

**SUPER
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by EANDO BINDER

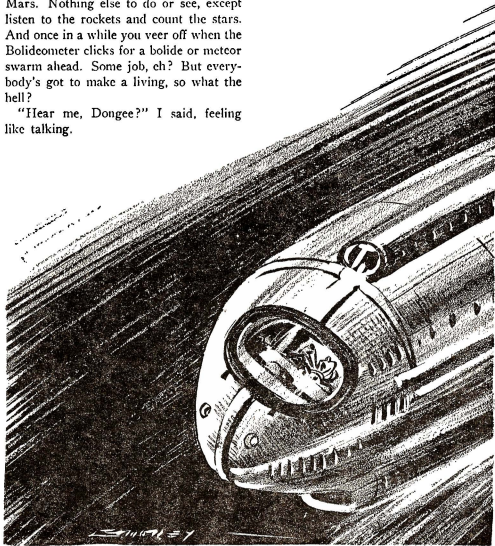
“YOU know, Dongee,” I said to my Martian relief driver. “there isn’t nothing more monotonous than this job of driving a trailer truck through space.”

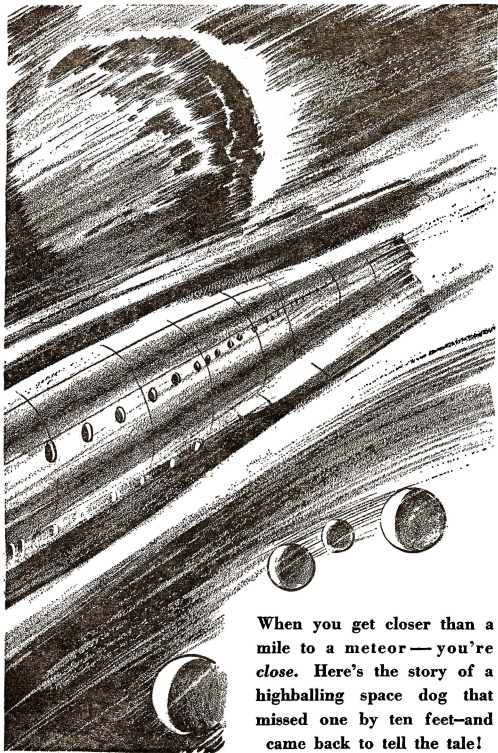
It’s the truth. Four hours you drive. Four hours you rest or sleep. A dozen lunch and gas stops between Earth and Mars. Nothing else to do or see, except listen to the rockets and count the stars. And once in a while you veer off when the Bolideometer clicks for a bolide or meteor swarm ahead. Some job, eh? But everybody’s got to make a living, so what the hell?

“Hear me, Dongee?” I said, feeling like talking.

“Uh,” Dongee grunted, which surprised me. A Martian don’t talk much, as anyone knows. I bet this Dongee didn’t let out more than ten grunts since leaving Earth. But he was a good relief driver, so I had no kick.

But suddenly he let out another grunt. The Bolideometer clicked and lighted up.





When you get closer than a mile to a meteor — you're close. Here's the story of a highballing space dog that missed one by ten feet—and came back to tell the tale!

We read the dial and saw it was a small comet, due to cross our course in two minutes. Wonderful things, them Bolideometers. In the old days, without them, you never knew when a comet or meteor was going to stare you right in the face, coming lickety-split, and if you were quick, you lived. Nowadays, the Bolideometer gave you the warning before the dangerous object was even visible.

When the comet showed up, with a short tail streaming behind it, Dongee was ready with his camera. Yeah, he was a candid camera fiend. He bent his long, bean-pole body almost in a loop to get an angle shot like they all do, the dopes. He held the camera steady with three of his hands, and clicked it with the fourth. Then his leathery moon face split in a wide crack, which was a grin.

"Good snap?" I asked.

"Uh!" Dongee said, and went to sleep.

An hour later I put on the reverse-blast brakes and slanted down toward PeeWee Station, the last gas stop before Mars. It's only a whistle-stop meteoroid, with an airdrome and a concession selling cats and rocket gas. No more life to it than an outpost on Pluto. But it was a break in the monotony, anyway. I had an hour's time, on my schedule, to land and stretch my legs.

I eased down to the parking lot, with plenty of underjetting. The job I was driving was a trailer, loaded to the gills with salt. Yeah, salt is worth its weight in gold on Mars, where the oceans they used to have all dried up ages ago, and the salt beds blew away as dust.

I plunked my trailer truck down in the sand yard so easy it didn't wake Dongee. So I had to shake him and ask if he wanted to eat. He blinked open one eye and then shut it, waving three hands. That was no. These Martians can go days without food. Besides, they're tighter than a Scotchman.

"Okay," I said. I hopped into my

space parka and went out the airlock of the cabin. I turned up the heat coil at the bite of space cold, with no air around. PeeWee Meteoroid is too small to have even a shred of atmosphere.

"Fill 'er up, sir?"

I nodded and the gas station attendant began pulling up the hose. But just then a bruiser jumped out of a truck behind me and grabbed the attendant's arm.

"I'm in a hurry," he said. "Fill me up."

"Hey," I said. "I'm first."

"Oh, yeah?" he growled, walking up to me and sticking his face plate against mine. "So what, punk? Another word outta you and I'll knock you five light-years away."

I'm a patient guy, but my blood boiled at that crack.

"You and how many Uranian bull-men? Think you own space, eh? Get back in line or I'll cram a quart of liquid helium down your noisy throat!"

He hulked up his shoulders and roared, "Why, I'll spread you all over the asteroids!"

He swung his fist gauntlet against my visor. Good thing they're made of unbreakable glasteel. I punched right back and rocked him back on his heels. There's no man in space can bluff me. I've met the roughest and toughest, and I'm no lily.

Well, we traded blows for a minute, and then I got a good left hook under his chin. His face flattened against his visor, blood spurting from his nose. That was enough for big-mouth.

"Back in the line, you refugee from a canal bottom," I told him. "Git!"

And he got.

"Now," I said to the attendant, who was a Venusian, and was shaking his head as though all Earthmen were wild animals, "you will kindly service me."

The tank took fifty-five barrels. Bad carburetion, eating it up that fast. The engine needed a good overhauling. I had

the attendant check spark-juice, liquid helium for the cooling coils, and the landing tires. And darned if she didn't need another quart of spark-juice. These Orion motors are spark-juice eaters, like the old cars they used to have on Earth that ate up oil. Oh, well, no skin off my nose.

"Charge it to Planet Trucking, bud," I said, and headed for the beanery.

And then I met the kid.

I WAS half-way to the airdrome when I saw him. He was standing in a shabby old space parka with at least a dozen vulcanized patches on it, ready to split a seam somewhere else. The neon-lighted sign of a thumb he held up was faded, too, as though the cosmic-ray battery was petering out.

He was shining the neon-thumb up hopefully toward the through-traffic zooming overhead. Spacemobiles zipped by, and some trucks that didn't need a gas stop. He blinked the thumb as a liner roared by, followed by a shiny space yacht with gold trimmings. No chance of a lift with them—only space trucks and mobiles would stop.

I shook my head. Tough racket, hitch-hiking. He was just a kid too. I passed him pretty close and made out the face behind his visor, pinched and thin. Half-starved and his heat coil probably on low-power to save current. Didn't have a thing in the world, maybe, except the outfit on his back—or a friend in the universe, the way he looked.

So what? No concern of mine. I pulled the handle for the airlocks and stepped into the airdrome, where I could lower my visor and breathe their air. The sign read:

The Space Kitchen—Home Cooking—Earth and Mars Menus. Welcome, Space-men! (Venusian Swamp-men Not Allowed.)

No wonder. Any place a Venusian swamp-man visits smells like his native

swamp for at least a month afterwards.

I barged into the hash-house, where some other truck drivers and a dozen spacemobile tourists were on the feed-bag.

"Hi, Monty!"

"Gerty!" I said, looking around where she was ringing up the cash register. "Good 'old' Gerty! Prettier every time I see you."

Which is about the biggest lie from here to Andromeda, because Gerty is plump and moon-faced with a big nose and bigger ears. Plain as the side of a spaceship hull.

"G'wan, Monty Walsh! You're no television idol yourself, with your nose flat like a meteor hit it. What'll you have? Got some nice Martian garlruk-sausages, guaranteed to give you indigestion."

"Swell! I'll have ham and eggs, Earth style."

Gerty left for my order, and I ambled up behind three men digging into their food like all truck drivers do—fast and furious.

"Pete Rand!" I greeted, clapping one on the back so hard he choked. "Whose truck you talking to destruction these days? Still on the Jupiter run for Solar Packing?"

"Yeah, Monty. Sit down. Meet Joe Peters, asteroid run. And Al Reuter, heading for Pluto—if he ever gets there. We was just discussing politics. Who you voting for next month?"

"Terracrats," I said. "Straight ticket."

"Atta boy," Rand said. "The blankety-blank Solar Party never gives the unions a break. The Terracrats promise to limit the immigration from Jupiter, so them strong guys don't keep beating Earthmen out of jobs."

Rand said it loud and jerked his head. Then I saw the Jovian sitting a ways down the counter. He shot us a dirty look.

We kept it up till he finally waddled over, looking us up and down.

"Those are insults to my race!" he fog-horned.

"Want to make something of it?" I growled, standing up to him. Those Jovians burn me up. Nobody likes them. They're chisellers and bullies all over the system.

"We of Jove do not pick fights with Earthmen," cracked the Jupiter guy, "unless there're a dozen of you, to make it fair!"

I would have sailed into him then and there except that Gerty slapped down my ham and eggs and grabbed my arm.

"Boys, please! No rough-housing. Keep the interplanetary peace."

"Okay, Gerty," I said, as the Jovian left.

"You're the toughest mug in the space lanes," Pete Rand said, shaking his head at the thought of tackling a Jove guy, which I did once and came out a draw, anyway. "Well, so long, Monty. Gotta make time. See you around in space sometime."

The other two left with Pete. I still had fifteen minutes left, so I played the pin-ball machine in the corner. It was the new-fangled kind where balls with little rockets shoot all ways among holes named after the planets and satellites.

I was playing that when the door opened and the kid shuffled in—the hitch-hiker. I saw him carefully valve off his oxygen-bottle, turn off his heat coil, and breathe the warmed air of the beanery, like pinching pennies, when every penny counts. He stood just inside the door, watching the patrons eat. Must be a traffic lull outside, I figured.

"Here, you, get out, you little chiseler!" came the voice of the owner of the place, a fat guy I never did like. "Always creeping in here to use my air I pay to have hauled from Mars. Get out! Gerty, shove him out!"

Gerty bit her lip kind of helplessly. It meant her job. What could she do? She started to shag him out. The kid made no appeal, hungry and cold as he was, just turned to go. The other patrons grinned like it was an act for their benefit and went back to stuffing themselves.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Come on, kid. Sit down and order what you want, kid."

He looked at me, and darned if he didn't freeze. "Thank you, sir. But I'm not hungry."

I thought fast. I knew his kind, pride and all that.

"Just won on the pin machine," I said. "The meal's on the house. Sit down, kid."

It worked. I didn't talk, just watched as the kid wolfed a meal down so fast I didn't lose any time on my schedule.

When I paid Gerty, she said, "Rand's wrong. You're the softest guy in the space lanes, underneath that ugly pan of yours."

And she only charged me half the meal's price. I didn't ask if she was paying the rest herself. I knew it. Gerty's gold.

"**H** EADING for Mars?" I asked the kid casually outside. He started to freeze again, so I added quickly, "You know, I get lonesome as hell driving. Need company. Hop in."

I shoved Dongee, who was still sleeping like a log, and made room for our passenger. I shifted into first and eased up off PeeWee Meteoroid. I'm always careful slanting into the traffic lane, but a spacemobile very nearly clipped me going by. Some people are maniacs in the space highways.

"Where's the fire, you—" The rest was a string of the best cursing I knew, and brother, I'm no slouch. But I cut it off, remembering the kid. I turned to him, after shifting into third.

"I'm Monty Walsh. This eight-foot length of suspended animation is Dongee."

Say, by the way, what's your name?"

"Jim," he said. And that's all, no last name. He didn't say a word more.

I tried to draw him out a little. "We'll pull up at Mars in eight hours. Heading for the cactus harvest along the canals, Jim?"

"No. Just sort of—traveling."

But the way he set his lips, he wasn't any ordinary space tramp, bumming his way around the system. Besides, he was too young, no more than eighteen. His clothes were just beginning to wear, like he'd left a regular life on Earth for the first time. He must have picked up the patched space togs and battered neon thumb from a cheap store.

I saw the pin on his lapel, too—Culvard College. Skipping school, maybe, to try his luck around the planets. But why? What was on his mind? He was sure the grimmest, tightest-mouthed youngster I ever ran across.

Well, that was his own business. If he didn't want to talk, he didn't have to.

Dongee woke up finally, and blinked like he thought Jim was something he'd dreamed up.

"Uh!" he grunted, by way of greeting, when I explained.

Finé thing, I said to myself, as the monotony of space driving settled down. Cooped up with a Martian grunter and a kid who wouldn't talk. I might as well be alone.

The Bolideometer clacked after a while. A meteor ahead. I cut speed and waited for it to roll by. It was a pretty big one, maybe fifty feet across. It was spinning slowly and the sunlight from in back of us sparkled off the jagged edges. Pretty sight, like a diamond whisking by.

"Ain't nature grand?" I said.

And then I growled. Set up on one flat surface was a big billboard, glowing with radium-paint, advertising—Pinky's Pills for Spacesuit Rash. You couldn't go anywhere nowadays without some blasted

sign like that staring you in the face every time a meteor passed.

Dongee was ready with his camera, and seemed tickled over the shot he got. He gave two grunts in a row. But there was another surprise. Jim was excited!

He grabbed my arm as I resumed speed. "That's a Clarkson Bolideometer, made by Solar Incorporation, isn't it?" he demanded.

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Is it—is it the 2097 model?"

"Sure. Installed when this truck was built. This is a '97 Orion. So the Bolideometer is '97. Why?"

The kid almost yelped. "They're untrustworthy! You can't go by them. Sooner or later it'll give you the wrong reading and you'll pile up!"

"Nuts," I said. "Solar Incorporation has the best reputation going. Any instrument made by them is Grade-A."

"Yes, but not that particular Clarkson model Bolideometer!" The kid was almost wild, staring at the gadget like it was a snake. "You can't trust it, I tell you—"

"Talk straight," I told him. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing." He was quiet all of a sudden again. "I guess I just got rattled. Sorry, forget it."

I shrugged, figuring he'd lapse into his brooding. But he seemed willing to talk now, like he'd been jolted to life.

"They used to think space was empty, before space travel," he said. "They didn't know that between Earth and Mars any ship on a bee-line course would intercept an average of thirty drifting bodies. They didn't even know of the larger meteoroids, hundreds of them, like Pee-Wee Meteoroid, most of which are stop-over stations today."

"You know your stuff, Jim," I said cautiously. "Taking it up in school?"

"Yes. Spacenaotics course. There's nothing more exciting than driving a ship

through space—listening to rockets!”

His eyes were shining. I had to tell the truth, as an oldster to a youngster. “Boring, Jim. Monotonous as hell.”

“I didn’t mean ordinary truck driving—” He flushed then, and went on quick. “Piloting on the big liners and freighters, I meant. Where you wear a uniform and advance to captain’s rating. That’s exciting!”

“Yeah,” I admitted, sighing. I once was on the way up there, schooling and all, when I threw it all up to join the radium rush on the asteroids, coming back broke. And—but never mind.

I said to the kid, “Keep it up, Jim. Never let anything stop you from that. You aiming for first mate rating, in school?”

“I—I was.” All of a sudden the fire died down in his eager eyes, and he was the hitch-hiker again, mum as a clam. I didn’t try to force any more out of him for the time being.

INSTEAD, I turned on “Information, Please,” on the radio. Being close to Mars, it came through strong on the Martian Network. I understand that program’s been on the air about one hundred and seventy-five years, since before space travel. I believe it. It’s about that stale.

For instance, Fadiman Five, the master of ceremonies, says, “And here’s a question from Zork Mool, of Saturn. Name three out of four bodies in the Solar System that begin with the letter P. Three out of four, my little master-minds. Ah, Kern has his hand up already!”

But Jim beat Kern, *Planet News* columnist, by a nose—“Phoebe, moon of Saturn, Pons-Winnecke Comet, and Pluto.”

“What’s the fourth?” came from the radio. “Just for fun. It’s so obvious, gentlemen. The prison satellite and the Ellis Island of a planet?”

“Phobos!” Jim almost whispered it to

himself, reluctantly, staring straight ahead. That was on his mind, too, for some reason. I was beginning to wonder what it all added up to, especially when the Bolideometer clacked again. The kid sat bolt upright, gripping the seat arms like he was ready to jump.

“Take it easy, Jim,” I said when we passed the meteor safely. “You sure don’t trust that Clarkson meter. Why?”

He was mum. He kept staring out ahead, watching for bolides, making me nervous.

But I forgot about it and cursed when a big space-buoy ahead lighted up in my head-lights. *Slow—Detour!* There was a meteor swarm crossing the space-lane, and I had to take a cut-off to the left, following the detour signs on buoys.

“Those meteor swarms are nasty things, Jim,” I said. “Sometimes it takes weeks before the whole swarm is past. Blast these detours! Lose a lot of time.”

If that wasn’t enough to rile me, a spacemobile comes blazing along the other way, shining his headlights straight into my eyes.

“Blast you, turn down your brights!”

We were still on the detour. Around a turn, we saw a jack-knifed trailer truck stalled, waiting for a tow car. And way over to the left, where the meteor-swarm was streaking along, a running series of radium signs said:

There’s Hardly

A Spaceman

Now Alive

Who Took

A Detour

At Seventy-five

Birma Shave’

You could have heard my cussing clear out to Saturn. “Imagine those billboard crews chasing down every blinking swarm and meteor and drifting body to hang up them silly slogans.”

The kid had to laugh, not knowing it was my pet peeve, seeing them over and over, trip after trip.

"It's estimated," he said, "that an average of a million eyes a day see them. The radium-paint lasts for centuries. It's cheap advertising."

Click! Dongee was awake, taking a shot of the meteors dancing by like a swarm of big fireflies in the distance. I looked at the chronometer.

"Okay, Dongee. Take over."

We shifted seats. My eyes were heavy, and I saw the kid's were, too.

"I'm grabbing a nap, Jim. How about you?"

He shook his head, still staring ahead all the time. "I'm not tired," he lied. "I'll sit up and watch—"

He didn't finish the sentence, but I knew he meant for bolides. He was getting me jittery. I couldn't sleep for an hour. And when Dongee woke me for the shift, three hours later, the kid was still watching ahead like a hawk.

ITURNED my attention to my driving, where it was needed anyway for the mountains. Yes, mountains. Funny how before space travel, Earth people thought space was one smooth, continuous

stretch. They didn't know of the ether-warps that pile up in dangerous eddies like mountains. And you have to circle and crawl through them or get spun on your ear way off course.

All the turns and twists were marked with danger-buoys. I shifted into low-low and snaked through the ether mountains. There's nothing to see, of course, like on Earth mountains. These are invisible humps in space. But brother, you know you're climbing up a space-warp when your engine begins to growl like a wounded bear. Then, on the down slopes, you keep the reverse blasts braking for all they're worth, or you fly straight off the next curve.

And yet, with all that danger, a crazy spacemobile came flying up and passed me like a comet. Ten seconds later I hear a space siren screaming, and pull over to let the speed cop pass. They patrol the mountains strictly. Ten minutes later we came across Mr. Speeder, parked off the lane, getting a ticket. You don't get away with speeding much these days.

I pulled out of the mountains in two hours.

"Home stretch!" I sang out. "Mars in two hours!"

"Uh!" Dongee grunted, as his home planet enlarged to a disk. I suppose that's the nearest a Martian can come to being excited.

But I was watching the kid. He looked like he hated to arrive and couldn't wait to arrive—both at the same time. What in the universe was eating his heart out?

While I was watching him, he jumped. The Bolideometer was clacking. His nerves seemed to let go.

"Turn!" he yelled. "Turn quick!"

"Calm down," I said. "The reading gave me four minutes."

"But you can't trust the reading—" And he actually tried to pull over on the wheel.

I jerked his arm away pretty roughly.

"Now look, Jim. I'm driving. I'm going by the Bolideometer. It says four minutes. I'm turning after two minutes, so as not to waste a lot of gas in a big, clumsy turn. Now sit down and bank your rockets!"

The kid obeyed, but bit his nails till I made the turn. Two minutes later, on schedule, the meteor sailed by.

"See?" I said. "This Bolideometer is as accurate as they make 'em."

"Yes, this time," the kid muttered. "But the next time, or the next, it'll slip. And you'll pile up."

"Dongee," I pleaded, "did you ever hear such rot? Tell me why, Jim? What have you got against the Clarkson Bolideometer, model '97?"

The kid looked like he was going to freeze up again, but suddenly he talked, his eyes going wild.

"Remember the crack-up of the Earth-Saturn liner, *Star-Clipper*, three months ago?"

"Yeah," I said. "Terrible. Meteor drilled right through. Half the passengers and most of the crew killed. Worst wreck in ten years. What about it?"

The kid swallowed. "It was equipped with a Clarkson Bolideometer, model '97."

"So what? The investigation proved that the chief pilot on duty at the time was negligent."

"Proved?" the kid blazed. "The meteor wrecked every instrument aboard. There was no proof that its reading was right. And the reading was wrong. The chief pilot, James Ellory, said so!"

I waved a hand. "Of course he said so. So would I, to get out of a jail sentence for falling asleep at the switch. He was sent to Phobos prison for life, wasn't he, with his piloting license taken away?"

The kid nodded.

"But he's innocent. I was studying Bolideometers at the time, in school. I took a Clarkson model '97 apart. It has

one little flaw in it. The beryllium-alloy spring for the dial is subject to cosmic-ray hardening. After five years no Clarkson '97 is trustworthy."

Was the kid whacky, or did he have something?

"You mean," I said kind of nastily, "that Solar Incorporation doesn't know about this flaw? The leading space instrument makers for fifty years, and they put a dud Bolideometer on the market so as to put themselves out of business, eh?"

The kid didn't get sore.

"This is 2102," he said. "The Clarkson '97 was put on the market five years ago!"

And he looked at me.

"Say," I said, when it suddenly soaked in. "You mean the Clarkson's are just beginning to slip, after these five years? You mean—say, what do you mean anyway?"

He came right out with it.

"I mean that starting soon, ships are going to crack up all over. Those with Clarkson '97's. The *Star-Clipper* was only the first. Any ship with a Clarkson '97 is a flying coffin!"

"Uh!" Dongee grunted, turning over and going to sleep.

I couldn't swallow it, either. The kid was space batty, or something. I'd get him to Mars and see that he was put in good hands.

"Okay, Jim," I soothed. "Now take it easy. When we get to Mars, we'll check on all that."

"If we get to Mars," he said, and darned if chills didn't climb down my back.

"No one believes me," he finished. "No one."

I turned back to my driving, thinking the whole thing over. The more I went over what the kid said, the crazier it sounded. What was he going to Mars for? To try to reopen the *Star-Clipper* case, and get a hearing?

I LOOKED at the chronometer, One hour to go. I'd soon find out, when we arrived at Mars. If we arrived at Mars! The kid's words kept bothering me. I looked at him. He sat stiff as a board, hawking space ahead like he had all the way, not trusting that Bolideometer one little bit.

Suddenly it clacked, and I jumped a mile. Then I quieted myself. Jim was a foolish kid, soft in the head, and I'd go by that instrument. After all, the thing had been perfected by the System's best scientific mechanics.

"Three minutes, it reads," I said for Jim's benefit. "I'm turning in two minutes."

But suddenly, with a gasp, he grabbed the wheel and yanked it over before I could get a grip to stop him. The side pressure from the sharp swing banged Dongee against the wall, and me against him.

"Uh!" Dongee grunted in surprise, waking up.

I was more than surprised. I was mad.

"You crazy little fool!" I growled.

"For two cents I'd toss you right out in space on your ear—*ulp!*"

Yeah, you'd make a sound like "*ulp!*" too if you suddenly saw a one-hundred foot meteor ballooning up in your face. Jim was still yanking the wheel over. And I helped him. I think we skidded around that patch of space in a forty-five degree angle. The meteor got as big as a mountain and shot by, with maybe ten feet to spare. Not a blessed foot more. When you get closer than a mile to a meteor, you're close!

I straightened the truck out, and then just sat there, gasping like a fish. Anybody says I'm a coward, I'll pummel him to Saturn and back. But believe me, that was one time in my life I was scared green.

Then I looked at the Bolideometer, and let out a yell that made the walls ring.

"Look at the damned, rotten thing!" I roared. "It says one minute to go! One minute to go—and the meteor's past!"

I turned to the kid.

"Thanks, Jim," I said. "If you hadn't kept your eyes open, we'd be mince-meat right now. And they'd put us down in the records as driving while drunk or something."

The kid was limp, too, and didn't say anything.

"Uh!" Dongee said. "Nice shot!"

Yeah, it must have been! The closest shot of a meteor ever taken, if you ask me. Can you imagine that nerveless Martian snapping a shot of the meteor that for all he knew at the moment was going to smear him along five million miles of space?

"Jim," I said, "the Bolideometer flopped."

"Yes, it did," he agreed.

"Jim," I said, "the Clarkson '97 isn't worth a plugged Venusian nickel!"

"No."

"Jim," I said, "when we get to Mars, I'm going to raise sixteen kinds of hell—"

MARS loomed up now like a big red moon. We didn't have to worry about meteors any more, thank heaven. We were close enough to be within the zone where the meteor-sweeper crews clear out all hazards around a planet.

Space ferries appeared here and there, on their short round trip with sight-seeing passengers. Way off to one side a swanky space yacht was anchored outside the million-mile limit. Probably some wild party going on aboard, with plenty of Martian cactus wine spilling over the sides. Traffic got thick, and I cruised in on low blasts.

We slanted down on Phobos, where all foreign traffic is checked in and out. We dropped into the aerated dome through

the automatic photo-electric locks. I plunked my trailer truck down in the Customs pit. It felt good to step out and stretch our legs, breathing good clean air.

"How long to check us in?" I asked the Martian Customs agent.

"About three hours."

Any other time I would have raised hell, like I always do over them pokey Martians.

"Take your time," I said, pulling Jim and Dongee along by the arms. "We have business to do. Solar Incorporation has a big office here on Phobos. We're going to raise a little hell. You too, Dongee. You're a witness."

I was even too burned up to suggest eating. We walked right to the business section. Solar Incorporation had a big, humming office in an Ioan glowstone building. I didn't bother asking to see someone. I just pushed clerks out of the way and stormed to the manager's office.

John Thomas, Manager, was lettered on the door.

Thomas wiped off a silly grin and leaned away from his pretty secretary as we barged in.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" he barked, standing up indignantly. "Who are you?"

"I'll tell you who I am," I said. "I'm Monty Walsh, driving an Orion trailer truck with one of your rotten Clarkson '97 Bolideometers in it. And I'm here to tell you to withdraw every Clarkson '97 in use, or I'll raise a stink from here to Sirius and back."

"I don't understand," Thomas said.

"You'll understand." I told the story. When I finished, I said, "Your '97 Clarkson isn't worth a plugged Venusian nickel, see?"

"Sit down," Thomas invited. He sat down himself. "You're making a very serious charge, Mr. Walsh."

"Right," I said. "The *Star-Clipper* was equipped with a Clarkson '97 too.

It wasn't the chief pilot, James Ellory, who failed in duty. It was your rotten Bolideometer!"

"That's ridiculous!" Thomas snapped. "Chief Pilot James Ellory is serving a life sentence now for negligence of duty."

"Says you. What about our experience?"

Thomas smiled a little.

"You have no proof, have you?"

"Proof? I have two witnesses, haven't I?"

"Meaningless," Thomas said. "Don't you realize your claims, upheld by court, would cost us heavily? We would have to make restitution on all the *Star-Clipper's* death-list, and its cost. Naturally we'll fight your fantastic accusation through every court in the System. We stick by our instruments. They're infallible. If this is some sort of racket, gentlemen—"

"Racket?" It was Jim who spoke up now, his eyes flaming. "Thousands of lives are in danger at this moment, in hundreds of ships equipped with the Clarkson '97. One by one they'll have the experience we did—with more disastrous results! You've got to believe me!"

"I don't," Thomas said. "You have no proof. It's silly. You're wasting my time."

Jim spoke tonelessly.

"That's the trouble—no proof. That's why James Ellory went to prison, a broken man. And there never will be proof. Just as with the *Star-Clipper*, all the instruments will be ground to shreds."

"Yeah, guess we're licked," I muttered.

"Uh," Dongee grunted.

"Good day, gentlemen," Thomas hinted impatiently.

"Uh," Dongee grunted.

I turned on him before leaving. "For Saturn's sake, stop it, Dongee! Stop grunting all over the place."

Dongee was fumbling with his camera and suddenly handed me a print. That dumb Martian had one of the latest kind

that develops the picture right in the camera. I took the print.

"What's this, Dongee? Yes, it's pretty, so what! Don't bother me—*ulp!*"

That's the kind of sound you make when something wallops you like a ton of neutronium. I stared at the print for about two minutes. Then I walked over to Thomas's desk and handed it to him.

He stared at it five minutes.

"The '97 Clarkson isn't worth a—a plugged Venusian nickel," he said.

Suddenly he was yelling into his desk annunciator.

"Get me Earth! Get me Venus! Get me every office we have. Call the Space police and have them put a warning through the whole System. Any ship with a '97 Clarkson Bolideometer is to pull to the nearest port at low-blast. Do you hear me? Yank every Clarkson '97 and smash them to bits."

The picture? I don't know how Dongee did it. Plain dumb Martian luck. When he snapped the meteor that nearly clipped us, he got half the instrument panel in the picture. The Bolideometer reading was *one minute*. And the meteor was already there, caught on film.

THE next day, Thomas promised that Solar Incorporated would take full blame for the *Star-Clipper* catastrophe.

"How about the chief pilot of the *Star-Clipper*?" the kid asked.

"James Ellory will be exonerated, of course," Thomas said. "And reinstated in full pilot rating. Now, if you will, come with me to Phobos Penitentiary to visit him—"

A gray-haired man was brought to the warden's office. I took one look.

"Kid!" I asked. "What's your last name?"

"Ellory," the kid said. "James, Junior."

"Gosh, kid," I said, "I should have known."

Then I pulled Dongee and Thomas out.

"Thomas," I said, "don't waste your time offering Jim a position in your firm. He's going to be a space pilot, like his father."

I grabbed Dongee's arm.

"Come on, Dongee. Back to space trucking for us. It's monotonous as hell, like I always told you, but what the hell—maybe we can pick up another hitch-hiker."