forward on the air brake pedal. He shoved hard.

The rockets roared out full blast far behind him. The building acceleration caught him and flung him stumbling back against the bulkhead. Then the firing took on complete departure blast rate.

Pinned like a butterfly specimen, eight G's smashed Frane Lewis' space suit against the metal wall. Lewis, being free inside the suit, was pressed hard against the interior of its back side.

The cold he had been seeking struck through the wet, felt lining and his exterior clothes. The thickly corded spaceman's underwear delayed the frost momentarily, but then the sweat froze. The death smell seized his throat. Dimly he knew what was happening, but he felt only heat. The sear of an atomic furnace burning his shoulders, buttocks, leg calves, through into his spine.

The heat—the terrible sear of space cold.