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TEN TO

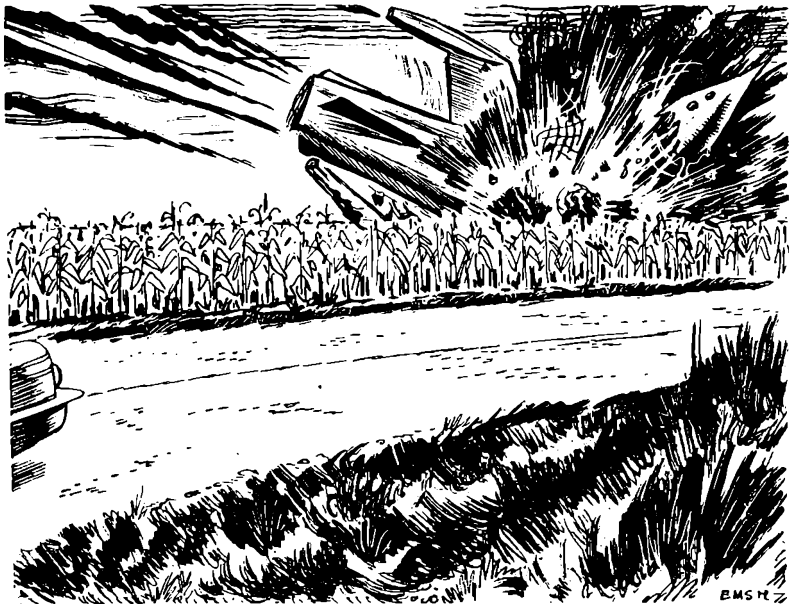


BY RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

ILLUSTRATED BY EMSH

They promised to meet again in ten years, after they'd explored all of space. It was sentimentality, of course, such as kids have always gone in for. Only, out in space, kids turn into men. . . .

THE STARS



The official name of man's pathway to the planets was the Harmon Jet Engine Number Three, but that lasted only long enough for someone to name it the Pusher. It was appropriate—it pushed men right up from the Earth, and out into space in droves. It opened the planets to

every young fool who had stars in his eyes and the ability to dig up the small sum needed to put the Pusher into a hunk of tin that could be called a ship. Like the ten who stood in the rain outside the science museum at Hume Hall, waiting to get a sneak preview of the gadget.

There was Lenz, shabby as usual. Beside him was Gannet, always laughing, with the white marks in his hair and the radiation burns he'd got in the recent war. There was Glodosky, the accident-prone medical student, flexing the fingers of a wonderful mechanical hand which had replaced the one he lost to a freak prewar infection. Beside him, Dopy Devlin, who always got high marks in science, was talking to himself as usual. Tobias was trying to sound as brash as usual, but the look in his eyes said that his motorcycle didn't mean much anymore. Roscoe, the University's star end, simply looked embarrassed, but he was the big, silent type, and that was normal.

Harwin, the ex-soldier, had come up from the rows of olive drab barracks—quiet, experienced, a little swashbuckling. Flashy Phelps had left his sleek fission-driven car parked nearby, and money had made him sure of himself, unless you looked too close. Major Benrus, the glamor soldier, might have been a garage mechanic, except for the war. But now the calm force of him couldn't stop pushing him on to victory.

And finally, there was Little Thomas, the last—and maybe the least—of the ten. Precise, silent, excellent in mathematics, and

about as noticeable as a snowflake in a blizzard.

Like a good-natured impresario, Flashy Phelps now took command. "The caretaker is opening up!" he said. "Let's roll . . ."

A minute later they stood before the invention that promised to unlock the barriers of the solar system to almost anyone who had the nerve for such adventuring. It was a shiny tube, clamped vertically in a thrust-measuring harness, inside a glass case. Around it, setting it apart by contrast, was the dusty room, dating back to the eighteen-nineties. The other displays had been set up much more recently, of course. But could one ever look at dinosaur bones, apparatus for demonstrating physical facts, or cut-and-dried star-charts, now?

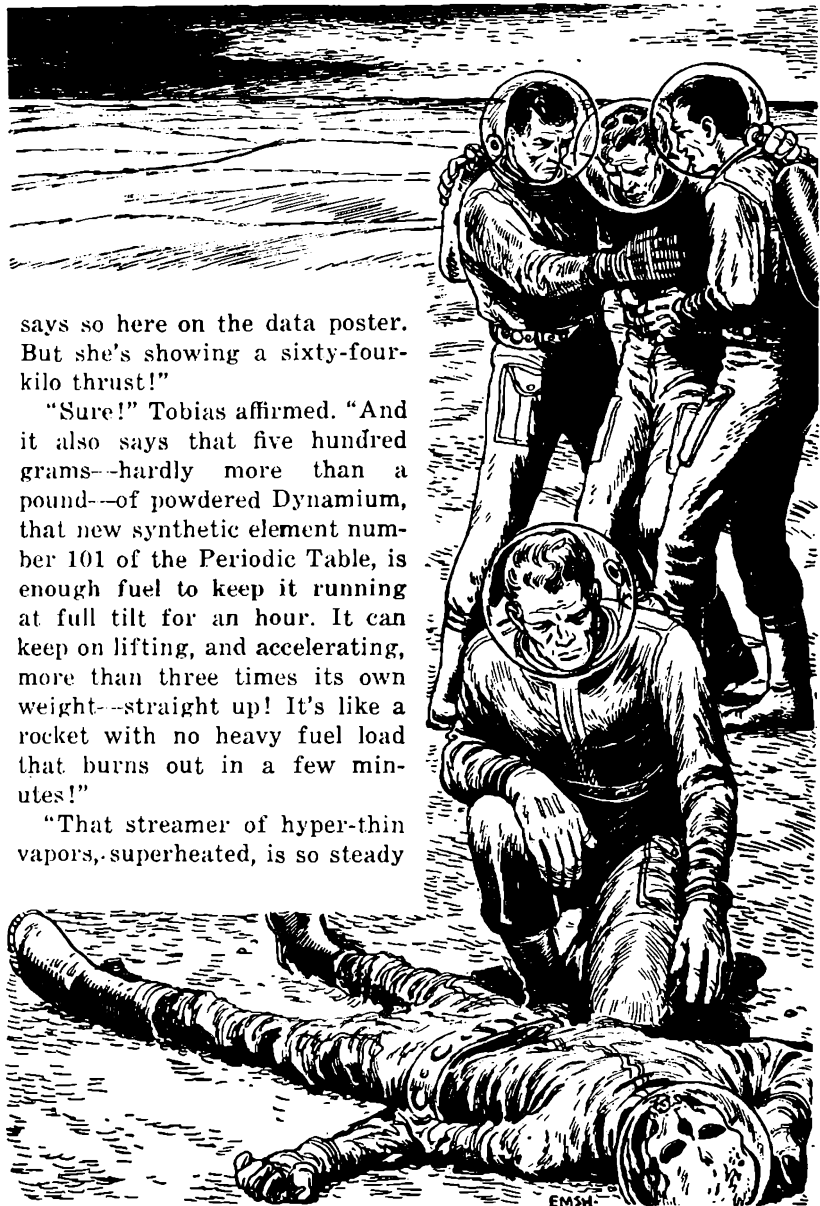
The old caretaker touched a button gingerly, and a tenuous blue flame, a meter and a half long, shot down from the bottom end of the cylinder, causing it to jerk sharply upward in its thrust-harness. The protecting baffle below whitened with heat. The thick heat-and-radiation resistant glass of the case, took on a blue fluorescence. Gauge needles jumped and swung, registering.

"This model Pusher weighs only twenty kilograms," Roscoe, the football man, pointed out. "It

says so here on the data poster. But she's showing a sixty-four-kilo thrust!"

"Sure!" Tobias affirmed. "And it also says that five hundred grams—hardly more than a pound—of powdered Dynamium, that new synthetic element number 101 of the Periodic Table, is enough fuel to keep it running at full tilt for an hour. It can keep on lifting, and accelerating, more than three times its own weight—straight up! It's like a rocket with no heavy fuel load that burns out in a few minutes!"

"That streamer of hyper-thin vapors, superheated, is so steady



that it seems almost rigid," Devlin muttered. "It's hard to believe that it's really moving at seventy percent of the speed of light. It's that velocity that gives the force. Acceleration, going on for hours, could build up almost any speed . . ."

Gannet kept staring at the engraved plate on the side of the jet engine. "*Patented November 11th, 1992,*" it said. More than ever he felt as if he were inside some kind of temple to coming history which both trapped and glorified him. The others couldn't feel much different.

"This is just a model," Harwin, the ex-soldier, said hoarsely. "But we've all heard. A full-size Pusher is so simple and easy to make, that, with government subsidy because they want other worlds colonized, it costs only a thousand bucks."

To these students, some of them shabby for more reasons than the still-existing shortages, this remained a lot of money. As they were reminded of a price, their faces fell a little.

"Oh, well," Gannet said.

Regret was tempered some by relief. Perhaps the thought was shameful; but if finance kept you from doing a thrilling but fearsome thing, then you were excused with honor.

But restless young minds have always been gifted with a special

talent for getting the most for the least.

Devlin's eyes were a bit wild. "Do we have to be stymied that way," he said, "when we know that if we can get the Pushers, we could build our ships with cheap war-surplus supplies?"

Everybody looked at Devlin strangely. He was a book-theorist. A soft, pedantic kid. A high-strung, sheltered screwball.

"Think your money will let you go?" Lenz taunted.

Devlin's cheeks paled. "Shut up, wiseacre," he drawled.

Then Phelps spoke with his usual flourish, saying what he had planned all along, and what was half expected of him by the others:

"I can stake you all to a reasonable amount, without strings, fellas. It's only fair. I can do that much for my buddies."

There was a tense pause, during which each man must have tried to weigh his own courage and dreams against the scare in him. Lenz was the first to answer.

"Thanks, Phelps," he said earnestly. "Count me in."

"Me, too," Tobias seconded brashly.

After that it was like ragged rifle fire.

"I'll finance myself. Pride," Harwin, the veteran, stated.

"Same here," Roscoe, the football man announced.

"I'll be another independent," Gannet declared.

"I can't swing it alone, Phelps. Thanks," little Thomas piped up. His companions stared.

But they stared more when Dopy Devlin growled: "Do you really think I'd stay out of this? Just give me a hand, Phelps!"

He was the defiant Mamma's Boy. The young pedant, the rose petal. How would he survive out there? You heard the stories of what happened even to some stolid people. If he went through with his boast, you felt that it was suicide.

Then there was Glodosky. Not exactly a stumble-bum, but with the same effect. The guy whom the paint bucket always fell on, and whom stray baseballs always hit. One of those called accident prone by statistics. A bird with a mysterious affinity for ill-luck. What would happen to him under the naked stars of space, away from the mellow scene of a campus?

Ruefully he shrugged a pair of massive shoulders, and grinned.

"You know me, fellas," he said. "But should I stay in bed all my life? Thanks, Phelps."

Phelps and Benrus didn't have to declare themselves in, for it

was a foregone conclusion. Now everybody looked to Benrus for guidance. He was the oldest—twenty-five. He knew speed and power. As civilian kids they'd all seen the war. But they envied his deeper knowledge of living. It was a thing that they had to get caught up on.

Benrus' glance was sober and a bit quizzical. The others could hear sleet tapping on the windows.

"Just to be sure," he said. "we'd better each check on what we want from life."

"Philosophers are dopes to wonder what life means," Lenz answered promptly. "Food, love, sex. Getting rich, maybe. And helping to find the materials to make living better, everywhere. After the war. But sidestep the myth of perfection. The fun of life is in the struggle and the gamble, the seeing what comes out of the years. Being able to look back, feeling that you haven't missed too much—that your memory-mixture is rich, and quite a bit wild. Maybe most of all, life is to make yourself a man . . ."

"For guys like us, he's absolutely right," Gannet joined in.

He felt the truth of this boiling in his blood. And there were prompt secondings of his statement.

"Ten years from now, to the

hour," Tobias said loudly, "let's all meet in this same Hume Hall, and compare notes and adventures!"

This bit of young whimsy echoed, thin and naive, in the big room.

Benrus, the ex-flier, laughed. "Okay—let's," he said.

From that moment, in their minds, they were really on chilly, fabulous Mars with its ruins and deserts, on hot, smothered Venus, or among the crazy, wonderful Asteroids, where an inhabited planet had been blown apart, perhaps by a colossal atomic torpedo that bored to its center, to leave the artifacts of its civilization drifting, preserved by the vacuum and the cold through millions of years, in a huge orbit around the sun.

And what went on in the old garage that Phelps rented out of town, was no isolated phenomenon. All over America, and in scattered parts of the recently ripped-up world, the same strange phoenix was hatching, as youth with new technology—some of it war-born—behind it, reached for colonization of the solar system.

Here were the ghosts of all the motorcycle, plane-model and aero clubs of the past, concentrating now on bigger objectives.

Long before the ordered Push-

ers arrived, blueprints from supply houses became the guides for the welding of skeletons of Titanium-alloy tubing, meant originally for the frameworks of supra-atmospheric bombers. In that old garage, ten such skeletons, all about fifty feet in length, but of varying types, began to take form in a row. Fingers, some of them not as deft as others, blundered, but there was always help at hand. Within the frames, anti-radiation bulkheads, gyroscope rotors, chlorophane air-rejuvenators, and delicate electronic instruments, all meant for the bombers, and now purchased for almost nothing—were fastened into place according to precise directions in the instruction pamphlets.

Then, over the skeletons, went the thick skin of insulated metal-sheathed plastic. Its seams were sealed and rubbed smooth, and tested for leaks. After that, the cabins—usually cylindrical, where a man could only lie prone and strapped to the padding before his observation window—could be arranged some according to personal taste: Supply lockers here, water tanks there, pin-up girls here, and so on.

Maybe it was no surprise after all that in the late spring, shy, precise little Thomas completed his ship and bolted his Harmon Pusher into its tail two

days ahead of his companions. Moreover, the government safety inspectors said that his craft was the best, and showed the finest workmanship of the lot.

Perhaps Thomas got a bit scared, then. Or maybe hero worship cropped out in him. Anyway he said:

"You test-fly it, Benrus. Show us how."

So, on the next Saturday morning, from a nearby vacant field, the war flier took it straight up for a thousand miles, on its thin streamer of fire. And most of the way Benrus' rough laugh came back to the listeners by radio:

"Beautiful ship, Thomas! . . ."

But it came down in a vertical power dive. Benrus' mistake was to fly it manually, instead of switching in the delicate robot controls that space-craft are meant to use. Perhaps Benrus wasn't as fit as he used to be, blacking out under acceleration at the wrong instant.

Anyway when Phelps drove with the gang for ten wild miles, the farmer told them that his potato field had splashed like water. The hole in the ground still glowed and smoked with the heat of impact. Of Benrus there wasn't much left to bury or cremate.

Just the same, here was

Phelps' chance to decide that it was his duty to run the food company he owned, himself, instead of delegating the job to others. Or for Glodosky to remember his jinx and unfinished medical studies. Or for others to consider the worries of their families. Gannet, himself, almost wished he weren't an orphan. Anyway, the key-man and main prop of the crowd's project was gone. But for Thomas, it might have withered like a rotten apple.

He had built the death ship. He turned ghastly pale; then green. Then he lost his dinner—which is not a romantic or delicate way to show grief. Two big tears made the mess worse. But he said without phony dramatics:

"I guess Benrus used up all his luck in the war. So I take his ship, *Gremlin's Roost*. And not to Mars, like I wanted. But to Venus, where he meant to go."

What he could do, the others felt compelled to equal.

"Stick to Mars," Tobias urged him later, with a touch of hysteria. "You know that Venus is no lovers' dream. Days and nights weeks long. Crazy seasons because of the extreme tilt of the planet's axis to the plane of its orbit. Smothering heat, then smothering blizzards. An atmosphere mostly of carbon-dioxide. No place for anybody but a fa-

natical scientist. Like living in a dark hole—breathing canned air. Be smart, kid! . . .”

Tobias looked tough and Thomas looked weak. With his nerve Thomas propped the sagging project. And in another way Tobias did the same.

His case headed up several days later, when he brought a dark, fiery, and very pretty little girl to the workshop. Or maybe she insisted on coming.

“I’m here to tell you fellows,” she said evenly, “that Toby is through with all this.”

Gannet felt the meaning of this scene just as the others must have. An ancient situation. The sweetheart with all of a woman’s capacity for gentleness and fury. The guy protected and possessed for his good or his detriment. Because she loved him, and had her own ideas. Because, partly, those ideas were his, too. Kids and a home. Tender, secret moments. Yeah, there was substance to such thinking, too.

Tobias looked sour, shamed, and pleading. Yet he defied his companions and the half of himself that sought to prove his strength and to satisfy a burning romantic curiosity to see the strangest of the strange.

His lips jutted. “I can’t help it, gang!” he growled. “I’m not twins! I can’t cut myself in halves and go two ways! Kitty’s

right! I’m staying with her! But it’s not because I’m yellow! Damn you all—you understand that, don’t you! . . .”

“Sure, Tobias,” Phelps tried to soothe honestly. “We understand. We’ll have wedding presents sent, and we wish you both the best of luck and happiness . . .”

But the gang’s inner contempt had to harden its remaining members. For they had to be above the thing they despised . . . Gannet wished mightily to escape the stigma of the white feather. And could it be any different with the others?

“Scratch two,” Gannet said later. “Benrus and Tobias.”

Eight ships hissed up from the rented field the next day. You don’t reasonably fly space craft manually. Speeds are too great; controlling is too finely timed. Nobody monkeyed with the pilot instruments. So the test flights were all successful. There were no more ruined potato patches to be paid for.

Dopy Devlin came back, pale, but lost in a rapturous daze. “I saw the stars at noon!” he muttered. “And the black sky with the air ripped off and the stars white hot! . . .”

They were all cocky, triumphant, and relieved of brass-flavored scare. Even Glodosky.

Though a humble wonder showed in him.

"I got back down, Gannet!" he enthused. "Here I am without a scratch on me! Maybe my jinx is busted. Maybe I'll make it to the moon with you and Devlin . . ."

Gannet shook Glodosky's cold mechanical hand, just then realizing that these two would be companions. Phelps and little Thomas were plotting their courses to Venus, as their first venture. Not so good, some thought. Lenz, Roscoe, and Harwin meant to shoot straight out to the Asteroid Belt.

Some minutes later, Harwin took Gannet aside, and gave him the gently insolent, suit-yourself advice of an older man who has faced danger many times, and has drawn shrewdness from experience.

"The moon, eh, Gannet?" he said with a slow grin. "Getting into things by slow stages—like some people going into ice water?"

Gannet chuckled. "That's about it," he said. "The moon's the nearest."

"Umhm-m—that's one way of approaching an unknown that could finish you sometime," Harwin told him. "With caution. Me—I like the long, deep dives better. I already talked Lenz into switching from Venus to the

Asteroids. The farthest place, the newest, the best. It ain't the culture of the Old Planet that blew up that's so important. It's that the whole metal insides of a world are laid open for easy mining. You know that the Earth has a heart that is largely gold, too. But who can get at it? And who wants gold, anyway? It'll be almost worthless, now. Think of almost pure uranium instead. The power source of the future is out there. And no end of industrial metals . . . Come on, be smart, Gannet. I like Glodosky. Too bad a good guy has to be a Jonah. But some of his luck might rub off on you. As for Devlin, when he mumbles to himself I wonder how the doctors can call him emotionally fit."

Gannet felt a sharper twinge of worry. But a stubborn and adventurous perversity hit him.

"I like to do things my way, Harwin," he laughed. "Step by step, not skipping anything. And I haven't seen the moon. Maybe we'll meet out there in your Asteroid Belt sometime before long . . ."

It was mellow June, and the bunch graduated. Then some went home to visit their folks, and to say so long for a while. Thomas, Devlin, and Glodosky were all under twenty-one, but nobody kept any of these at the

last minute, from space. Their intentions were an accepted thing everywhere, nowadays. Gannet was nineteen, but he was an orphan.

Some of the crowd brought relatives back to see the takeoff. Devlin's mother came. And his sister. Devlin's mother was a prim little woman, different from what Gannet had suspected. Hard. But maybe naive, too. She seemed to think her boy was just going on a picnic, when she said to Gannet:

"He's a strange kind of son . . ."

Kath Devlin was just budding out of the awkward age—with great promise. Her pale brat's eyes dug at the ships with such interest that Gannet said jauntily for her to hear:

"Before we get started, we'd better check for stowaways, fellas!"

Kath met this compliment with a pout and a blush and a look of murder. Too bad for her that she wasn't a boy.

Phelps' smooth Bett was there, and Lenz' Mary. Mary showed the hurt of long neglect. Bett masked her injury with a light and cheerful indifference.

"We used to know each other—for laughs," she said. "Good luck."

Phelps bowed, and patted her cheek. "Thanks, Bett," he said

earnestly. But his former sardonic elegance still showed in the neat coverall he was wearing.

The ships started out almost together. With the power of the Harmon Pushers to depend on, waiting for special favorable moments for a takeoff to any given destination was no longer necessary. You plotted your trajectory to fit the time that was convenient.

Two ships flashed sunward. Three arced around the Earth to head in the opposite direction. Three more climbed more cautiously moonward. None dared to use full power. And all joined the general restless flow outward, to colonize the solar system.

Not many hours later, Gannet watched his ship slide down backwards on its jets, to a velvet landing by instrument. Then, in a space armor that was really a high-altitude suit for bomber crewmen, he was stumbling through the dust of thermal erosion, and through the daze in his mind. The feeble lunar gravity confused his feet.

There was the mountain ring-wall of Copernicus all around him, one half of it shoving the black fangs of undiffused shadows toward the blazing sunlight on the crack-lined lava around his boots. There were the brittle stars and the inky, airless sky.

The Earth was high, and fuzzy blue-green, but he had the frightening impression that it was really far beneath him, and that he would never be able to climb down again.

There were the clusters of glinting metal igloos that showed man's presence, even where there was no natural air to breathe. And he was moving toward them. His ears rang with the silence. But in his brain was the thought that he hadn't gone hysterical in space as some guys still did. Even the weightlessness, which felt exactly like falling, had brought him no panic. That much was proven. There was that much growth. He was that much of a man. And to the extent of what was around him, so much of burning curiosity was satisfied. He was on the moon! This was his personal conquest!

Devlin and Glodosky he had hardly troubled to notice, but now their voices came to him by helmet radio:

"We made it—we got here!" Glodosky was saying thickly. And the words were more pointing out of triumph.

Devlin's tone quavered, either in terror or ecstasy. The sourness in him was gone. "Luna," he was saying, as if in apostrophe. "What was it like when it was brand new—back two billion years? Great meteors falling.

Smoking craters. Hot lava. The vapors that might have formed an atmosphere, leaking away into space, because the gravity was too weak to hold them . . ."

"Yeah—we know," Gannet growled. "Here come the security police."

Martial law compelled you to work, here. That was to be expected, and Gannet and his companions accepted the fact as natural. Even the air you breathed had to be labored for—removed chemically from the oxides in the rocks.

For Gannet it was all wonderful, at first. You slept in a dorm dug deep under the lava, sealed, white-walled, spotless. Your life was as coordinated as the parts of a watch. You ate vegetables grown in vaults, under sunlamps.

Devlin was put to work in those gardens. Glodosky refused a hospital job for rugged work digging more tunnels and vaults—extending Earth's hold on its nearest colony. So Gannet and he were doing the same things. Other young men were around them, with histories paralleling their own. And it was good to be building something human and proud.

Gannet kept his high spirits while Glodosky's cheeks hollowed with homesickness, and while Devlin, mumbling, withdrew deeper into himself, causing

other men to look at him askance.

Gannet didn't know quite what to do about Devlin; but to Glodosky he said encouragingly:

"Feeling low can happen to anybody, pal. You'll straighten out."

"Sure I will," Glodosky affirmed.

But the nostalgia was his undoing. Befogged by it, he wandered right into danger, when somebody forgot to put up a safety rail, during blasting. Glodosky's jinx was still around.

Advanced medical science could keep him alive, and patch him up, but it couldn't give him back his own legs. He was fixed up right there in the lunar hospital; and when it was over—well—you couldn't tell the difference.

His legs, now, were like his right hand. They looked like flesh on the outside, even to the dark hairiness. But inside each there was a motor, and many steel cables, and a small atomic battery. Platinum wires finer than spiderweb were connected to nerve-ends in the stumps of Glodosky's real limbs, to pick up the minute neurotic currents. These were amplified, and used to direct the movements of Glodosky's new underpinnings just as if they were the ones he had originally been born with.

But it took three lunar months. Time for the novelty of being on the moon to wear thin in Gannet. Time for his mind to get into mischief, thinking of the discipline exercised by officials whose natures were perhaps harshened by the harsh lunar scene. There were the "forbidden" notices. Ah, yes—it was good to dig more sublunarian chambers, but you never got close to anything important.

The great fortress, that could range all of Earth with its guided missiles, was closed to you—the place that was meant to check future wars which didn't seem likely to come anymore, but somehow might anyway—Man had grown wary of himself, and of his old hopes of being finally civilized.

You never got close to the great astronomical observatory, either, or to the vast research labs, where more wonderful newness was being figured out, far from the Earth, and where extensive populations would not be wiped out, were there an accident. Such places were for the elite. Or that was the bitter, inaccurate thought. Thus you never became an aware part of the moon's greatest meaning in the invasion of space. That was for the experts—those who were investigated and put under contract on Earth. You were of the

bums, the drifters who came on their own, and were always suspect.

Gannet fought such bitter thinking—with scant success. Being off the Earth changed everybody. Or was it life that did that? As soon as you broke its placid surface, and struck out to do something big and dangerous, your view of yourself and everything began to shift. A thing once yearned for could turn to venom inside you. A friend could seem an enemy. Or vice versa.

In his restlessness he began to hate the moon. He felt responsible for Glodosky—tied to him. He thought about little Thomas. Deep in Venus he should be. If something hadn't gone wrong. And how about Harwin, Roscoe and Lenz? Out in the Belt! While he was only on the moon, stuck, left behind, outpaced! He was almost as bad as Tobias and his Kitty and his cowardice.

Glodosky was back, working in the tunnels, for less than an hour when Gannet said to him:

"I'm going, fella. Out after Harwin and the others. Maybe you and Devlin better go home."

Glodosky's eyes lighted. "Unh-unh," he grunted. "I have my own ship. I go where I please."

A half hour after Gannet got into space with the ship that had

been stored at the port, two other well-known craft were tailing him. He cursed under his breath. What was he supposed to be, a nursemaid? He could cheerfully have killed Glodosky and Devlin just then.

But being in motion once more, and on some kind of obscure quest, had lightened his inner nature. So, after a moment he smirked wryly into his radio and said:

"Okay. I guess you guys didn't find yourselves on the moon anymore than I did."

The acceleration produced by just one Earth-gravity of force, operating for an hour, builds a velocity of something over twenty miles per second. And the Harmon Pushers could do better than that. But maybe it's not so good to go much faster than fifty miles per second, because, for one thing, you have to slow down for a landing. Even so, distance is eaten up fast. A million miles in a bit more than five hours.

But Gannet and his friends didn't get to the Asteroid Belt, then. Yeah—the reason was Glodosky. A brace in his ship snapped under the strain of acceleration, tore a big hole in the hull skin, and let his air out. All he could do was lie in his cabin in space armor, and sweat, and sound scared.

No, you couldn't desert him,

even if he begged you to—which he didn't. Sixty hours later, with Glodosky almost gone from thirst, since he had had no emergency flask of water inside his space suit, they soughed down through a tenuous atmosphere of nitrogen, mixed with small quantities of carbon-dioxide, water vapor, and oxygen. They were down on the wide sweep of the space port of a place called Cross Valley, soon afterward.

"I'm kind of glad we could come," Devlin said through his helmet radio. "Thanks, Glodosky, for being a clunk—this time."

His eyes were bright and interested. He kicked at the dry ground, and with a quizzical intensity watched the thin wind—air pressure was only one-point-two pounds per square inch, compared to fourteen-point-five, Earth norm—blow a little cloud of dust toward a lazily turning anemometer atop a gleaming laboratory structure of Earthly design.

Gannet was glad that he was here, too. Cross Valley was one-third several years old, its hemicylindrical corrugated-metal buildings caked with dust; and it was two-thirds yesterday-new and shining. All buildings were hermetically sealed, to confine breathable air, of course. The new part was to meet the needs

of the flood of wanderers who had come to Mars by virtue of the Harmon Pusher.

Gannet looked at the town, that sprawled in mid-afternoon sunshine from a weak sun not much more than half the diameter, in the greater distance, than it used to have, seen from Earth. Yet its brilliance was undiminished in the frostiness that must be creeping into the air from a high of fifty degrees, F., at noon.

And he looked beyond the town to the umber hills, toward which the trails led in all directions. Young men followed those trails, now, to hunt for—well—whatever they found. Wealth, the solution of some mystery, a mood that was yearned for, or death. Nobody yet knew fully what Mars might be good for in the new scheme of things.

The fabulous Martians had been wiped out long ago. But in return they had smashed even the planet of their enemies. Something ached in Gannet, and it was as cold as the thought of empty pockets far from home—even though he was now flush from recent pay. It was cold and lonely, but there was freedom in it, far from the crowded Earth. The scene fitted the feeling, too. The soft tones of dusty color, and the hard blue of the sky. The

peace was that of a small, cold planet, sinking toward death.

Gannet's gaze pulled itself nearer, to explore the vast, flat bottoms of the two valleys that crossed, here—through telescopes they would once have been called "canals," and they may have been artificial.

No water was in them now, of course. There was just a great, rusty mound a mile away—the ruin of some machine. Monoliths loomed, wind and dust scarred, until their bas-reliefs were all but obliterated. There were sparse growths that he had read about. They had scientific and common names.

The low shag-trees had paper-dry whorls, the color of an old hornets' nest, faintly patinaed with moss. The grubbers looked like huge gobs of hard tar, left to flatten irregularly in hot sunshine. But they were covered with little wrinkles, like lichen. They were hoarders. They stored not only moisture inside their massy forms, but the oxygen that they produced from carbon-dioxide—as all green plants do—as well. They didn't liberate it to the atmosphere but compressed it into hollow spaces in their horny shells. Such economy on Mars was necessary. There was so little oxygen in the air. And during the bitterly cold nights

the stored supply served to maintain an animal-like tissue heat in them by slow oxidation.

Gannet thought of this, and of many other things. In the town, through the thin plastic of his helmet, he heard muffled hammering. Absently he decided that a home-made space ship, powered with a Harmon Pusher, was exactly like a covered wagon. This was exaggeration.

"Hey, Devlin!" Gannet croaked. "Can I go into your unpunctured ship cabin and take off my helmet, so I can have a drink of water? Before I shrivel?"

This plaintive request aroused Gannet from his thoughts.

"Come on," he said. "Let's try the town. Beer, maybe. Five bucks a bottle. Unless the Harmon Pusher has already cut the cost of transportation. But what the hell. . ."

They entered a nearby hut by its airlock. There was a restaurant. And because of an inevitable need in a place like Cross Valley, there was also an inevitable friendly man who grinned and said, "Do you birds want to work?"

No—that doesn't have to be a crooked proposition, even on a frontier. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred it must be okay. . .

Before sunset, Gannet, Glodo-

sky, and Devlin had signed up. Their ships went into storage again. And in the blackness of the night, with the stars blazing, and with Phobos, the nearer moon—not round, but a small jagged chunk crawling eastward among them, they were aboard a crawler—inside its heated airtight cabin—while its caterpillar treads ground at the valley floor and then at the desert, where the temperature must have dropped to eighty below zero, at least.

They rode all night, cross country, and thin winds covered their tracks by blowing dust, and fine salt from oceans that had died a hundred millions of years ago. They didn't know where they were going, except from what Bart Lasher, the driver who had hired them, had said. "A couple of hundred miles west. Wait and see—you'll like it. . ."

"Yeah—I like it already," Devlin said. "I used to dream of Mars when I was a kid. And here it is. Deserts, valleys, strange life, ruins. Fifty million years ago its people died. In a big scrap across space. . . And now civilization is coming. Of people. Not—*beings*. Corruption and cheating are here already. The rest comes later. . . The dome cities. The harmony. The governments and politics. . ."

Devlin talked on and on. But you never could quite tell whether he was being fervent or sarcastic. . . Sometimes they all dozed—like hoboes riding a freight long ago. But mostly they didn't.

In the night they passed huge broken dams and rusted pumping stations rimed with frost, squeezed out of the dryness by cold. And strange towers loomed against the stars. And in the dawn there was a white haze of tiny frostcrystals, lying low in the valleys.

At 10 a.m., by watches that had been retarded 37 minutes and 23 seconds from the daily Earth norm, they arrived at a small camp of nisson huts at the foot of a bluff which was the mound of a city. The huts, dust plastered, were marvelously camouflaged by nature.

They liked being here at first. They couldn't help it. It was so new to them. The bunks were not as clean as on the moon. But good enough. And the food came from Earth, in dehydrated forms. Water was flown in from the snows hard hoarfrost of the south polar cap a thousand miles away. Things were better than they had expected, and that was a surprise that lifted them from the dumps. And you expected guys who had stayed here a long time to look tough,

didn't you. Tough and full of grouches? It was natural.

So they went to work, digging into the strata of that bluff. Sometimes you used shovels, sometimes fine knives, and sometimes even brushes as fine as a painter of portraits uses. For care was the nature of the work. It was like archeology with a heavily commercial angle. For what you found were exquisitely colored tiles. Bowls of stone or porcelain. Most were broken, of course. But there were ways to patch them together so that the breaks couldn't be seen. But it was important to find all the pieces that you could. For it was hard to make restorations. And then the price dropped, on Earth, in the art salons where stuff like this brought minor fortunes. It was a new fad. . .

Throckson, the boss, explained some of this, but he didn't explain all of it. Yet it didn't take many days to get the general drift. Throckson was long and lean, and near fifty. And he could handle himself pretty well. And he matched an old mold. The man who had come to a frontier to win wealth and power by whatever means came to hand. Sometimes he still looked the professor of literature that he claimed to have been. But he had a system, now.

Also pretty cut and dried, in a way. It had no aspects of violence, except for the young roughnecks he kept around in case somebody got aggressively difficult. Otherwise, you did your work, you got paid and fed. And you could quit if you wanted to. Only, no means of transportation was provided back to Cross Valley, the nearest settlement. Moreover, ostensibly for greater freedom and comfort while working, your regular space suits were taken from you, and you were issued a lightweight coverall with an oxygen helmet, suitable for Mars. It really was more comfortable. But it carried only lightweight oxygen tanks, instead of regular air purifiers. And in the cold of the Martian night it would never be any good.

"They'll give you space suits back, too—if you ask for them," a big youth who looked as though he'd soaked up all the ruggedness of the solar system, told Gannet bitterly. His name was Hellers. . . "Only, there's always something wrong with those suits. A tear you can't fix. Or a missing part. . . Oh, sure—lots of men have quit and started out, crazy mad. Do you think they ever got to Cross Valley? You guess. There's no life for men in Martian air."

Gannet never cursed or any-

thing. Not audibly. Nor did Glodosky. Both looked scared. And sober. And wise after being dumb. But what good did it do? Think, maybe? Figure out an angle?

As for Devlin—well, any time now. He worked all right. He kept the color in his cheeks. But he'd lost four-fifths of his contact with reality. He looked at things with a kind of half smile—but he seemed to look more beyond them, or through them. The hills around. The gorge or "canal" extending away. And he muttered—not even looking embarrassed any more. You could catch what he said, sometimes.

"Sea roar. Surf on beaches. Here. Once. Like Earthly geology. Similar. Not the same. Coal formed in the same way, though. In swamps. Before intelligence developed. Pulpy things without bones that corresponded to the dinosaurs. Blue sky. Rain. The air was never dense, though. Low gravity. High atmospheric expansion. . . And never a very warm climate. Then the Martians. Things that stood up on legs without bones, and made the first spears. . . Can you see them in the darkness? Half visible. . . Gone. . . It's figured out a little, isn't it? But there's lots more. Fossils. Pieces of machinery. Pumps can be understood. Engines. But much can't

be understood. I wonder what a Martian would think a table fork was for, or a lady's powder puff? . . ."

Poor Devlin—made of softer stuff. And what good would he be when trouble came? Well, he'd die fast, anyhow.

And a couple of times Glodosky said: "I wish I was like Tobias. Home with a woman. He's no fool."

Gannet didn't even agree, audibly. It went without saying, now. Aspects had changed, utterly.

No plan of action was made. Events just blossomed out by themselves in mid afternoon, two weeks after Gannet and his companions had arrived. A tough old man took issue with Throckson. It didn't matter what the argument was about. There were too many possible subjects. Throckson knocked the man down, pulled him erect, and repeated the process. The man's light helmet was torn from him, and he gasped in the thinness. But Throckson, with a smirk on his face kept pounding, even after the man's bloodied lips began to turn blue with the cyanosis of asphyxia. . .

Maybe it was a cold, dispassionate thing on Throckson's part. Part of a plan of periodic intimidation for everybody. To

maintain order, later. Of course he started a riot. Someone took a swing at him, too, and he went down. Gannet got the second poke in, and it also had good results. Then the pug-uglies went to work, and everybody had to quiet down, or run. Some did run for a ways. But most of them came back to surrender, because they didn't want to die.

Five didn't come back. They were too full of rage to surrender. To knuckle down. There was Gannet. And Hellers. And another big guy with a soft drawl. And there was Glodosky, who might have gone back, if Gannet had gone with him. Maybe Devlin's motives were the same as Glodosky's—if his mind had any rational motives left.

They straggled down the valley among the boulders and the corkers and the grubbers—those queer Martian growth. Enraged, Gannet, Hellers, and the other big man forged away from camp for almost an hour without thought of consequences. But the sun was sinking, and that meant ninety below zero. Also, their oxygen tanks were low. There was no food or water. Cross Valley was two hundred miles of this kind of wilderness, away. A pale haze of frost was gathering high in the air, already. . .

Gannet growled to his companions. "Throckson got free of

law out here. It was easy. Why—in a hundred years, when Mars ought to have many people on it, and cities, there probably will be hundreds of thousands of square miles of desert that nobody has put a foot onto. There can't be any law in such country except nature. . ."

His wits began to come back out of the blur of blind rage. But enough fury remained to stimulate ingenuity. And there was fear of the lengthening shadows, and of frosty cold creeping through the coverall, to add to that. The blue shadows. The quiet scene took on the taint of death. But the question of how to breathe was more pressing. Oxygen. Oxygen. . .

The grubbers had it. If there was any way to make use of it. Martian plants were like Earth plants. They liberated oxygen from carbon-dioxide under the action of sunlight. They made starch molecules by hooking the carbon to water molecules drawn from the dry air, too. Photosynthesis. A function of chlorophyll. But Martian plants couldn't be wasteful. Especially the grubbers. They kept moisture sealed in their hard bulbous forms. And the free oxygen, too. They couldn't let it go. It was too precious. To maintain a faint body warmth by slow combustion at night. That was the way

they had learned to survive the nocturnal cold, and the harshened climate.

All right—what good was having read about all that? It was like saying that there is iron in most any kind of soil, when you needed to make yourself a knife. . .

He kept right on going, away from camp, though. He wouldn't go back. Dying was bad, but not a bad enough alternative. He didn't tell Devlin or Glodosky or the others to go back. He was through with that. They were supposed to be grown men. If they weren't entirely that, was it his responsibility? He felt worn out.

But the sun sank out of sight. It gilded the castle-like crags of the gorge walls far ahead, for awhile after that. But the stars came out brilliantly, and the speck of the Earth, attended by the lesser speck of the moon, and it seemed a dream that he had ever been to either place. The cold deepened, and gnawed at his fingers and his lips. And after that—well—desperation took him, and he seemed just to follow his nose, doing all he could.

He found a soft spot of dust underfoot, and began to dig a hole into it, barehanded, and dog-fashion. "Dust insulates

against cold," he said to anybody who would listen. If you listened hard enough, you could hear, on Mars, even through a thin helmet, without the intervention of radiophones.

Then he tore at the grubbers, and threw the pieces into the deep hole. Hundreds of pounds of the stuff—even on Mars. Then he packed the whole business over with dust, mounding it high, stamping it down for a kind of seal.

At long last he really burrowed—like a worm going into the ground. He pushed dust backward, plugging his point of entrance behind him. He got down a yard or more to the grubber fragments, and with his gloved fingers, he tore them apart. They half exploded with little pops, from the pressure of the almost pure oxygen sealed up in spongelike cavities within. Maybe it would work. Maybe it was a new invention, sort of. Maybe his companions would catch on to what he was trying to do, and follow suit. He hardly cared, one way or another.

He got his helmet off, and tried to breathe. There was a thin atmosphere sealed up around him. But it was mostly oxygen. He found out that, for the moment, he could get along. There were little dewdrops of water inside the cavities in the grubbers. He

lapped at them. And though he wasn't hungry yet, he chewed some of the fibrous pulp, and sucked it dry. There had to be some slight food value at least, in most any plant. The stuff tasted faintly sweet, and there was an oiliness on his tongue. Maybe there was nothing in it to kill him. So this was an experiment. Maybe it could keep him going.

He tore up more chunks of grubber, to free more oxygen. Then he tried to sleep. It didn't work, then. And in an hour, by the luminous dial of his watch, he had to rip up still more grubber parts. Once he succeeded in sleeping—only to awaken from a nightmare of suffocation. That was near dawn, when the awful cold was beginning to dig down to him. By then he didn't have many unused grubber fragments left. His head ached terribly. Well, maybe he'd figured out a way of sorts to keep alive. But as much or more depended on endurance. Two hundred miles! Well—no. Say a hundred and ninety-three, now. They'd already come part way. But he bet that other guys had thought of his technique before. And had any come through alive? Not that he knew of.

He put his helmet back on, and let the dregs of the contents of his oxygen flask flow into it, and dug up to daylight. He saw

then that the others had paralleled his scheme exactly. Digging deep holes, mounding up dust over the pulp of the grubbers. And the others had already emerged. They'd even added a new wrinkle, that Gannet figured would have come to him too.

Stuff your oxygen helmet, except for the absolute minimum needed for your head and vision, with fragments of those same plants. Put the helmet on. Start ripping the fragments apart with your teeth. The key point of course was, that on Mars, with lungs full of concentrated but expanded oxygen, you could go without your helmet, and without breathing, for most of a minute. But you had to work fast.

Gannet worked the trick himself, and then said: "Come on—let's go!" One thing was in their favor. There were plenty of the queer plants they needed growing in the flat canal bottom ahead. If that hadn't been so they would have had to try to carry a supply. Which wouldn't last long. Well—that time might come. If they had that much good luck.

His mood was waspish. His nerves tore at his mind, and the awful desolation around him tore at his nerves. Mars' charm

was gone for him, now. And this valley was what you'd call a fertile region—comparatively! What a place to kick off in! He ached mightily to tear Throckson apart. Maybe the fury of revenge in him was the one force that sustained his efforts to keep alive. Sometime. Some way.

Hellers and the other guy were in worse shape than he was. "Three greenhorns we got on our hands, too—Mic," he growled to his companion. "Like having babies to take care of. Especially Mumblehead, here! He was nuts at the start. . . He'll go loopy at the next turn. Well—you don't catch me trying to hold him down! . . ."

Gannet growled under his breath, as he saw Hellers' twisted thinking. Baby, huh? He'd given Hellers and Mic the tip about the grubbers, that enabled them to still be alive, hadn't he? He fought for self control to keep from leaping at Hellers. But he hated Devlin too, just as he worried about him. Devlin with the kiddish pink cheeks, the eyes with the cherubic look that had lost all grasp of reality, now. And his mumbles that you couldn't hear the words of, in that thin muffling air. But he spoke up loud enough a few times, so that the sounds came through his helmet, and across the small distance to the other men.

"Swell picnic, fellas. Nice to be along. . ."

Every fifteen minutes or so the grubber pieces in the helmets had to be changed for fresh stock. But the march went on. Lying behind some rocks they found a corpse in a Mars suit. He'd managed to steal an extra oxygen flask, it seemed, from Throckson's camp, on some previous occasion. But both his flasks were empty, now. And all that Glodosky, who went through his clothes with shaking fingers, found on him was a crumpled letter from a little place in Illinois. It was signed, Mom. His name was Fetterly. Burt Fetterly. Yeah—take it along for identification. Maybe. . .

After that the daze began to close in on Gannet. When the sun got higher, aches began to afflict his body. Something like the bends in that thin air, maybe. But you had to keep going. Thirst was on his tongue from the dryness. And the drops he kept licking from inside the spongy cavities, didn't seem to help as much as they must have. Without them he would have been in a lot worse shape.

Sometimes they had to carry huge bundles of grubbers across desolate stretches. Bundles fastened to their backs with fibers torn from the corks—those strange treelike growths. In the

fifty degree heat of noon, Gannet felt hot and feverish. But maybe the fever was a good thing. He didn't lose so much moisture from his body, sweating.

They bedded down that evening, as they had the evening before. They were near a vast pavement of rusted iron, to which areas of white glaze still clung. Lord only knew what it was for. The millions of years and the thoughts and purposes of rough skinned creatures who hadn't been men, and who were long extinct, hid that. And who cared, now, anyway? . . . Maybe they'd covered twenty-five miles that day.

Two days later, around noon, Hellers blew up. Gannet watched it happen as he might have watched a dream that he didn't believe in. Hellers just ran off toward the low hills of the widened valley. His screams turned swiftly fainter. The other man, Mic, took off after him. And what were you supposed to do about it? Try a rescue? Where did you find the energy for that, or the concentration of mind, even if there was any good or any reality in all that? Gannet half wanted to run, himself. Sure, it was an impulse to try to escape. From aching feet and body, and strain that went on and on and

on. . . Why he didn't, then, was maybe that he kind of lost interest. He just kept plodding, with the mumbled conversation of Glodosky and Devlin droning, without words or meaning in his ears. . .

Every time he replenished the Martian plant-life in his helmet he did so more clumsily, and with less interest, as if he were going to sleep. Near sundown, all he did was give up—flopping over in a faint.

He woke up with his helmet stuffed again, and with Devlin with all the old sourness out of his nature, talking to him very gently: "Easy, pal. We've gone almost half way. We can make it. We can bed down here for the night."

Devlin's voice was scratchy as with great thirst, but his words were perfectly rational. And Gannet found himself almost hating the thought. Devlin the kid, the Mamma's Boy, the crackpot from the start, the soft-headed dreamer, still on his feet, and still—or again—able to talk straight, when this day two guys of large and ugly proportions and long experience with Mars, had gone to their certain deaths, raving nuts. . . While he himself, who had always looked down on Devlin, had worried about him, was also near to coming all in pieces. He met the

truth of it now with a poisonous resentment, which said that all the natural laws of human nature were off beam, when it came to places beyond the Earth.

But as Devlin continued speaking, Gannet knew that a conviction of Devlin's advantage had been growing in him all the time.

"Listen, Gannet," Devlin said. "I found out that I've got something most people haven't got. All Hellers and that other mug could see here was the terrible desolation. I've been seeing a lot more. Mars as it was way back—just after the planets were thrown off from the sun. Mars with its first life—perhaps in its small salty oceans of those times. Mars in a stone age. Then, grown old, but at the peak of its civilization. Exploring space, even. Establishing a few colonies. Then, Mars at war with its nameless neighbor. To the complete smashing of one, while the people of the other were wiped out. And maybe Mars of the future, too. See what I mean. Reverie and dreams, under control, can be a good thing, Gannet. Velvet padding between you and the harshness. Sure I mumble. It doesn't mean anything. It's part of the reverie. . . Try it yourself. Now let's get you bedded down. . ."

Devlin sounded very earnest.

The next day Gannet did try the reverie. He knew what it was, some, of course. He'd felt the charm. . . But he wasn't quite like Devlin. . . He couldn't romanticize Mars, right now. But he thought about girls he used to know. And his dead folks, and the country place they'd had. And a certain island in a lake. . . It helped. And it might go on helping. If he didn't get in too deep. For that stuff was utterly out of reach, now. . .

But energy still kept dropping lower and lower, under wear and tear. In another twenty-four hours and thirty-seven minutes, both Gannet and Devlin were just about done. So Glodosky croaked through cracked lips: "Come on. I'll carry you both. . ."

"Carry us?" Gannet echoed. "How are you so strong?"

"You know," Glodosky answered. "My legs."

Gannet had all but forgotten. His legs. Not of flesh but of machinery. Atom powered. Never tiring.

And so they were able to go on. With Gannet thinking a curious thought. That if Glodosky hadn't lost his real legs, they'd be about dead by now. Misfortune adding up to—maybe—good fortune. Life. Cock-eyed. Unpredictable. Who could blame anybody for anything?

Sometimes Gannet and Devlin

still staggered along on their own feet. More often they were lashed to Glodosky's back by means of a rude sling of vegetable fibres. They still had to stop to collect pieces of the grubbers for oxygen and moisture and a little food value at frequent intervals. And for more nights they had to burrow into the ground to escape the cold. Their consciousness seemed to fade away from them. But here necessary actions became a kind of automatism.

And so, late one morning, the people on the streets of Cross Valley were treated to a strange spectacle. A pair of strong legs bearing three nearly dead men, their clothing grimed with the red, salty dust of Mars. It was not easy to guess that only months before, they had been students in a quiet university town on Earth. But some who saw them did guess. For many had had a similar background. They too had joined the vast outward surging and had become part of the colonial impulse that the Harmon Fission Jet Engine had made possible. They rushed forward, eager to help as much for curiosity as for kindness. The weight of three men on Mars was about equal to one on Earth.

Gannet awoke at last to the

dim hammering and clang of building. He was in a hospital. It was natural, wasn't it, that in this harshness the nurses would be male? Sunlight was on the windows, heavily glazed to resist internal airpressure of an Earthly level. A studious looking middle-aged man came after awhile, and after profuse good wishes and congratulations for his still being alive, announced his name . . . Dan Simpson . . .

"Survival on Mars, Mr. Gannet," he said. "Under native conditions, I mean. You and your friends have found a way. From what was in your helmets, I can guess part of your method. It will be useful knowledge for all colonists, here. A safeguard in case of emergencies. Something that should be standard, published advice, for everyone here, or on the way. I am prepared to pay fifteen thousand dollars to you three men. And the others said, come to you. There will be royalties as well, of course. So, would you explain your method fully to me, and allow my firm to prepare pamphlets?"

Somehow the thought of commercial things, so soon after his and his pals escape from death, irritated Gannet. So did this man's gentle, rather insipid face—Gannet had already forgotten his name, and did not try to re-

member it. And with some brash carelessness, as of a haughty person tossing a coin to a beggar, he said:

"Sure, friend. Listen carefully. . ."

But he found a satisfaction, too. At having done a little. Adding something to knowledge. Doing something that counted. It was one thing that people aimed at, wasn't it? He talked on with better consideration, now.

Yet his mind was on Throckson and revenge. He'd go back out there now—with whatever forces he'd collect. Police, or whatever else there was. Break the empire of a frontier baron. . .

But later, after they'd let him up and out, he found it wasn't that simple. Throckson had taken care of things like that, it seemed. The sheriff wasn't interested in anything but positive proof, and they had nothing to show him. Mr. Throckson was a highly respected man here, and they couldn't just take anyone's word against him. Besides, the police were needed here—they were short-handed, and . . .

Gannet left him, feeling contempt and something strangely like relief. He couldn't understand it, but somehow the trip to take revenge on Throckson didn't

seem as important now as it had before. He told the others, and they nodded. They stood there in the Mars suits from Throckson's camp, but they were all busy with thoughts that had nothing to do with getting even. Finally Glodosky shrugged, and turned to Devlin.

Devlin mused aloud: "So? I wouldn't mind staying on Mars for awhile. What's it got? Well—not much in available resources. It's half dead. And cold. But it has color. Romance. That's an easy thing to sell. And the Earth feels so small. And it's getting so that people can make any place comfortable. They like the challenge of doing that. I could stay—help see what we can do about Throckson. Work. And maybe try historical research, here. But the Asteroids are better. And plenty of folks have more right to get Throckson than I have. He's a damn fool who'll wind up very soon, smashed and dead. So why should I lose more time and risk my neck further, trying to do something that plenty of others are itching to do, anyway?"

"We've been telling about Throckson, Gannet," Glodosky added. "While you were still out cold. And they could see where we came from. So more than that bird we just talked to, knows. Come on. Down there's the post

office. Maybe mail was forwarded from the moon. From the gang. Especially from Roscoe, Harwin, and Lenz, out there where we ought to be going."

Gannet felt a difference in his friends, now. Something everybody fought to get. Growth. Devlin, especially, seemed now to have his feet on solid stuff. Out of danger and strangeness, he'd won pride and confidence. He seemed to have found out what he wanted.

Both Devlin and Glodosky collected bunches of letters. But Gannet, the orphan, got nothing at all. In spite of himself, he felt lonely and left out of things.

Both of his companions thumbed through their sheaves of envelopes. Devlin glanced at Gannet. "Nothing from the crowd, here," he said. "Just family stuff. My mother. My sister."

"Same with me. Only my dad," Glodosky stated.

What they shared with him was the disappointment at no news from their friends. The family part they tried to depreciate. And that, he sensed, was consideration for him. In his new confidence, Devlin had lost his defensive sourness, too. That was another thing that space had done for him.

"We'll head for the asteroids

anyway," Glodosky said. "We know that Roscoe and Lenz and Harwin headed for the asteroid, Ceres."

Gannet shrugged. He had wanted to go out there. He still did. It is what he would do. Still, there was a dull regret at leaving revenge behind.

"Okay," he said. "So now we see if we can buy regular space suits."

They found a shop. Gannet and Glodosky took new armor, still crated after shipment from Earth. High altitude suits, they were, really, like the ones they had had before. War surplus. But even at the low prices for such surplus, those two armor used up the better part of ten thousand dollars out here.

Devlin did a little better. The smaller armor he bought was second hand, third hand, fourth hand—who could tell? Each dent and scratch on it might have had a history. He put it on right away. Then a puzzled smile came to his lips, and extended up to his eyes. His nose twitched.

"Who hocked this thing, Mister?" he asked. "I mean who owned it before?"

The graying shopkeeper grinned. "Somebody that needed a ticket, on a regular space liner," he said. "Back to Earth, or else farther out. I don't re-

call which. But a talkative person."

"I see," Devlin answered with some awe. "I could stand a larger size. But I'll take this one. . ."

When the transaction was completed, but while they were still all inside the pressurized shop, Devlin beckoned his companions close. The face plate of his helmet was open. "Make like dogs, you guys!" he chuckled.

They sniffed dutifully. Gannet caught just a trace of a delicate aroma emanating from the armor's interior, and it didn't come from the unwashed Devlin. It was a whispered hint, plying on them through memories of soft lights and music, far, far away.

Perfume!

And on the outside of the suit, over the heart, a red rose was carefully painted.

Gannet and Glodosky donned their own new armor as fast as they could. Out in the street again, they all tried out their helmet radiophones. But that wasn't their interesting motive, just then.

"It could be the effeminate type," Gannet teased Devlin. "Male."

"Could be. Sure," Devlin agreed mildly.

"Or else some blowsy adven-

turess who'd cut your throat for a buck," Glodosky hinted.

"Or a sweet and tender violet—who knows?" Devlin himself chuckled.

"Not too likely—off the Earth, or even on it," Gannet stated.

"Hey—what are you lugs tryin' to do—discourage me?" Devlin protested mournfully.

"Of course not—we're your friends, and we just want you to be very realistic so you will never be disappointed," Glodosky said. "Of course, probably, the former owner of your suit hocked it for the purpose of getting home to Earth, rather than to go farther. That's a more regular procedure for folks who go broke."

"It is," Devlin agreed airily. "But who was it who once said, 'You never can tell. . .?'" So what are we doing, anyway? Chasing skirts as our primary motive? We should have stood home. . ."

"We didn't have the sense to do that, and now it's too late," Gannet laughed, meaning of course that if they had known about the events that they had just been through, in advance, they would never have had the nerve to start out at all. Now he was glad that they hadn't known. . .

"We've got to collect our ships, from storage, and I've got

to patch up the hole in mine. Then we can get some more fuel. And start out," Devlin said.

They did all of that, clearing Mars at midnight for Ceres. Leaving with other Pusher vagabonds and their homemade craft, for the same destination. Mostly they were young, but a few were old.

The stars were very bright and hard and unfeminine. But somehow they looked a little different now, to Gannet. There were women around in space, too. Adding another mystery to mystery. Being alive,—that was a supreme success in itself—made him feel good. And lightly, for the sake of old-time joshing, which was back for now, he laughed over the radio, and said:

"Just because you got her tin overalls doesn't make her your girl, Devlin." Then, strapped prone in his cabin, against the weightlessness, he slept. The slightly curved course outward was well plotted. The millions of miles reeled by.

Later, much later, he saw the speck of Ceres growing before him. There was a fuzzy haze of light around it—boulders, meteors, dust, wreckage, following lunar paths and encircling it continuously, chained by its slight gravity. There was a glow from its great smelters—metal being the great new industry of

the asteroids. But these countless thousands of bodies, most of them too small to be seen from Earth in a telescope, ranging singly and in clusters in an orbit almost half a billion miles across, could not be thought of as a single place, like Mars. Distances were too vast. To say that you went to the Asteroid Belt, this was not a very definite explanation.

Gannet watched eagerly, wondering how much more eagerly Devlin must be watching. This region was legendary. Here a thing that people had worried as a possibility for Earth, too, had actually happened. An unnamed, inhabited planet had been blown to pieces, the latter following now many scattered orbits, around the sun. And Gannet's reveries about the region must have been then of the same quality as Devlin's. How quickly it must have happened. How cities, and whole sections of country must have been hurled skyward, the flames from the atomic explosion, and from the hot guts of the planet, being chilled and quenched quickly in the cold of space, so that destruction of that ancient culture had not been sudden and complete. In fact many of its artifacts had been perfectly preserved in the cold vacuum of space, and had made the millions of years that had

passed since, mean nothing to them. The handiwork of Mars. Some gigantic torpedo, perhaps. But Mars' people had died too, in that great conflict. Perhaps both sides had fought for empire.

Gannet and the others had to cut their speed to a crawl as they approached Ceres, to avoid collision with the yet uncleared lesser wreckage of the ancient planet. But they got through to what someone had called Boom Town, safely. At the spaceport the rotating beacon lights were reflected from a square mile plain of almost flawless and polished nickel steel—not imported, and not smelted in furnaces here, either. It had been smoothed as, on Earth, a native granite outcropping might be smoothed and cut. Nickel steel, the stuff of many meteors, un-rusted in the absence of oxygen. And Ceres was like a gigantic meteor—a fragment that had come from deep inside the bulk of the original planet.

After their landing, Gannet, Devlin, and Glodosky, stood in a group by the administration building of the port. Devlin didn't mutter, now. He spoke aloud.

"The theory of planets' inner structure," he said. "Materials settling out in layers, according to density, down to the center.

Light rocks on top, heavier ones below, then lots of this nickel steel. And at the center the really heavy stuff, in quantities undreamed of on the surface. Gold, lead, osmium. And a whole string of radioactive elements. But on Earth, and on other regular planets, all that stuff is buried too deep—maybe forever out of reach. Not here, though. . ."

"Sure—we heard about all that before, Devlin," Glodosky laughed. "Look at the town. Boom Town. A corny name. But honest."

It certainly was honest. It had the air of having been built overnight—but according to a precise plan. And it was still being built, swiftly—and for a swift, efficient life. Scores of huge airdromes, of thin clear plastic, flexible, but sustained by the atmosphere inside, looked toward the airless stars. And there were hundreds of long, low buildings. Factories, hospitals, laboratories, barracks. From the mines of Ceres, on what had been its deeper side in the original planet, came the radioactive metals that powered the post-war reconstruction on Earth, and the advance of industry, there, and the colonial surge into space. From the uranium of Ceres could be made more of the dynamium that was fuel for the Harmon Pushers.

"Even the moon was nothing

like this place," Glodosky remarked.

"Let's not just stand gawping," Gannet advised.

Their ships were wheeled into hangars, and they rode into town on a moving belt with their packs, and they found their way to a name registry office, where they were required to put down their own names, and could search for others. The calendar was different here, and arbitrary. There were numbered months of approximate Terrestrial length, divided into thirty watches, measured by the twenty-six-hour Cerean day.

Thus they found the names, and the time of arrival of their three friends. "Fifth hour, third watch, twenty-second month." Long ago, of course, that turned out to be. But the address of the hostelry was also given. "Merret House, Fourth Lane, Second Cross."

In the ridiculously low gravity, they almost floated to their destination. Harwin was in the lobby. The ex-infantryman. He searched their faces, which must have changed some. His own features had thinned down some, but his pale eyes still had that light challenge. He wasn't surprised to see them. Just pleased.

"Good thing I came back from prospecting," he said. "Figured

you'd be around soon. But Lenz and Roscoe have gone out again. . . Lenz thinks he wants to set up some kind of business. He's got that kind of a head. Roscoe's just a big lug. . ."

"Funny we could find even you in a place as big as the Asteroid Belt," Gannet offered, grinning. "I mean it strikes me funny. Of course it's easy enough, as long as you are on Ceres. . . Why didn't you write to us. . .?"

"Why didn't you write to me?" Harwin laughed back at him. "Don't worry. Same old story of separated pals, wandering. Too much happening. Too much that's new. New people, new things. No spare time. And the past getting a little dim."

"Tell him what happened to us, Glodosky," Devlin said.

"Glad to," Glodosky began.

But Harwin's interest turned out to be only mild. When Glodosky was finished talking, he had his inning.

"What I'll tell you will be mostly a build-up for the Asteroid Belt," he said. "You can find anything around here from a quick finish to fame and fortune—maybe in a way that you could never imagine beforehand. You've heard this before from the explorers books. Gold? Hell—don't worry about gold! Think of wreckage floating in space—

never changed through all the ages, since the Great Blowup. As if a freighter, loaded with household supplies, and everything that makes for civilization, came apart in space. Only it's not *our* civilization. It was one that was bigger than ours, some ways. Do you know that, on a little piece of the surface of the old original planet, I once slept in what was left of the house of an ancient inhabitant? That house was stout enough not to fall completely to pieces by that shock. And I made what I suppose you'd call the stove in the place work. Self-contained power unit. But I didn't even bring it back with me. The old owner was there, too—dried up and on his pallet, black—with bones sticking out of him, and not human at all. Kind of a leathery sack, with dried out tendrils, and eye-stalks sticking out of him. . . . But these are just hints, of course. There are a lot of things and devices that you can find, that you'd have a tough time figuring out. Just floating in the emptiness. Maybe they're whole devices, or just fragments of the whole, torn apart in the blowup. There are ideas in that stuff. Here, Devlin. You ought to be good at this sort of thing. Catch!"

The thing that lashed through the air to Devlin's palms

was a maze of wheels and grids and sliding parts in a round crystal case. Devlin looked at it in awe that was like love. Of course he might never know what it was. . . ."

And Harwin's voice ground on. "Things you find could blow up in your face. That has happened. Or it could be worth something. Of course there are the metal deposits, too—the mainstay of economics out here. You might as well say it's all like Aladdin's cave. But like that, it has a curse on it. You think you're a good guy, But wander around here for a while and you'll run into a situation where you know you're a wolf and a murderer. That is when death is on your tail, and morals don't mean anything. . . ."

You could see Devlin's eyes light up. This was for him. Even if Harwin was just gassing, some—as probably he was . . .

They jabbered on through most of the night. But in the morning Glodosky, the med student, headed for the general hospital. "I'll play it safe," he said as he left. "I've been riding my luck heavy lately. And you know what its like. So I'll play it slow, now. . . ."

Gannet found that Devlin had already left the hotel. He shrugged, and went to see Harwin's prospector's gear, put up in a



warehouse. When they both returned to the hotel, Devlin was there in the lobby again. He looked fuddled. But he was all smiles.

"Here she is, guys," he said. "Miss Jeanne Pauls."

"Pardon? Who?" Gannet demanded, puzzled.

"Miss Jeanne Pauls. Entertainer," Devlin said with a pained frown. "You know—former owner, and owner again, of what used to be my space suit. I gave it back to her. Jeanne, here are Gannet and Harwin—fellow voyagers, and former classmates of mine."

They greeted her formally while they looked her over. She was wearing the suit, all but the helmet. There was the painted rose. She was cute and blonde and fuzzy—cute as anything you could name. Cuddly, too. But hardly smaller than Devlin. And what was the thought of her now? The roving, reckless eye. The flow of young feminine shrewdness. Maybe she wasn't as old even, as Devlin. Chronologically, that is. But Devlin was still a baby beside her.

Now she giggled. "Hello, boys!" she said. "Devlin, you call him. But he's Arnold to me, already. Arnie told me that you thought I'd be headed back for Earth from Mars. Now why would I be doing that if I came

so far? And Arnie found me. . . He checked back all of the women's names for months in the Registry. There weren't so many. And there were only a few hotels listed where they went. I'm at the Woman's Y. Arnie came there, wearing this armor. Of course I saw the rose. . ."

She stopped, and a petulant look of anger and hurt came into her heart shaped face. Gannet knew that it was Harwin's and his own expressions that did it. Of humor, judgment, and worry for their buddy. And vexation. Gannet thought for a second that this Jeanne Pauls, this pretty little devil, was going to launch into a tirade against him. So he nudged Harwin, chuckled genially, and said: "That sounds like an interesting start, Jeannie. Romance among the asteroids. . ."

Later, though, he cornered Devlin. "Where did you get the money to buy yourself another space suit?" he demanded, "to replace the one you needed, and gave away?"

"Sold my ship," Devlin answered airily.

"Umhm-m," Gannet commented. "All in a couple of hours time. Boy—you work fast! Or somebody does! Crazy, ain't it—dim wit? A guy wins a little of being man-size from space.

And along comes a certain kind of sharp female operator and cuts him to zero. Haven't you got sense enough to see through this Jeanne?"

For a second a terrible fight loomed. But Devlin held himself in, maybe because Gannet could surely lick him.

"Sure I see through Jeanne," he said at last. "I don't say I thought she was an angel—not the regular kind, anyhow. I also see that you're trying to be a pal and put me straight. Thanks. But maybe I see more of Jeanne than you do. She was on Mars. Now she's among the asteroids. Alone. That means one thing to me. She's got guts. Courage. More in a minute than a lot of your 'good' stay-at-home girls have in a year."

There was a pause. Gannet wasn't really taken aback. Because he knew. He chuckled. "You're right," he said. "But does that make you any less a sucker? Don't you want to go along with Harwin and me? I thought you did."

"I'd like to," Devlin answered guardedly. "But not now. Sorry. I've got things figured out. The way I want them to be. The kind of mood that fits me and the asteroids. Maybe you'll see what I mean, sometime."

Just then Harwin came into the room. "Oh," he laughed.

"Rare jewels that women are out here, you want to hang onto one, eh, Sonny? Better learn judo, bud! Better hire a dozen body-guards. Better go for your blaster, whenever you hear a wolf's whistle!"

After a good sleep, Gannet and Harwin said so-long to Glosdoky, who had gotten the hospital job he wanted, and to the worried and rather puzzled Devlin. It was the parting of the ways, for a while.

Then they were off Ceres, plunging deeper into the Belt. Gannet was a little like Devlin in his quest for the charm of newness. Here was vigor and manhood. And what was better than to be part of the leading edge of progress and colonization, than to be a searcher for resources?

During his first hours, now, he realized the vast distance in the Belt. Deserts of nothing. Not all tiny worlds at fairly close quarters. But at long intervals. And sometimes in clusters. The glamor wore off quickly; yet for him and Harwin some of it always remained; or a different kind was built somewhere inside them.

There were already fifty-thousand men in the Asteroid Belt. But how often did you see even one besides yourselves? Nor was

the ancient wreckage of the culture of another people as thick in space as Gannet had pictured it.

And you lived in a space suit. Lots of guys didn't even use ships out here. A small Harmon Pusher attached to your shoulder-plate was enough to hurl you millions of miles. For where was there an asteroid large enough and with a gravity strong enough even to pose the obstacle of velocity of escape? You could jump off of the smaller ones, and never fall back, by virtue of your own leg power. There was this much of the mood of fairyland, travelled by means of seven-league boots. But the dark shadows were real. The shrunken white hot sun was real. So was the rancid smell of your own sweat inside your armor.

Food concentrates were all around you, inside. And you pulled an arm out of an armor sleeve and fed yourself—if you didn't have the cabin of a ship to relax in. But it was a lot the same both ways. You worked so much outside your ship. Water you drank through a tube, attached to a belt tank. Your armor became like your house.

You investigated all wreckage, and all meteors around you. Relative to yourself there was no terrific speed to either. For, in general, in the Belt, you became

part of your surroundings. You moved in the same direction, and at the same velocity.

Certain heavy metallic meteors were what you wanted. Some were black. Some dull gray. Visually you could be confused. But a Geiger Counter fairly shouted at you if you were right—naming fragments from near the center of that broken planet. Anything less than sixty-percent pure, you ignored.

Gold was no more worth the transportation than iron. And sometimes it was almost as plentiful. Earth had a heart of gold, too.

Gannet and Harwin loaded up the freight nets, which then trailed behind their ships. . . A full load on Earth would have been around fifty tons. Out here it was like a great bubble with a considerable inertial drag.

And there were the souvenirs to pick up, or discard. Rails of steel. Or of some kind of titanium alloy. Maybe they were girders. They'd been snapped off by some terrific force. Once they found what might have been the tip of a tower. Inside they found a small square of woven glass-wool tapestry. Its bizarre design in red, blue, and white, would have turned a bum like Throckson green with avarice. And there were little hooks of silver. And there was something which

might have been a microscope. And a flat object with one string. It was of vegetable substance, probably. Call it wood. Maybe the whole thing was some kind of musical instrument.

There was a lot more in that curious round tower-top or chamber, which must have been hurled into space like a projectile, when the planet it had graced exploded. It was all mashed together against the floor. Metal, wood blackened and dehydrated by the complete dryness of space, crystal. Substances and shapes that couldn't be named.

Harwin and Gannet took what they thought might be worth something, as they always did. Gannet felt there were ghosts around him. But he felt the thrill of discovery. This was living. This was a high point. And he thrilled to it.

Of course he always knew that if the steady murmur of his air purifiers stopped, he might mingle with this wreckage too. And that was just one thing that could happen. But it was good to know that you were equal to your surroundings. Yes—good.

Their first load went, not back to Ceres, but on to another group of much smaller asteroids. For from Lenz and Roscoe a radio message called them: "Unload at Refuge. . . Unload at

Refuge. . . Get fair prices at Refuge. Stock up at Refuge. Refuge, the way station. Follow the radio beacon in. . ."

"It's the business," Harwin laughed. "That was Roscoe's voice. From football to space, and then back to advertising. Seems as though those birds are even trying to start a town of their own. . ."

So they saw Lenz again, and Roscoe, browned and casual, but a little scared underneath. Gannet's and Harwin's loaded nets bounced lightly down beside the half-dozen nisson warehouses they had managed to build, and one worried some if this embryo outfit would ever be able to pay at all. But they'd run in supplies. And of course Lenz said, or maybe bragged, sounding like his old self:

"We made out well enough doing what you guys are still doing, to start something better. Now we've got two supply ships started—plying directly to Earth. Pretty soon we'll be bringing in prefabricated houses, and wall paper for living rooms. You'll see. . . Join up when you want to. . ."

"Not before, not now, not ever, not me," Harwin pronounced. "Maybe you can interest Gannet. But I don't think so. . ."

The next time they went out, Gannet and Harwin almost had

bad luck. Four men just in space suits fitted with Pushers tried to be friendly. . . . But Harwin was smart, and wouldn't bite. And Gannet used a rifle that fired explosive bullets to keep them off. Stealing ships and net loads was a common thing.

And when they got back to Refuge, Roscoe said. "Yeah, I know. I killed a bloke with a blaster. Had to. You know what he was on Earth? Yeah—a grocer. His credentials were in his pocket. And a family picture. Nice wife and kids. And he was okay himself, in the picture. Funny things the Belt does to people. Living the way they do. Not out of armor for weeks at a time. No luxury. Being scared of smothering something. So the weasel crops out. Watch yourselves, you guys. . . ."

Time went on. There were more and more men in the Belt. You almost expected to meet a few, now and then. Refuge showed signs of growing. Lenz, the poor boy, was building his town. And all the business in it belonged to him and Roscoe. But of course this was a common phenomenon, everywhere.

"They're forcing us farther into the wilderness, Gannet," Harwin began to kid.

Not always were they lucky. Once Gannet was far afield in just an armor. And his Pusher

went wrong and almost quit. His radio was too weak for an SOS back a million miles. Lucky his air purifier cartridge was okay. Food and water was the problem. So what did he do. Well, you know what they say in the belt. "You can find anything." He knew what to look for. He'd seen them before. Flat containers of thin sheet metal. There's a little airlock under the arm of each space suit, for the entrance or exit of any object. The pasty stuff in some of those containers, made him sick, and the sour liquid in others made him dizzy. But taking his time, he limped back to Refuge all right, and laughed with his friends. . . .

He had a funny feeling, though. Something which kept telling him—only just so long. Sooner or later. . . .

Lots of things happened. Harwin and he might have stolen supplies themselves, once, when they were far afield, and low, and when some men passed near them, and glared at them. They didn't, but the old cutthroat impulse was there. . . .

They'd been out from Boom Town on Ceres a year then. And then Glodosky finally wrote:

"Dear Gannet:

"I haven't heard from you. Maybe you're in or around Refuge, which we hear about. Lenz'

project, eh? Could be. I'll just take a chance. I'm sending him and old Harwin letters, too. Hope this finds you, and finds you prosperous enough to snoot an old friend. But I know how you are about letters, Pal. So I'm kidding.

"I'm in the same place—same hospital. And in spare time in research branch. Electro-neuronics—artificial body parts section. You know how I got into that, don't you? My legs and my hand. All news is good, so far. And there's more good news. But first there's some bad.

"I had a letter from Little Thomas. He's doing research work for an outfit on Mercury, now. What he tells me is that old Flash Phelps was killed on Mercury, shortly after their arrival, there. The accident was a simple one. He just slipped on a high ridge in the fog, and tumbled into a deep gorge. I don't know what to say to all that, except that he financed us all, and looked as though his chances of taking care of himself were better than with most.

"Thomas sent photographs. Of himself. He's not so thin anymore. He can grin. The kid in him is dead. There are photographs of Venus. Think of a cellar full of steam. But sometimes its snow. Boiling hot. Then cold. That's the climate. The vegeta-

tion is low and crusty. It cakes the continents and scums the oceans. The mountains are hidden, in the fog. And there are the test stations, to find out what Venus is, was, and will be like. You know how the stations look. It's like everywhere. Low domes. Barometers and wind gauges on top. Cosmic ray testing equipment. And everything inside to study air, soil, rock, water, fauna, flora—what not.

"So what is Venus? Twin of the Earth in size. Just a trifle smaller. Should be another, warmer Earth. Only it's not. Instead it's a problem world. What can you use it for? The crazy exaggerated seasons, because of the great tilt to the plane of its orbit. The long days. The heavy atmosphere. The place might be more useful if it had no atmosphere at all. And there aren't even any specially valuable mineral deposits.

"I'll show you the pictures of Venus when I see you. There are also those of Mercury. Dead as the moon, but maybe promising someways. At the center of its forever sunward side, they're building a great solar observatory, for instance. Shielded against the heat, of course. 'Like putting up a lot of gauges to keep tabs on the functioning of the central power plant of the

solar system,' is the way Thomas expresses it.

"I guess he found himself. Maybe he's no great scientist. But he fits in planetary research. Strange tough conditions don't bother him. They seem to give him a lift, instead. He'll be okay.

"Devlin married Jeanne Pauls, right after you left. I guess you thought it was bad. Maybe it is. And now they've got an heir. I'd say that he's one of the first kids born off of the Earth. All right—somebody says that space is too rugged for young love, much less babies. So it happens anyway. And Jeanne, remembering you, says, 'Ask that Gannet what he thinks I thought I wanted from life, anyway, just a new hat?' She's okay.

"You know Devlin, the dreamer—the scientific visionary. There's something of the South Seas beachcomber in that guy—and he's brought it out here—in his head. He has done some of the work you are doing. He's brought back a lot of ancient instruments. He's worked in the metals labs of the big refiners. Now he's on his own, again. Maybe he'll make out—some way. He thinks of things like vacation centers in the Belt—featuring new sports like races in Pusher equipped space armor, from asteroid to asteroid. I guess

maybe stuff like that will happen. Sometime.

"Well—enough for now. I hope I'll see you. Norman Glodosky."

So Gannet felt himself stirred up. And it was the same with Harwin.

"I guess the wind blows the other way for us just now, don't it?" Harwin said, and grinned.

"Yep, it does," Gannet agreed. "For now, anyway." He felt the urge in him. Go back to Ceres. Just for a look. For old times. But more for facts unravelling themselves strangely from the unknown. The future becoming the present, and turning itself into the visible and indelible past. Not hidden anymore, but still mysterious.

Harwin still grinned—and it was right that he should. It was no lack of warmth for the memory of Phelps. Flash Phelps. Cocky. Sure. Brave. Opulent.

"You'd say, 'scratch three.'" Harwin commented.

Gannet felt not grief so much as a frosty tingling. Surprise. As if he thought that there should be no end to Phelps, ever.

"And Devlin, the kid we thought was Earthbound, has a son in the Belt," Harwin said further.

"This all needs looking into," Gannet laughed.

They said so long to Roscoe

and Lenz. There were even a couple of girls in Refuge to kiss goodbye—for a hundred hours, or for good. Then they picked up and left with the casual ease of tramps, the same as if they were going out for another net load. The meaning, here, might be less or more than this. They went out across the millions of miles. To Ceres.

Boom Town had grown. Weight, under Cerean gravity, put scant limits on its potential for spidery height. For the beacons and guard towers.

But Glodosky wasn't much changed. Steadier and cooler, that was all. Another guy with a niche, now. The three went to a small cluttered apartment in a new building, and looked on the Devlin heir with appropriate and flattering comments, mostly for Jeanne's sake, while they saw nothing new. A red, healthy kid. A young couple struggling. How old a picture was that? And did it's being on an asteroid make any difference?

Devlin searched their faces, and they searched his. Catching up on time that was. Then it was more or less as it used to be.

"Do you still mumble?" Harwin asked brashly.

Devlin blushed.

"Sure he does," Jeanne laughed.

Devlin made a mock sour face

and said, "Want to see what about?"

He showed them a lot of pieces of apparatus from the ancients. "I'm supposed to take them apart and to try to see what they're for. Or what they're parts of. Sometimes you can assemble pieces into something more complete. I've got a knack for it. Sometimes it's very hard going. The archeological research division, coordinating with the physical research section pays me for data on devices delivered to me. And the same to a lot of other guys. Sometimes it gets a little screwy. For instance this little brush. Does it sound sensible to you that the ancients used such things to oil their leathery hides? It was me that found it out. From a color photograph fifty million years old, half burnt away. Maybe I'll find out sometime if they had advertising. For cosmetic products."

Devlin laughed and went on: "But that brings up another point—their color photography. Fragments of film emulsions have been put under test. That's a job mostly for a big lab. But I did find out one thing about their cameras on my own. They used not lenses of quartz or glass, but of clear gelatin. Focus then is controlled by flattening or thickening the lens—tensile

shaping, as in the human eye. I found a little sac of thin plastic in a broken piece of a camera, and dried residue of the gelatin, and figured it out. . . In other fields—surgery, medicine, manufacturing processes, the same hunt goes on. Almost in any subject you can name. Superimposing what they knew on what we know. . .”

“Some would call that bad, Devlin,” Harwin chuckled. “A weakening force. Men should invent their own gadgets, not pirate them.”

“And who lives to invent gadgets?” Devlin shot back at him. “I live for fun. And the pay-dirt of exploration is richer when you’ve got more hints to explore. It’s more exciting—particularly when the hints come from a world that blew up, leaving enough behind, preserved, perfectly. Nothing like that is true, on Mars. Too much weathering in an atmosphere. Nope—there’s no place outside the Earth and in the solar system, as wonderful as the Belt.”

Just then Devlin sounded sure—convinced. A guy who had jiggled into his own particular place.

“How did the Martians blow up this world?” Gannet asked “Has that been figured out yet?”

For a second Devlin looked scared—as if the question posed

a hidden answer that still might be a danger out here. “You can guess that it was atomic, of course,” he said. “Otherwise there’s not much data—yet. . . But forget it. What else have I got to show you? Books on thin sheets of metal, that nobody has read much of yet, you no doubt know. No—let’s get back to photography. Lots of guys bring lots of half burned junk in. And I get the restored prints. I’ve got quite a collection. Here. . .”

Gannet hadn’t really seen the like, before. Those photos in color, might have been taken yesterday. High thin clouds, no doubt ice crystals. Deep blue sky, almost like that of Mars. But the hills and plains were green. Often the vegetation was planted in rows, too. Gannet had walked across such rows, dried out and blackened, on chips of the outer crust of that world. The surface asteroids, they were called.

And in the various pictures, shapes reared up—quasi-human at a distance, leathery, decorated with bright bits of color. They were the many mummies he had seen, filled out, animated again. In some pictures, they bent over strange machines. In others—well there were a great deal of others.

Gannet laughed. “You want to put old machinery together,

Devlin," he said. "Why not put the whole planet together again? The pieces are all floating in space. Including all the smallest ones, which can't be seen from Earth, they'd make a world as big as Mars. It would be a real restoration."

"You think you're joshing," Devlin told him with a grin. "I thought of that. It could be done. With a lot of Pushers, the pieces could be collected. Still—what for? The asteroids are better as they are. They make a very special region. Which brings me to something else. . ."

Devlin spread some plans on a table. "A house," he continued. "A covering of thin, transparent plastic, with an inner layer of gum as a sealer against meteors. A sort of huge tent, covering house and gardens. The life of Riley. It could be nice. Beautiful. It's happening already, Gannet. Permanent colonists, loaded with their junk, are moving in. To farm. To feed the miners. To make things like they were at home. Me—I'm a family man, now. There's got to be a place for kids. . ."

Gannet felt elation creeping over him. Something like a meaning was, or seemed, clear. One civilization creeping over the wreckage of another. Order coming out of chaos. From the murder of colonial beginnings.

And the harshness of space. He really felt part of something big. He felt that his life was well spent. But maybe the ground-work was laid, and it was time for a shift. He'd had enough of the lonely thrills of vast distance, and of the danger in it.

He even looked at another kind of photograph—atop a cabinet of books. A girl just emerging from the gangling stage. A brat beginning to bud with great promise.

"I saw her before, Devlin," he said. "Just before we left Earth."

"Yeah, Gannet," Devlin said. "The brat. My sister. Kath. . . She's crazy. She wants to come here, too." His eyes teased.

Gannet thought of the thousand times that he'd envied Tobias. The guy who had stayed home with his wife. The guy whose choice had been along the path of good sense.

"It happens here, too," he said suddenly. "I'm gonna write to Tobias and his Kitty. I'm gonna put them straight. I wonder how they are. Life in a cottage. With roses. Well—that's a lot, too. I'll write right now. . ."

Jeanne's expression sobered suddenly. "Don't do it, Gannet," she said.

"Why?"

"Tobias is sick." She touched a finger to her forehead.

Gannet felt the prickles of

surprise and strangeness again. "Am I guessing the reason for his sickness?" he asked.

"Probably," Jeanne answered. Her eyes were soft.

Gannet looked back in time to see Tobias pleading that he was not yellow. While he didn't live up to his own standard. All he had had to do was get rid of those ideas. Relax on Earth. Accept his Kitty's pattern. But he hadn't been able to. He was in an emotional trap. Maybe all people were, partly. You could die in space. But you could die on Earth, too.

"Has his Kitty stuck with him?" Gannet demanded.

"Yes," Jeanne answered.

"If he'd come along with us, he'd probably be both alive and sane," Gannet said.

Devlin's grin was elfin. "Probably," he said.

Gannet and Harwin spent several days on Ceres, loosening up and doing the town. Gannet still meant to stay. But at last Harwin grew bored.

"It's fun for a while," he said. "But I like open space, better. I'd rather be on the pioneering end. Staying in Boom Town—well—what more is it than just another version of what poor Tobias did? No—don't let me influence you, Gannet. Do what you have to or want to. . ."

Harwin was all in one direction. He belonged in his work. Gannet was not so sure. Most of the bunch belonged where they were. After over a year, he was still at loose ends, unsettled. He wanted to team up with Devlin. Maybe it was the idea of not taking too many chances with his neck—and of seeking security. But what had happened to Tobias on the safe Earth, sort of disturbed that notion. It was a prop knocked out from under him. And he liked the open regions of the Belt. The strange discoveries. The fun of relaxing in Refuge, after bringing in a profitable net load. It was a way of life that could get into your blood. The adventurer's vanity was in it.

"Got to go wind up things with Roscoe and Lenz," he told Devlin. "But I'll be back—I guess. . ."

They were an hour out of Ceres. They stopped to investigate a large meteor mass, which probably^o had been examined many times before. It was more or less just whim. The way the sun glinted on flakes of gold. Gannet got out of his ship. He stood on the chunk of gold fleeced wreckage, watching a string of colonists ships, trailing away toward the farther regions.

Then, all of a sudden, he was very ill. The first thing he

thought of was a heart attack. But he knew that that was unlikely. Out of nowhere, and out of a peaceful moment, disaster had come to him. He coughed inside his helmet, and tasted blood in his mouth. Blackness began to creep into his mind. He thought of rumors of the viruses of diseases kept in cold storage like other things, from the time of the ancients, and active again among the colonists. But there had never been any real substantiation of such talk.

Then he heard the racing whir of his air-purifier that settled quickly back to an even hum. He thought of the fluid gum between the double walls of his space armor, that could quickly seal any small puncture, and of course now he knew what had happened.

He thought of the distance, represented by an hour's swift flight back to Ceres. Across cold vacuum. He wondered if he'd ever see the place again. "Harwin!" he called hoarsely, and saw his friend veer his ship toward him as he blacked out. . .

It was a long fuzzy pull back toward thready awareness. He smelled hospital smells, and saw the faces of his friends worried around him. But maybe he only dreamed it. It seemed that he was climbing a high hill, and

couldn't quite make it. For a while he sank into darkness again.

Then there was Devlin's indulgent voice chuckling:

"You were hit by a meteor, Gannet. It sounds spectacular, doesn't it? A fast stray, from outer space, from outside the Belt. The usual kind—the size of a large grain of sand, and traveling up to twenty-five miles per second. Of course the Medics didn't find it. It went right straight through you from right shoulder to left thigh, and on out into space again. Like a long needle driven in the same course, and producing the same kind of wound—with hardly any time for the heat of friction to burn tissues. You know, don't you?"

Of course he knew! His mind was almost defiant about it. He knew space, didn't he? What did Devlin think? . . . There were always those tiny meteors. On Earth the gravity drew millions of them into the atmosphere in a day. But the atmosphere, there, was a shield—they burned up quickly, and hurt no one. Here, there was none of that. Still, there distribution was thin. If there were fifty to a square mile in a day, rarely would they hit a man. But there were not nearly fifty. The chance of a man being in a particular few cubic feet of space at a given time, to keep a

tryst with a meteor from interstellar space, was slim. Yet it had happened before.

"The danger to those hit is seldom large," Devlin went on. "And you know you'll be all right. . ."

Yet if you wanted to, you could say that there was the intervention of Fate in it. Devlin didn't say anything to Gannet about a definite focusing now of the latter's plans. But he must know it was there. It was in his voice. Being ill or injured always swung a person away from rugged living. It was like having your mind made up for you. And Gannet relaxed in this at last. It was time for a shift, anyway. While he was still weak, he began drawing plans. He'd studied architecture at the U. hadn't he? Let Harwin, with the pioneer in him, chuckle and go away out into the wilderness.

So Gannet went along with Devlin's idea. They had the funds to start. Gannet had piled up a lot in his year with Harwin. And Devlin, with his job, and with the proceeds of some new processes, and alloys figured out from the relics of the ancients—to which he acquired patent rights on his own—was almost as well heeled, himself. Without getting rich being the main thought, as with Lenz.

"I want a certain mood to

what we do," Devlin said. "Otherwise, its the same as with lots of colonists. Bringing the fruits and flowers of Earth out here and growing them. . ."

Gannet agreed. The rest was rugged work and defiance of space again. They chose an asteroid almost an Earth day out from Ceres. It was a surface chip asteroid, from the old planet. One side held thirty square miles of ancient soil, in which water had been locked through the ages, in the form of ice. Most of the latter had not sublimated away even in the dryness of space, after the quick freeze that had followed that vast explosion.

Here, in the negligible gravity they blew up their first great plastic air-bubbles with atmosphere brought out in cylinders from Earth. Each covered acres of the plain, where the rows and stalks of old agriculture showed. The ground thawed, for the plastic roof cut off only the dangerous rays of the distant sun, whose heat was not diminished by great depths of atmosphere, and the greenhouse effect of confined air did its work. . .

Oh, you kept your weapons close to you. You couldn't tell what might happen, as far out as this. But you kept working. Drilling into the deep subsoil,

and introducing heat units to thaw the ice. Then attaching pumps, pumping it into old storage cisterns. A score of such wells they drilled outside of their airdromes. But the cisterns were under the latter. Water was of first importance. For itself. And for the oxygen you could free from it.

It was tough work for just two men and their machines. But it was best that there were just two, whose ideas matched, and who could trust each other.

In the warm, thawed ground, strange vegetation, shaggy and dark green, began to sprout, proving the fact of suspended animation in the frozen cold, and through the ages, at least in the case of some seeds. But they added Earthly grass. They planted young trees. They planted vegetables. Vegetation around them would keep the air fresh, charged with oxygen for them to breathe.

Then, using the rectangular blocks of stone from the ruins, they began to build Devlin's house. Though the more interesting ruins, the more complete ones, they did not disturb. Those with the strange cells and passages that humans could not use.

It was Devlin's house which they built first, for Devlin had a wife and son waiting on Ceres.

Gannet had not bitten off that

much to chew. He was aware of being smarter than that. It was in his grin.

To Devlin's joshing he had quick answers. "Right now I'm in this to help you, and for the profit of business, and for fun," he said. By fun he probably meant seeing something blossom out under his fingers. Something that meant that space was really being colonized. And not in a half-scientific and a half-haphazard way. Like rough and lusty Refuge, with its banks, foundries, and trading places.

But it wasn't to be said that he didn't think of the future. All in proper order. It wasn't to be said that he didn't think of Kath Devlin's picture. Kath who was still in high school, on Earth. Or of the girls of Refuge, even.

Devlin's wife and infant son, David, came out as soon as Devlin's house was finished. Then, long before Gannet's first house was finished, he had a dozen prospective buyers—men who had made good among the asteroids, and could pay the fantastic prices prevalent there.

Too bad that no one knew what lay in the ground of this asteroid. A thing made on Mars. A dangerous thing.

Devlin and Gannet expanded their housebuilding operations. They also admitted people to

build for themselves—to set up shops, and residences, and metal refineries, as in other places. But they retained strings of control. Their plan must be followed. There must be beauty, and not disorder. The commerce must be hidden. The mellow feeling of a countryside in summer must be preserved.

So that was their life for six years. By that time their asteroid was populous, and shaggy green, under its many connected domes. There had been a dozen times when Gannet and Devlin, and those who had joined them, had to drive off bands of space hopping marauders. But the result was being achieved.

They had a central lake, a great park, rich farmlands, and a thousand houses, perched sometimes, at fantastic angles on weird crags, for gravitational force—what there was of it—was always toward the asteroid's center of gravity, while it was not round. Going straight out toward either end of it, was always up hill.

Glodosky came out with the clinic. He was a physician, now, having completed his studies in a university branch attached to the hospital on Ceres. . . To this record, he had already added important research work. . .

And Kath Devlin came out

from Earth. One of the first things Gannet said to her, was: "Miss Devlin—you'll be disappointed here, now. The setup is too easy. You'd like to build from scratch. It's in your eyes. . ."

She was bronzed and beautiful. Let's see. She'd be about twenty, now. She liked blue. And he had meant what he said. She had all of Jeanne's courage. But she was a finer drawn type. She was here to work in the clinic.

Her eyes smiled as they went over him with that kind of searching which told him that she had heard a lot about him from her brother.

"Maybe you're right, Gannet," she said. "But the building goes on for a long time, doesn't it?"

She called him Gannet without explanation or apology, as if it were what she was used to. And what he said to himself was that here in her was his future. . .

When the asteroid tumbled over, turning like a pivoted chip in its regular twenty-two hour period, and it was night, he held her hand. He told her how long he had thought about her—since the day he'd left Earth. And she said, "This seems to be the way it's supposed to be—Norb. Yes—I know your name is Norbert. . . I thought about you, too. . ."

It was pretty well settled, then. Though he didn't want to hurry

her. She might not want that. Meantime Glodosky developed a crush. He worked with her all day, on local people, and on people moving among the asteroids. Mostly it was that kind of handgog crush. Common out here. Women still were not plentiful.

Maybe Kath was just flattered. "He talks about the farther planets. The giants. And little Pluto—little by comparison, way out in the cold and the gloom. The satellites of Jupiter have already been reached, haven't they? I guess that was natural, wasn't it? But the others are so much farther. I hear that an expedition to Saturn didn't come back. Considering that the Rings are composed of meteors, I guess dangerous strays must be plentiful there, too. . . But what will anyone do with Saturn's satellites? Or the farther Planets? They're all so big and cold? Of course I know my brother has found something. Still—well—nobody's tried yet for farther than Saturn, though the Harmon Jet is perfectly good for the greater distances. He talks about going, Norb. . ."

Kath's eyes were warm. Right then Gannet would have liked to poke Glodosky in the nose. Glodosky's crush was perfectly evident to anyone who saw him within half a mile of Kath. . .

But there came a moment when all this seemed unimportant. It was while some underground storehouses were being dug. Part of a rusted steel cylinder began to be uncovered. Gannet didn't even know it had happened.

Yet he did remember those last minutes very clearly, later. Walking in the late afternoon with Kath. Walking, or rather gliding. You could swim up through the air, if you wanted to. A couple of small boys were doing just that, nearby. Tus-sling and yelling.

Then the explosion came. An eye-searching blob of light. A delayed but terrific concussion that knocked them prone. Out toward the farther end of the asteroid. The ground opened and turned to dazzling fire, right in the middle of a bunch of air bubbles.

Gannet could guess what it was. "An old bomb," he yelled. He knew of course that it couldn't be anything like the giant that had destroyed the planet, perhaps after drilling to its core. But a bomb from the same conflict. A dud, before. . .

There was no time to speculate on such matters, now. There was just the rush to help. With Kath. Ten hours later, they and the other people were still laboring

like demons, sweating, burned by radiation. Five hundred people were dead. A third of the populated area was wiped out. It was not news to Gannet or Kath to see charred bodies. Of adults and infants. That had been part of the war. But experience did not diminish horror. Two hundred people were injured. Most of them not badly. For that was the nature of the bomb. It either incinerated its victims completely, or left them all but untouched outside of its zone of action.

There was one exception. Glosdosky. He whom circumstance seemed always to have conspired against. He was not at the clinic. Which was left untouched. He was off duty, and on a minor errand. He would have been crisped by the blast, except for those mechanical legs of his. They kept walking after he had all but lost consciousness. They walked him out of the zone of intense heat, before the latter, combined with the airlessness after a dome collapsed, could have full effect. And so space-suited men picked him up. He was black from head to foot. His clothing was burned off, and his skin. His lungs were seared inside. His body was ripped open. His lips, ears, and eyes were burned away.

Kath Devlin was in on what was done to him afterwards.

There were tears in her eyes when she told Gannet, later.

"His legs and one hand were artificial already, Norb," she told Gannet at the clinic. "The rest was really just the same. It was a thing he'd worked on, himself. Make the whole body artificial. Except the brain—which was all that could be salvaged. Put the latter in a case of nourishing fluid, kept warm. Blood is purified, reoxygenated, supplied with food. An apparatus to do all that can be self-contained, compact, atom powered—operating for months without attention. Then all you do is hook the neuronics contacts to the outlet nerves of the brain—motor and sensory. Then the brain can control and live by a robot form. That is what will be done, Norb. It will take time to set everything up, and hook it together. Wonderful eh? And scientific and horrible!"

She began to cry. Gannet patted her shoulder. He didn't feel that he should take her in his arms. Not remembering how Glosdosky had felt about her.

He got busy with the salvage and reconstruction work, making sure that there were no more dangerous unknowns in the bulk of the asteroid, by means of delicate radar. It was an oversight on the parts of many besides himself that among the asteroids such precautions had hitherto

been neglected. He got busy with the salvage and reconstruction because it had to be done, and he had to be doing something while he waited.

It was weeks before the doctors began the hookup work on Glodosky's doped brain. His mind was perhaps the first to submit to a complete substitution of mechanical form, after an accident: That was what this system of replacement of limbs and organs by mechanical equivalents was for. And here was its acme.

Those doctors were more than doctors—they were artists. Glodosky, lying in a bed, at last looked almost as he had been—a squat young man with broad, irregular features, and sandy hair—of glass-fibre, now. There would be no shock of horror, or of immediate and obvious loss at awakening. He would not know at first that he had changed at all. That would come on him slowly, when he discovered things about himself—that he did not breathe or eat, for instance. Or that his voice was made by a tympanic buzzer in his throat. He could modulate these tones with his lips and tongue of soft plastic. He could smile if he felt like it. But his plastic eyes could not weep.

Once he muttered in his sleep.

"Did the Devlins get out of danger? And Gannet? And Kath? Kath! . . . Kath honey. . ."

Gannet and Kath were among those who heard and winced.

Glodosky was awake a moment later. He felt of his body, looked unbelieving. "Why," he stammered. "I'm like I was. . . How can it be?" Then his expression turned sheepish—almost embarrassed at his optimism. "No—of course not," he went on. "It's just that good. . . I ought to know, shouldn't I? Anyway I couldn't have gotten through what I remember, all in one piece. Hell, though—it's a fine job. . . Hi, folks! Hello, Kath! . . ." He even smiled a little, before the reaction came. His face contorted, and a scratchy sob came out of him.

A physician pressed a bulb. A sedative went into the blood that fed Glodosky's brain. "He has a grasp of things as they are," the doctor said. "With that kind of reaction, he'll adjust. . . Let him sleep some more. . ."

Glodosky sold himself a purpose the next day. That is, he did so for Gannet to hear. "I had a funny idea that something like this might happen to me," he said. "And there are big advantages. I don't need to breathe air. My body will never suffer from cold. I don't need food or outside water. I'm not nearly as

subject to injury as you are. I don't need a space suit even. I could last as long as my brain does. So I'm getting a ship, and see if I can reach the farthest planets. Go down into the ammonia and methane blizzards of Uranus, maybe. Where a man of flesh and blood would have a tough time. Maybe the jinx is busted this time, Gannet. That nameless thing that statistical science recognizes. . . That some people are prone to accidents."

Glodosky looked actually eager. He had lost most of being a man. Physical love was out of his reach. Yet he had become a little like a minor deity. But you couldn't probe into his mind. Gannet was among those who saw him wave jauntily, several days later, as he fitted with improved Harmon jets. He flashed away on a streamer of blue fire a minute later. So here was another weird windup.

Kath had tears in her eyes again. Gannet burned to take her in his arms, comfort her. But doing that didn't fit, now. He growled and went away—he didn't know entirely why.

He couldn't talk.

Later Kath talked to him. "It always was just you—with me, Norb. Oh, I know how you feel. He's your pal, and he had terrible luck, and you think he loved me, and though you know there's no

sense in it, you can't help but feel its unfair to him. . ."

"That's part of it, Kath," Gannet admitted. "But its only a detail. The final twist. . ."

Devlin, working to piece together an ancient sunray tower, talked to him, too. "So we had a big accident out here," he said. "A few hundred people were killed. But more than two-thirds of our project is still intact. In history, there have been lots of accidents. How many times, at home, has Vesuvius erupted, and how many times were new cities built up again, afterwards? Maybe that case is even stupid. Vesuvius is a known danger spot. Here it's not like that. We just have to be careful, that's all. So why be down at the mouth?"

Gannet grinned naturally enough. "I'm not down at the mouth, exactly, Devlin," he said. "It's quite a bit different from that. . ."

He went to the small house he occupied by himself, and tried to think things out. A little, he was bitter. Not much. But the drives were out of him. He felt flat and confused. His trouble didn't seem to lie in philosophy, either. Life, to him, was simple and elemental in meaning. To take what came, to go after things, to taste everything, bitter and sweet, to feel

that no part of time was an empty plateau.

So far he had accomplished all of that, and expected to accomplish more. Plot, as in a story, he did not especially look for—though perhaps it was there. His race he did not glorify especially as a space conquering people. He knew that here it had been antedated, and among the stars there must be millions of other races, as knowing and aggressive, or more so. They spread from world to world. Like a growth of mold. And yet maybe it was magnificent. The thrill was in the doing.

None of these thoughts had changed in him, basically. Yet he was mixed up. Over the wreckage of the far past—the failure of two great races—from Mars and the Old Planet—races who must have lived more or less by his own code, his own people were spreading, perhaps toward success. He thought of that. And again, of Benrus, the war flier who should have lived, Tobias who had gone mad for denying himself space, and of Phelps, the rich boy, who had achieved the ultimate poverty of death. Then there was Lenz, not especially industrious or clever, who was rich, now, with metal refineries and space ship factories, and what not—rich beyond Croesus' wildest dreams. Then there was Devlin, the sheltered kid who

had found another kind of success in a place where it seemed that he could never belong. But he had impressed his inner self on space instead. Making a mood that had a little of the raggedness and charm of the south seas. Harwin, the soldier, the roustabout, the casual nerveless adventurer, was the only one who was not a surprise. Still asteroid-hopping. And Glodosky was the greatest surprise of all. The schlemiel who turned demigod with a sad touch, and hurtled farther out toward the stars than anyone. Who, then, was left out? Thomas. Little Thomas, reported now to be lecturing about Venus and Mercury on Earth. And Roscoe. And, of course, himself.

Gannet saw Roscoe, who came out to see if his friends were all right after the accident, the next day. Roscoe, it seemed was in on the space ship factory deal with Lenz, and was the main-spring of it. According to report. But he didn't say much about it. . .

"I figure on entering politics, Gannet," he said, grinning. "To bring better law and order out here. . . And I got a new hobby. Making violins. From wood from the Old Planet. Properly treated, that space cured wood can give wonderful tone. I've made three fiddles. Wish I'd brought one

along. Used to hate music lessons when I was a kid."

This was Roscoe, the football man.

"Ever been back to Earth?" Gannet asked.

"Sure. Twice. Had to buy machinery. Why?"

"Just thinking about it," Gannet answered.

That seemed to be his guiding impulse, now. To go home. To chuck everything. It wasn't that he was bitter or hurt or anything—very much. Just flat and mixed up and fuzzy in his head. He was just twenty-six, now. Good night—was he old and burned out already? No—not exactly. He figured that he could take any kind of luck that came his way. Anything.

He told Kath, rather formally. "I won't promise I'll be back," he said.

She nodded. "I know, Norb," she said to him quietly. "I'll wait and see."

Devlin didn't protest his decision, either. "Lots of folks are drifting back, Gannet," he said. "That'll always happen. I'm glad one way that you're making this trip. Davy'll have a traveling companion. To Earth. . ."

Gannet turned a startled gaze toward Jeanne. She looked worried.

"Davy is six, now," she said.

"We want him to go to school—back home."

It seemed kind of odd to him for a moment—sending a kid away from his mother, so young.

"Oh—break 'em in tough—from the start," he laughed. "Well—I guess it's best."

"Davy won't be much trouble—on the liner, or anywhere," Jeanne said.

Gannet worked two months more on the restoration of his asteroid. He didn't see Kath so often. And whenever he did—well—they weren't exactly cool to each other. Just withdrawn. But they clung to each other tight, at the last moment. Kath didn't go along with her brother and Jeanne, to see him and Davy off from Ceres.

Gannet didn't really begin to get acquainted with the kid until after the big ship was in space. He was a wiry, sun-browned little guy, with sullen lips. Gannet had never had the time to try to know Davy. Now he felt embarrassed by the effort to be friendly. But the kid helped him.

"Are you scared, too, Gannet?" he asked.

"Maybe," Gannet answered. "Of what are you scared?"

"Of the Earth," Davy told him. "Some of the men at home say awful things about it. That its gravity almost breaks your

legs. That its air almost smothers you. That you can drown in the oceans. I'm scared of Mars, too—but not so much. . .”

The kid's fright of Earth added a new touch to Gannet's inner confusion. For to him it was hard to see how the home planet could scare anyone. Of course the answer was simple; still, it did not help him very much to realize that the asteroids were home to Davy, while Earth was a Great Unknown. Still it remained emotionally, a strange reversal of forces. An elusive thing of viewpoint, beyond reason.

“Some men like to pull the legs of young fellas like you, Davy,” Gannet laughed. “Don't listen. Me—I was **just the opposite** from you. Scared, not of Earth, but of Mars and the asteroids. Maybe I still am—deep down.”

The liner passed Mars without landing. It came down at the Chicago space port. Davy was delivered into the care of a young man from his school. Then Gannet was free.

He didn't bother to look the city over much, though it had soared higher and sprawled wider in seven years. Only seven. Not ten, as someone had said long ago, setting a date for a comparing of notes among ten men. But it seemed a naive idea,

now. . . Chicago was fast becoming one of the capitals of a spreading space empire.

Gannet headed north by train. Far north. To an island in a lake. The island had belonged to his father. It was his, now. The place had a cut-off feeling. There were no paths left on it, except the tiny ones of small animals, under the brush. All the trees had too many small tangled branches. The shack was half fallen in. Here was the same world, of centuries ago. The marsh at one edge of the island couldn't have changed much since the time when only Indians had hunted in it. Mosquitoes swarmed from its summer lushness. Frogs croaked. And an occasional heron swooped up from it with a primordial cry, and a silhouette against the sky that suggested the pterodactyls. All time seemed to linger here, like a static check-point.

Gannet pattered with hammer and saw, repairing the shack. He fished. And the weeks went by. And he pondered. Yes, maybe it was time that he was trying to get hold of. Restless, moving time, making its changes. And the summers he'd spent here, long ago, before the war, seemed like a kind of norm or starting point to him. Space travel had just begun. It hadn't affected average living very much. Other

planets still were remote. . .

Now he would look up into the August sky soon after sunset, and it was much the same as it had been long ago. Mars was red in the southeast. Just a speck. How could you think of that as a world? A place he had been to? Almost died? A desert planet.

Out there, much farther, and not visible at all, was the Asteroid Belt. Much more significant to him, but lost in the distance beyond the deepening blue of the sky, as if it didn't exist. Yet the Devlins were out there. Roscoe. Lenz, Harwin. And Kath, whom he loved. . . Infinitely farther, if he still existed at all, was a machine with the brain and form of a man. Glodosky it still was called.

Gannet began to see his trouble. Not exhaustion. Not the griefs and trouble that came with success, and were part of living. No. Time had been changing things too fast. So there was an emotional indigestion, after too much newness, too many surprises. He was gorged on living. Maybe that was good. He hadn't missed much. But instinct drove you toward a time and place of relaxation, where you could think things out, shake them into their proper order, and grasp the rushing march outward.

He began to see. . . Still he

stayed on the island far into the autumn, going into the nearest town every day for his mail. And finally a message came, printed from signals that crossed space at the speed of light from Ceres:

"Dear Gannet: I made it; I'm back. I skimmed along beside Saturn's rings. I was deep in a blizzard of Uranus. And I was clear out to Pluto. Some meteors from a broken comet riddled my ship. One even went through my chest. But I fixed myself up. Pluto is smaller than the Earth—some. I stood on its frozen snow of air and left my tracks on its mountaintops. It's bleak and dark, Gannet. But there could be the sun-towers that Devlin figured out. There is oxygen, and carbon dioxide—congealed, of course. And some of the mountain tops are ice mixed with rock. Thaw Pluto out, and it would be almost a second Earth. . ."

In the message Gannet read Glodosky's elation and triumph, that could compensate for what he had lost. But he read a lot more in the coming years.

He returned to the island, and began to pack. He was a little like Devlin then, mumbling to himself, anticipating in reverie coming moments; small and personal, yet part of a bigness.

"You know I'd be back, Kath. No matter what. . ."