

10c ASTONISHING STORIES

VOL. 1

FEBRUARY, 1940

NO. 1

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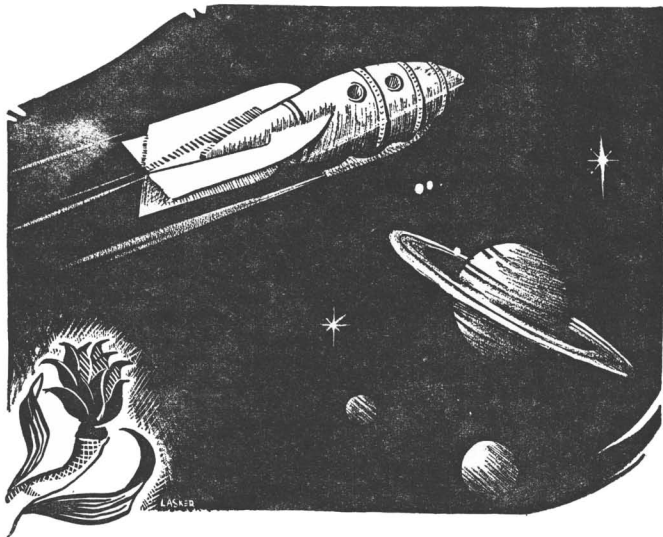
THE LIFESTONE

By **Paul Edmonds**



A
Full-length
Novelette

For thousands of years the Desert Nations had worshipped the Lifestone. And when Lang stole it he made his biggest gamble—a billion dollars against ten thousand lives!



CHAPTER ONE

The Wreck of the *Starbird*

WITHIN the control room of the space ship it was impossible to hear the harsh clamor of the riveters. Walls of beryllium and insulation deadened the sound of repair work, but a deep, grinding vibration shook the giant craft. Outside in airless space, Captain Griffin knew, men in protective armor were working against time. Meteors swarm near Saturn, and unless the battery of photo-magnetic cells that lined the hull was replaced swiftly, the *Starbird* had made her last run.

Space liners are never silent. There is always the distant hum of powerful machines, the faint patter of hurrying feet, the murmur of voices. All the normal sounds of life seem intensified through

contrast with the deadly, illimitable emptiness stretching all around, a blazing curtain of starlight that blackens the skins of spacemen with rays that not even polaroid glass can exclude. Somehow Griffin's dark tan seemed oddly incongruous with his blonde, huge Viking build. Though he was still a young man, his hair was bleached almost white.

Frowning, he glanced at a crumpled sheet of paper on the desk beside him. But a moment later he had forgotten it to stand before a porthole, gazing into the abyss, pale blue eyes narrowed. Unaided vision, however, was useless to discover the bullet-swift drive of a meteor. Only the photo-magnetic cells could protect spacecraft against the most deadly menace of outer space—and the cells were dead.

The *Starbird* had been well on the outward run from Jupiter's Ganymede when the alarm bells sounded. Now, stand-

ing alone in the room that was the ship's brain, Griffin whispered an oath. Blind rage rose up within him, a cold, bitter anger against the unscrupulous greed of a third-rate transport company. Space flyers need unceasing attention to safeguard them against the innumerable dangers of their tremendous voyages, and the strains and stresses of hundreds of long trips had weakened the *Starbird*. But the owners would rather spend two thousand dollars in bribes to the inspectors than five or ten thousand for the replacement of shoddy equipment. So the guarding photo-magnetic cells, that automatically warned against the near approach of meteors and set up a compensating field of repulsion, had burned out near Saturn, and a dozen of the crew were working desperately on the outer hull, welding and connecting the emergency units.

Thirty men were in the ship, more than half of them passengers who preferred to run the risk of traveling in a low-priced, shabby vessel rather than pay the exorbitant rates of the giant luxury liners whose owners dared take no chances with poor equipment. The *Starbird* was chiefly a freighter, carrying tons of machinery, fuel, and food supplies to the outer planets and their moons, which, though rich in minerals, were almost incapable of supporting human life.

A sound made Griffin turn swiftly. At the door stood a slim, round-faced man whose appearance of youth was belied by the lurking devil in his brown eyes. A smile of half-malicious amusement quirked one corner of the newcomer's mouth. Felix Lang was apparently pleased. He had come aboard at Ganymede City, bound for Uranus; his nationality Griffin did not know, though he was sure Lang was not Earthborn.

"Still worrying, Mister?" he asked, with the trace of some indefinable accent. "What's the use of that?"

Griffin nodded toward the porthole.

"If a meteor hits us—"

"We die quickly. Clean, sudden—but cold. That reminds me—" Lang calmly opened a drawer of the desk, extracted a flat silver bottle and drank deeply. He looked at Griffin, wise eyes glistening. "Distilled on Venus—and for medicinal use only. Bring on your meteors, Mister."

Griffin retrieved the bottle. "Every time you come in here you swipe a drink. We may need that liquor before long."

A DARK streak ripped past the porthole, a black line drawn suddenly against the shimmering star-curtain.

"That," Griffin informed his guest, "is a meterite. Not far away, either. If there was an atmosphere out there it'd have looked like a comet."

"Even meteors are better company than the other passengers," Lang said. "They know something's wrong, and they're scared stiff. The Venusians have a proverb—'It is better to be devoured at a gulp by an ugly fish-lizard than to be absorbed slowly by the beautiful Medusa fungus.'"

"Why must you spout quotations at a time like this?" Griffin asked. "My troubles won't be over even when the repair work's finished. Look at this." He thrust the crumpled sheet of paper at Lang, who glanced at the signature and whistled.

"Chief of the Interplanetary Guards! There is trouble, eh?"

"There is trouble—and a hell of a lot of it. Ever heard of the Lifestone?"

Lang blinked. "Who hasn't? The most famous jewel on Mars—or in the system."

"It's the most sacred fetich of the Desert Nations of Mars," Griffin said. "Like the Kaaba—the Black Stone—at Mecca. The Martians have worshipped it for ages—the wasteland tribes, anyhow. A thousand years ago when Earthmen first dropped in on Mars the Desert Nations were praying to the Lifestone, and

it's the one thing no outsider can tamper with. Martians are insane on the subject. I'd rather take a sledgehammer to the Kaaba with a million Mohammedans watching me than to touch the Lifestone—or even look at it. The fetich-worship of ages—it's old, Lang—older than Earth's civilization. When man was a Neanderthaler the Desert Nations were in their prime, had the greatest culture the system ever knew. And they worshipped the Lifestone then. Now they've retrogressed; they're uncivilized—but no Earthman has ever dared touch the jewel, and only four have ever seen it. I mean—five men."

"I see you've studied history," Lang said drily.

"The Lifestone's been stolen. An Earthman stole it, the Martians say. And they're in revolt. Unless it's recovered every Terrestrial on Mars will be wiped out—and probably tortured first if that can be managed conveniently."

The groaning vibration that shook the ship increased in intensity. Griffin's voice grew louder as he went on:

"They traced the thief to Ganymede City, and they know he boarded the *Starbird*, Lang. You can't see it, but there's a gun in my pocket—and it's pointed your way. So you'd better tell me where the Lifestone is before I squeeze the trigger."

The other didn't move, but his lips quirked in a one-sided smile. "You think I have it—that I'm the thief?"

"Aren't you?" Griffin asked.

"Of course. But your suspicions hurt me, Mister. I thought—"

GRIFFIN brought out his weapon—a flat, stubby automatic that carried both deadly and sleep-producing needles in its magazine. "Sorry, Lang. But we're heading back to meet a Guardship as soon as the repair work's finished. I've already sent a radiogram. You see, there are

lots of people on Mars, and they'll all be dead in a few weeks if the Lifestone isn't brought back."

Lang snapped his fingers. "A few lives! They won't be missed. The Earth Council will pay plenty before it gets the stone back." Suddenly his smile broadened, and he grinned delightedly. "I tell you, Mister, I am a mighty clever little fellow the way I worked it—a damn plucky chap!" His strange accent grew stronger. "For two years I lived with the Desert Nations—you know they drink nothing but water? What a two years! Then one night I got my ship from where I'd hidden it, took aboard a few Martian big shots, and told 'em I'd learned the Lifestone was going to be stolen. We'd planned well. My cousin had already blasted his way into the temple when I got there. I don't think he knew I was going to kill him."

Lang shook his head sadly. "No. However, it was the best way. The scheme was that he'd make a bluff at stealing the jewel and then escape. My companions naturally would make sure the Lifestone was okay—and that's when I took it. I got all six of them with five shots, not counting the bomb I used on my cousin. Three of the Martians were armed, too. What a smart chap I am!" he finished.

Griffin was sure now that Lang had some of the conscienceless Callistan stock in him—the cold-blooded, passionless ex-actitude of that race, and probably some candid, naive Venusian blood as well. He said, eyebrows lifted, "Well, you clever little fellow, just hand over the Lifestone before I puncture your hide."

LANG'S reply was cut short. Without warning came catastrophe swift and complete. A rending, jarring crash shook the ship, and the scream of escaping air. Thunder of valves shutting deafened the two momentarily. A sudden cessation of gravity showed that the controls had been wrecked.

They floated up from the floor as the ship lurched, then drifted down slowly. Emergency gravitational fields were being automatically created. But the power was failing fast.

Griffin dived for the door, making use of every projection to pull himself along and increase his speed. Over his shoulder he promised, "I'll settle your hash later, buddy!"

Alarm bells shrieked. Above their hysterical clamor a toneless robot voice bellowed, "Go at once to the lifeboats that have been assigned you. Do not wait to get your luggage. Hurry!"

Lang followed the captain more slowly, still smiling. The *Starbird* was smashed; a glance at the instruments had told that. The meteorite, a small one, had driven slantwise through the body of the hull, wrecking the engine room and warping and weakening the whole structure of the ship fatally.

The next quarter of an hour was to Griffin an eternity of hopeless activity. For the important thing now was to avoid loss of life. Perhaps some had already perished in the crash; he could not tell. The crew were well trained, and at last the lifeboats were filled and cast off. Several of them, however, were useless, and the others jammed to capacity. As the last of the tiny ships floated free of the airlocks Griffin turned hastily to seek a means of escape for himself.

Finally he found a boat that was space-worthy. About to enter it, he paused, remembering that he had not seen Lang since the crash, though he had checked every survivor. With methodical haste he began to search the collapsing liner.

He found Felix Lang crumpled in the corner of a corridor, blood smearing the wall and oozing slowly from a scalp wound. A lurch of the buckling ship had apparently knocked him unconscious. Griffin hoisted Lang's light form to his shoulders and hurriedly retraced his steps.

The great liner was singing a threnody of death. Tortured metal screamed; the crash of safety doors sounded as compartment after compartment burst its seams and let the atmosphere escape. The air in the corridor abruptly became a roaring gale against which Griffin fought grimly. Frigid chill of space touched him with congealing fingers as he thrust Lang into the safety boat and sprang in after him, sliding the door shut with numbed hands.

Machinery rumbled, suddenly went silent. With no sense of movement the boat slipped silently into the vast abyss, a tiny speck of flotsam on an ocean whose shores were infinity.

Two men, alone in space. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Selenites

"THIS is a hell of a fix," Griffin said, somberly chewing the bit of his pipe. He couldn't smoke; there wasn't enough air.

Lang smiled sleepily. "The Venusians have a proverb—'Men who dance on the teeth of dinosaurs should not complain if they are devoured.'"

"One more of those lousy proverbs and I'll wring your neck," Griffin promised. "Only two days since the wreck, and the air's almost gone. Maggoty food, the water-vaporizer working when it feels like it, not enough power to send out an S O S—and you talk about dinosaurs' teeth."

"We sent several calls for help," Lang pointed out. The little man did not seem discommoded by his plight; the bandage about his head only gave him a certain air of rakehell deviltry. "Somebody may have heard it. When the other boats are picked up there'll be a search."

"Like looking for an atom in the Pyramid," Griffin grunted. "That reminds me: where's the Lifestone?"

"I left it on the *Starbird*," Lang smiled.

"I don't believe you."

"And quite right, too," the little man admitted unblushingly. "What good would it do you if I gave it to you?"

"None. And I don't think I want it. Right at present I'm safe enough if I sleep with one eye open, but if I had the Lifestone you'd cut my throat with your toenail—if you got the chance. Keep it, and I hope it chokes you."

The little ship swayed, jarred. The blanket of stars was blotted out from the portholes on one side. The televisor—which was practical only for transmission over short distances—buzzed sharply. Griffin sprang to it, threw a switch. On the screen a pattern of dots danced madly, and then resolved themselves into a face.

The fat, silver-skinned countenance of a Selenite looked at Griffin. One of the race that dwelt on the Dark Side of the Moon, beneath the titanic dome that held life-giving atmosphere and a civilization.

"We're alongside," the Selenite said in his soft, shrill voice. "And—wait a minute—"

Grating of metal jarred the boat. Abruptly there was blackness outside the portholes.

"We've got you," the Selenite said with satisfaction. "Wait till we pump air in the lock and you can come out."

"Good!" Griffin said, breathing deeply. Due to the lack of air he had been taking shallow breaths for a long time, though he had scarcely realized it. "You came along just in time."

"Come out now," the televisor murmured, and the face faded from it. Lang was already working on the door. It slid open; a gust of cool, fresh air, with a faint tangy flavor, sent new vigor coursing through the two men. Starved blood drank it in gratefully.

Griffin followed Lang out to the floor of the lock. Bare walls of steel were all around them; a slit of light widened.

In silhouette a grotesque shadow loomed.

"Captain Griffin?" the Selenite's voice whispered. "But come in, come in! We are anxious—" His gross body drew back, was visible as a shapeless bag overgrown with an iridescent crop of feathery fronds, inches long—adaptations of the silvery scales that covered the bare skin of his hand and face.

Faceted eyes gleamed from the puffy face, so startlingly human in contour—yet so strangely alien.

A LITTLE warning note clanged at the back of Griffin's mind—the hunch that had so often warned him of danger. But he had no choice. He entered the cabin, Lang at his heels, stared around. Drapes and cushions of violet samite made the room luxurious. Lounging on a low couch was another Lunarian, very tall, skeleton-thin, with his mobile lips pursed ironically. The faceted eyes were unreadable.

The door clanged shut. A puffy hand pointed to a table nearby, with cushions piled invitingly around it. "We've prepared, Captain Griffin. Food—and drink. Probably you're both hungry. Don't wait on ceremony; eat while we talk."

Griffin hesitated, but Lang hastily snatched up a rosy, aromatic drink and drained it at a gulp. His round face glowed.

"May the gods reward you," he said unctuously, bowing to his hosts. "Is that a pheasant? Ah-h—"

Griffin hesitated, and then sat down beside Lang, who was industriously refueling. A drink of the rosy liquor strengthened him, and he turned to say, "You got our S. O. S."

The Selenite nodded. "The other life-ships have been picked up, Captain Griffin. Ether calls have been going out for two days. The wreck of the *Starbird* is front-page news."

The slim one waved a languid hand. "I

am Elander. This overstuffed gentleman is Thurm. We're on a pleasure jaunt to Ganymede City."

Lang, busy with a pheasant, said, "My name's Felix—"

"Lang," Thurm interrupted, his plump face smiling. "Oh, you're front-page news too. You and the Lifestone."

Griffin froze. Lang's brown eyes flickered, went stone-hard. He didn't move.

"Elander and I have decided to take the Lifestone," Thurm went on pleasantly. "The Earth Council will pay us, not you, Mr. Lang. To use an archaic term, we shall indulge in a little hi-jacking."

Griffin had the needle gun out of his pocket. "Sorry," he said. "I'll have to take command, in that case. We're going back Sunward—*my pronto!* The Lifestone's travels are over. From now on it's taking the quickest road home."

Abruptly a glimmer of light blinded Griffin. He cursed pulled the trigger—and saw the needle projectile fall, flattened against a transparent wall that had suddenly materialized between him and the Lunarians.

"Flexible glass," Thurm said, his voice muffled. "And the liquor is drugged. In a few moments you'll both be unconscious, and we can search you for the gem."

"Lang," Griffin snapped. "Come on! The lifeboat—" He sprang to the door by which they had entered. But it was locked.

The Selenites watched silently, Griffin turned, drove his shoulder against the transparent barrier. It gave slightly, but the tough resilience of the material checked him.

"Why waste your strength?" Lang asked. He was still sitting cross-legged on the cushions, sipping at a drink. "This liquor's good, if it is drugged. Wait till they're off their guard—wait, Mister! Don't forget. . . . I'm a clever little fellow. . . . The Venusians have a . . . proverb. . . ."

His eyes glazed. He collapsed in a limp heap. Griffin's muscles were watery; he made a futile effort to stay erect and failed. He went down into velvety blackness.

GRIFFIN woke up to find himself prone in a bunk, with the star-misted depths of space visible through a porthole in the further wall. The ringed splendor of Saturn shone coldly.

Flat on his back in a bunk across the room was Lang, painfully manipulating his shoulder. He smiled wryly as he saw Griffin's eyes fixed on him.

"Awake, Mister?"

"Yeah," Griffin said. "How'd you sleep?"

"Not for long," Lang smiled crookedly. "They woke me up and took the Lifestone. It was—"

"I know. In your armpit, under the skin."

The other's eyes widened. "Oh, you knew? You're pretty smart, too."

"Thanks. But what are they going to do with us?"

"I have found out—a little. Very little. There are only two men on the ship besides Elander and Thurm. Robot control, mostly. What they intend to do with us—I'm not sure. I tried to induce 'em to let me join their party, but only succeeded in giving them a new idea. You know Selenites—gamblers."

"They'd bet their last cup of water on the flip of a coin," Griffin said. "Yeah, I know. So what?"

"So they don't want to split the money they can get for the Lifestone's return. The fat lad said, 'One of us can handle this as easily as two. And the profit will be twice as big for that one.' That got their gambling blood up—jumping Jupiter, Mister, imagine it! Staking a fortune like that on a chess game."

"They always do it," Griffin declared. "They'll never take a dare. I remember—"

The door opened; a Selenite stood on

the threshold, his drab coat of feathers showing that he was a worker. In his hand he gripped a needle gun. He jerked it commandingly.

Under the weapon's menace Lang and Griffin preceded the Selenite back to the violet-draped room where they had first encountered Thurm and Elander. The two were relaxed on cushions, an intricate three-dimensional chessboard between them.

"Who won?" Lang asked.

"A draw game," Thurm informed him, his fat face alight with keen interest. "Elander and I have devised a new contest. Another kind of chess—with human pawns."

COLD foreboding gripped Griffin—a premonition of what was to come. Elander said, "Mr. Lang, I've drawn you as my pawn. Thurm sponsors Captain Griffin. You'll be set down on Titan, weaponless, and will fight a duel. The survivor will be landed safely not far from Ganymede City. If you win, Mr. Lang—if you kill Captain Griffin, I'll take the Lifestone and set you down on Ganymede. Alive, incidentally."

"How do I know you'll keep your word?" Lang asked. A mask had dropped over his round, youthful face; the brown eyes were hawk-watchful.

"You don't. You'll have to take a chance. But I think you'd rather take that chance than be shot out of a torpedo tube. One dies quickly in space without armor."

"You're crazy," Griffin broke in. "This is—well, it's ridiculous. You can't—"

"But we can!" Thurm beamed with delight; ran spatulate fingers through his feathery, iridescent hair. "You have no choice, you see. We're slanting down to Titan now, and in a few minutes the game will begin."

Griffin was silent. Titan, sixth moon of Saturn, was an outpost of the system.

There was life there, but not human life. The air, though thick, was breathable; yet there was no reason for men to brave the perils of this world. It was poor in minerals, possessed nothing that could not be secured more cheaply on other planets. It was unmapped, uncharted, a fantastic wilderness of teeming, alien life.

Elander turned to a port. "A valley—here. I shall land you, Captain Griffin, at one end; Mr. Lang at the other. You will be unarmed, save for a rocket flare apiece. There are no rules. The man who survives will be the one who goes back to Ganymede. As soon as your task is accomplished, fire the rocket. We shall then descend and view the result."

Thurm murmured an order; the space ship drove down. Suddenly giant, sickly yellow vegetation was all around them. The vessel ground with a gentle jar.

The door swung open; Thurm pointed. "Here you leave us, Captain Griffin. Your rocket—" He gave it to the man. "Is everything clear?"

Griffin glanced around quickly. Thurm's finger hovered over the lever that would lift the barrier of flexible glass. The needle gun still pointed at him, held unwaveringly by the dull-feathered Selenite.

Shrugging, Griffin stepped out of the ship. The door clanged; with a scream of displaced air the vessel raced up.

Above him the gigantic ringed globe of Saturn hung ominously. The stir and rustle of alien life murmured on the hot, oppressive wind.

CHAPTER THREE

The Hunt

A STRANGE world, Titan—teeming with life, animal and vegetable, yet supplying no food fit for human consumption. Griffin wiped his face. He thrust the rocket into his belt, scanned his surroundings.

Yellow plants, gigantic, draped with long festoons of delicate tracery. A vaguely sulphurous odor crept into his nostrils. From the distance a deep, hollow boom sounded, and the rush of cleft air. The ground slanted down at his left, and he cautiously moved forward.

The first thing now was to find Lang. Not to kill him—Griffin's eyebrows drew together as he thought of the Selenites. They had overlooked the fact that their pawns were human beings, not helplessly

inanimate objects to be moved at the whim of the players. Together he and Lang might be able to find some means of escape—arrange some trap for Thurm and Elander.

In the deep indigo sky Saturn swung, attended by a horde of glowing, tiny discs—the other moons. The ring was a shining, splendid setting for the jewel-like planet. Among the trees Griffin caught a flicker of movement, a vaguely-glimpsed, small shape that darted away and vanished.

He went on cautiously.

The trees thinned. At his feet a rocky plain stretched down steeply to a broad, dully shining ribbon, a river that flowed



sluggishly between steep banks. Beyond it the forest began again, sweeping toward the high cliffs that bordered the valley. There was no sign of the space ship.

A noise strangely like the blare of an automobile horn made Griffin jump.

"Phonk—phonk!"

Bright eyes peered at him from the dark recesses of the undergrowth. As he turned it resolved itself into a mass of furry green, of indeterminate shape. Griffin waited.

Very slowly the creature came forth, staring inquisitively. It was about a foot high, with a plump globe of a body surmounted by an almost wedge-shaped head. Bulbous eyes, on short stalks, watched. A growth of cilia fringed the gaping mouth, and dwarfing the little head was a long, bladder-like nose that drooped disconsolately. It padded forward on stumpy legs; the arms were apparently boneless, ending in tiny fringes which seemed to serve as hands.

"Phonk!" the thing said mournfully.

Griffin put out a tentative hand. The creature scurried back, and as the man still advanced, it indulged in a curious stunt. The elongated nose suddenly swelled to monumental proportions, inflated with air until it was much larger than the being's head. The little arms came up and began to pound against the taut skin of the nose.

Immediately a low thunder of hollow boomings sounded, so loud and unexpected that Griffin jumped. He waited a moment, but as the drumming showed no signs of ceasing, he shrugged and turned toward the river. Halfway down the slope the booming died, and a loud, triumphant *phonk* reached his ears.

"Go on, laugh," Griffin muttered "You're apt to be my dinner tomorrow if I'm still on Titan. Though how I'm going to get off this crazy world—"

The sluggishly flowing stream didn't

look much like water. Occasionally inexplicable bumps would appear on its surface. Griffin hesitated, wondering how he was to cross.

AND suddenly he knew that eyes were watching him—intent, curious eyes. Lang?

He turned, looked around swiftly. The phonking animal was gone; no one else was in sight. Faintly there came a deep explosion, and something skimmed up above the trees in the distance, pale against the purple sky, glided down and vanished.

Then, across the stream, Griffin saw a little animal running toward him—a scaled and glittering thing that moved swiftly on six spidery legs. No larger than his hand, it raced forward, and behind it came a larger one of the same species. The first darted to the water's edge, leaped—and continued its flight over the surface of the water. The other hesitated, paused.

No, this wasn't H₂O—not with a surface tension that would support a such a creature. The scaled thing ran on.

Around it a group of bumps bulged the stream. Something burst up into the light, fastened on the spidery animal, and dragged it down. Almost simultaneously a dozen other creatures had leaped up from the depths, were wrestling with their prey, struggling desperately on the surface of the river. They looked like fish—but modified. The tails were muscular, shaped like those of seals. The pectoral fins were greatly elongated, the spines seemingly as flexible as fingers. The fish were jet-black, about as long as Griffin's arm.

In a moment the spider-creature was torn apart and devoured. The fish seemed to hesitate—and their heads turned toward the man. The water's surface bulged with innumerable bumps. Several more of the things popped up from the depths, and began to propel themselves shoreward

with a peculiar humping movement, their tails and pectoral fins being brought into use.

"Hi! Look out for the skippers!"

The cry came from behind him. Griffin swung around to see a slim figure at the top of the slope, waving to him. Not Lang—for red-gold hair cascaded to the girl's shoulders.

Did she mean the fish? The little things were humping toward him rapidly, like black slugs converging on a feast. Certainly they were ferocious enough, and, remembering the deadly Terrestrial piranhas of South American rivers, Griffin hastily began to climb the slope. Behind him a murmur of whistling gasps sounded.

The girl waited. She was wearing a glimmering, delicate web of some sort that billowed with each breath of wind. Tattered black leather showed beneath it.

"Lucky Jimmy brought me here," she said breathlessly. "Those skippers would have eaten you alive in another minute. Whew!"

Gray eyes examined Griffin as he sought for an answer. "Am I glad you came along! I've been here nearly three months!"

"Oh, Lord," Griffin said, his heart dropping. "Don't tell me you're a castaway."

"You guessed it. I was on the *Cyclops* when the tanks exploded. Two weeks in a lifeboat, and we never knew the pilot didn't know how to navigate till Titan caught us. The crash killed everybody but me and another chap—and he died in a week. Where's your ship?"

Griffin explained in full detail. The girl looked sick.

"My luck," she said bitterly. "The famous Kirk luck. I'm Frances Kirk."

GRIFFIN didn't answer. He was staring at the shining cloak the girl wore. It wasn't a garment, and the slow, ceaseless ripple of movement that shook it spoke

of life. And it seemed to grow from the back of the girl's neck.

"Jumping Jupiter!" he said. "What's that thing?"

She chuckled, touched it with slim fingers. "That's my meal-ticket. Didn't you know there's nothing to eat on Titan?"

"But it's alive!"

"Sure. It's a parasite. As near as I can figure out, it uses a little of my blood whenever it feels like it. But it feeds me, too—proteins, carbohydrates, and so forth. Not a full course dinner, but it keeps me alive. It lives on minute organisms—the air's full of 'em."

Symbiosis! The true give-and-take between parasite and host—allied to the partnership of the anemone and the hermit crab. In Terrestrial seas the anemone, with its poisonous tentacles, protects its host, and in return helps itself to the food caught by the crab. Amazing and a little horrible—but a phenomenon not unfamiliar to science. The cloak-like organism supplied the vital enzymes—but what might it not take in return?

"How long have you been using that thing?" Griffin asked.

"Since I landed here—less a week."

"And you don't feel any ill effects?"

"Not any. Why? D'you think it's dangerous?"

"Maybe not," Griffin admitted. "But there's no telling. Can you take it off?"

"Sure." She tugged at the iridescent cape; a shimmer of movement shook it, and it came free in her hand. Two tiny punctures were visible on the back of her neck—clean wounds, on which two droplets of blood appeared.

"I'd starve without it," the girl said. "So will you."

"Not if we can get off Titan pronto," Griffin told her. "Right now the first thing I've got to do is find Lang."

"You'd better have a weapon. I've a revolver in the ship—shall we get it?"

Griffin nodded, and they turned back into the forest. The ground grew steeper as they proceeded, till at last they came out on a little bluff overhanging the river. The wreck of a lifeboat was there, warped and broken. Something peered out from the port and drew back hastily.

"What's that?" Griffin asked.

"It's Jimmy. He made friends with me after I'd fed him a few times. A native of Titan—come on out, fella! Come on: Want some candy?"

The furry, wedge-headed creature Griffin had already seen emerged. It jumped to the ground, stalked eyes wary.

"Phonk!"

"Candy, Jimmy! Come on." The girl gave Griffin a bit of chocolate, said, "That finishes the larder. Feed him and he'll be your friend for life. I'll get the gun."

She hurried into the ship, and Jimmy, after a tentative expansion of his balloon-like nose, hurriedly seized the candy and retreated, phonking with the air of one who has shrewdly outwitted an opponent. Griffin chuckled.

"Hi, Mister!"

It was Lang. He stood knee-deep in the underbrush a dozen feet away, his round face twisted with pain. He grinned crookedly.

"Found you at last." His gaze examined the wreck. "What's this?"

"A boat from the *Cyclops*," Griffin said. "Where's the Selenite ship?" He watched Lang closely, but the other made no hostile move. Instead he made a tentative step forward, staggered, and nearly collapsed. A crude crutch under one arm supported him.

"Ankle's broken," he explained. "I—give me a hand, will you?"

Griffin hurried forward. Too late he saw his mistake. Jimmy phonked warning.

The crutch came up, and the lower end was sharpened. The improvised spear thrust straight at Griffin's unprotected throat. He tried to dodge, slipped and

fell. Lang, no longer shamming lameness, sprang at him, the spear-point driving down.

To Griffin, flat on his back, the scene seemed to move with incredible slowness—the round face of Lang, looming against the purple sky, the sombre yellow foliage around him, the deadly weapon coming closer and closer. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

The Cannon-Flower

A GUN barked. The spear shattered, was torn from the hand that gripped it. Lang almost overbalanced, but caught himself in time and, with a glance of startled amazement, leaped away. The underbrush swallowed him.

Quickly Griffin got to his feet, turned to see Frances Kirk standing by the ship, smoke coiling up lazily from the revolver she held. Her face was pale. Jimmy was hiding behind her ankles, his stalked eyes horrified.

"Thanks," Griffin said, and took the gun. "Brother Lang intends to play the Selenites' game, I guess."

"Looks like it," the girl whispered, her voice not quite steady.

A hollow booming explosion sounded from not far away, and a huge shadow darkened the summit of the bluff momentarily. Griffin glanced up.

"I'll have to keep my eyes open for him. It just makes things a bit harder, but—what was that noise, Miss Kirk?" A fantastic idea had suddenly flashed into his mind.

"The cannon-flowers—Captain Griffin." Her tone held amusement. "This is a swell place to be formal! Call me Fran."

"Okay. Spencer's the label . . . cannon-flowers? What—" Griffin's stare was watchful, but there was no sign of Lang. Abruptly he caught sight of the man far down the hill, near the river.

"Flowers as big as houses, almost. Those are their seeds you see flying around. They shoot 'em out, like some Earthly plants, and the seeds are built like gliders. The noise used to keep me awake till I got used to them."

"Yeah," Griffin said slowly. "That's swell. I've a hunch. . . ." He took out the rocket tube in his belt, eyeing it speculatively. "Do any of those cannon-flowers grow around here—not too close?"

"Why, yes. I'll show you—"

Frances Kirk led him down the other side of the cliff. It overhung the river at one spot, and, looking down, the girl shuddered.

"Those skippers—I'm afraid of them, Spence. They watch me whenever they can. Horrible things."

Griffin looked down. Rocks bordered the river at this point, and a horde of the tiny monsters was visible. Black dashes against the white sand, they were humping themselves along, rapidly climbing the stones, and diving head-first into the stream, where they vanished.

"Ever tried drinking that water?" Griffin asked. The girl shook her head.

"I didn't dare. Those fish were always too close for comfort."

"Just as well. There's something in it that increases the surface tension tremendously—so much that a considerable force is necessary to break it. The fish have to climb rocks to dive back in."

"I've seen things down there," Frances said somberly. "Huge shadows moving—and lights. The skippers swim in and out of the larger things. Lord knows what they are—sluips, maybe, or alive for all I know."

The ground dipped, gave on to a shallow slope that led down to the river. Frances hesitated. A number of the voracious fish were humping quickly from the river. She said, "Hurry, Spence. I don't like the look of that."

The two quickened their steps. Even

so, a few of the tiny monsters intercepted them, but were easily eluded. Two fish followed them for some distance, and finally a queer premonition of danger made Griffin turn. A few feet away was one of the creatures, staring at him balefully.

THE skipper seemed in distress. It was gasping and whistling; in the distance its companion was hastening back to the water. Suddenly one of the flexible pectoral fins curved, tugging at a long spine that erected itself from the black, glistening back.

Frances said, "Look out!"

The horrible little creature's gaze swung to her. It seemed to hesitate, then jerked the thorn out of its back and threw it. Javelin-like, the spine arched through the air, and Griffin jerked aside just in time to avoid it.

"So that's the ideal!" he said grimly. "Well, I'll soon settle your hash." He picked up a stone.

The skipper gasped, writhed, and lay quiescent. Griffin flung the rock with accuracy. From the crushed creature's gaping mouth emerged a swarm of tiny, ameba-like organisms that oozed in a horde down the slope, back to the water. Frances shuddered; her slim fingers gripped Griffin's arm.

"Ugh! What on earth are those things?"

"I think—ever hear of the wood-roach?"

"Yes. What—"

"They eat wood. But they can't digest it directly, so they have in their alimentary tract a lot of protozoa that digest it for them. Maybe those fish can't digest their food, and keep a batch of protozoa, or something like them, to do the job. I dunno—it's just a guess."

"Ugh!" Frances said again, looking slightly green. "Come on. There's a cannon-flower near here."

It was gigantic—as large as a small room. But it grew in the shadow of a tree that dwarfed it, and was parasitic on the larger plant. The great bell-like mouth of the flower was fully twelve feet in depth, and much wider. Within it was the seed, a rod as thick as a man's body and ten feet long, with two stiff planes, vaguely reminiscent of a glider's wings, on the sides. At the base was a coil that served the purpose of a powerful spring.

"I think I get it," Griffin said. "When the seed's large enough, its weight trips the spring and it's shot out. You're right; a lot of Terrestrial plants use this trick. It may get us off Titan."

Frances stared at him. "Across space? You're crazy!"

"Well, not directly. Here's the idea." Swiftly he outlined his plan. The girl nodded dubiously.

"It's pretty dangerous. I'm not sure—"

"It's our only chance. If you'd rather stay here on Titan and dodge the skip-pers, okay."

"Lord, no! I'll do it, Spence—though you're the one who'll be taking the chances."

Griffin shrugged. The only part of the scheme he didn't like was the necessity for Frances returning to the lifeboat unarmed. But it was the only way.

First of all, Griffin opened his clasp-knife and tied it securely around his neck. It was necessary to search for strong, tough vines, but luckily there were plenty of these in the vicinity.

Griffin made a harness of the vines and tied it securely around his body. Then, after carefully measuring the distance, he climbed the tree that was the parasite's host and tied an end of a strong liana about one limb. The other end was knotted to his harness.

BENEATH him was the huge cup of the great flower. The seed pointed up at a slight angle—the "bullet" of the

cannon-plant. A bullet that would soon be shot out to race through the thick atmosphere of Titan—with a human being riding upon it, as a man rides a glider-plane above Earth. Griffin let himself down hand over hand along the dangling liana. Presently he felt the spongy, pliant substance of the flower's rim beneath his feet. The plant bent slightly under Griffin's weight.

Very carefully he lowered himself further. Now he was within the flower's cup, the great rod of the seed spearing up beside him. The most difficult part of the task was yet to come. Griffin must bind himself securely to the seed without permitting his weight to press it down far enough to release the spring.

Without the liana Griffin would have failed, but the improvised rope held him suspended while he made himself fast to the monster seed.

At last he was ready.

"All set, Fran," he called. The girl was invisible to him now, but her anxious voice floated up.

"I'll hurry. Can you see all right?"

Griffin looked up at the sombrely dark sky, with Saturn low on the horizon. "Yeah. Good luck."

The girl raced away, carrying Griffin's rocket. The revolver was strapped securely to the man's thigh, and he settled himself to wait.

Yet when the signal came it startled him. He made a swift involuntary movement, and felt the seed stir ominously beneath him. He froze. Above him the signal rocket fled up, a blaze of red fire, a glowing path stretching down to the ground.

Would the Selenites heed it? Griffin thought they would, that their gambling-fever would make them anxious to learn the outcome of the game.

And a few minutes later the gleaming bulk of the spaceship swung into sight....

CHAPTER FIVE

The Human Projectile

GRIFFIN drew a deep breath, braced himself, and cut the vine-rope that held him suspended within the flower-cup. Simultaneously came a thunderous, deafening boom and a frightful shock of sudden acceleration that drove the blood from his head. Agony tore at every nerve. He fought to remain conscious.

But it was not easy—no! Griffin was, in effect, tied fast to a shell fired from a huge cannon. The shock was sickeningly intense. For a brief eternity the man felt nothing but black, horrible giddiness.

The great seed tore up through the air, at a steep angle. The stiff planes that grew from it, and the density of the air envelope, saved Griffin's life, keeping the seed from dropping too swiftly in spite of the man's additional weight.

He fought his way back to awareness. Air screamed in his ears; he caught a dizzy glimpse of the valley spread beneath him, a dim map of sulphur-colored forest, with a gleaming thread winding through it. Far in the distance Griffin caught the sheen of a broad, level expanse—a sea on this alien world? But he was never to know what lay beyond those enigmatical cliffs. For the glider dipped, fled down, and far to his left he saw the Selenite spaceship.

Griffin was bound tightly to the seed; he flung his weight desperately to one side. The weird craft swayed beneath him, arced in a long curve. There would be no means of climbing to regain lost altitude; he must gauge his distance accurately or fail. Somehow Griffin managed it, straining every muscle, sweating with the exertion. Long years of experience battling air currents helped him.

The spaceship was below him now, and dead ahead. The seed would sweep over it, with ten feet or so to spare. Somehow

Griffin must free himself from his harness and jump to the ship's hull—and there could be no second chance. Failure would mean certain death.

Swiftly Griffin cut most of the vines that bound him, made ready to slash the others.

The moment came; a desperate slicing of tough lianas, and he drew his knees up under him, preparing to jump. Death waited four hundred feet below. But the slight displacement of his weight brought the glider's nose lower; it dipped and raced over the ship with scarcely five feet to spare. Griffin leaped.

He slipped, fell on his side, clutching frantically at frail photo-magnetic cells, at metal rough and pitted with the heat of innumerable swift flights through atmospheres. The cells were countersunk into the hull, and on a new ship he would have inevitably slipped and fallen, but one hand slid into a hollow pocket, one foot found a niche, and he swayed and clung on the vessel's steep curve, weak with reaction.

He knew that his task had just begun. One thing was in his favor; the Selenites would not expect attack from above. If he could find and open a port . . . his calloused fingers touched the gun-butt.

The two ports on the ship's upper surface were locked. Griffin's face was grim. There was nothing to do, then, except wait until the vessel left Titan for the airless depths of space—or else jump to destruction. The bullets would not open the doors; the locks were on the inside.

VERY slowly the ship was grounding—something Griffin had not anticipated. It dropped down toward the summit of the bluff. He could make out the tiny form of Frances near the lifeboat's wreck, but soon the curve of the hull hid her from view. He hesitated, glanced around, striving to remember the positions of the side ports.

With a jar the vessel came to rest.

Crouching, Griffin waited. Frances was visible now; once her gaze flicked up to him, and then she lowered her eyes. But she moved aside several feet.

Telling him the location of the port? Griffin moved with her. Would the Selenite be curious enough to investigate?

Lang had said there were only two men in the ship, aside from Thurm and Elander. Five bullets were in the barrel of Griffin's revolver.

The back of a man's head, then his shoulders and torso, came into sight. Griffin recognized Elander's slender, feathered form. He slid down the hull's curve, trying to move silently. But the rough metal was treacherous. He dug his foot into a hollow and became motionless as his heel grated harshly, loud in the silence.

Elander had paused, staring around. One more break like that and—! Griffin forced his mind from the thought. Then he saw Jimmy.

The furry little creature was standing in the port of the wrecked lifeboat, watching him. Would the thing's stare betray him to Elander? Griffin half lifted his gun, eyes intent on the Selenite's back.

"Phonk!"

Perhaps Jimmy was more intelligent than Griffin had thought. Perhaps he was merely using his natural defence mechanism in the presence of danger. His bulbous nose swelled, obscuring the small wedge-shaped head, and the boneless hands swung up.

A bellowing thunder of boomings blasted out on the humid air. Jimmy was pounding his gourd-like proboscis like mad, emitting loud, whooping *phonks* as he drummed. With a deep breath of relief Griffin slid down the hull, the slight noise he made lost in the resounding clamor of Jimmy.

Cloth ripped from the man's back; agonizing pain knifed through him. He braced himself, fell through empty air, and

dropped with a shock that brought him to his knees. But immediately he was up, facing Elander.

THE SELENITE had a needle gun. A deadly charge splintered on the hull beside Griffin as the revolver blasted. Lead, sent by a trained aim, smashed into Elander's face, blotting the faceted eyes and silvery scales with a mask of red. Before the Selenite fell Griffin wheeled and plunged into the ship.

Something burst on his chest; he held his breath as the first whiff of poisonous gas sent probing fingers into his nostrils. Fat Thurm was crouching behind a heap of cushions, a long tube leveled. Through another door came one of the crew; the faint rush of feet sounded in the distance.

Griffin leaped forward, free of the concentrated cloud of gas. With cold, deadly accuracy he shot the worker Selenite, traded bullets with Thurm and felt chill wind of death touch him as a pellet burst near his head and spattered him with flame-hot acid.

Only three more bullets.

One of them drove Thurm back against the wall, blood gushing from a gaping hole in the silvery throat, staining the varicolored plumage. The last Selenite squeezed the trigger of his weapon a half-second after Griffin's finger contracted, and the delay meant his death.

Had there been one more opponent, Griffin would have failed—that he knew. He stood swaying, the wind chilling his damp face, cheek and shoulder smarting with the pain of the acid-pellet.

Outside the ship Jimmy's drumming had died. Griffin stumbled to the door. "Okay, Fran," he said shakily. "Come on in."

She was at his side. "Spence! They're dead?"

"All of them. Yes."

The girl tried to smile. "I was afraid—look, down the slope. The skippers—"

From the river a black tide was crawling up. A dozen great tapering cylinders, with rows of whitely-shining discs along their sides, were beached on the sand. The fish were coming in a horde, thousands of them, converging on the ship.

With an inquiring *phonk* Jimmy hopped into the cabin. Griffin picked up a needle gun and, Frances at his heels, made a hasty examination of the ship. But it was empty now.

They retraced their steps. Behind them Jimmy *phonked* warningly.

"Wonder where the Limestone is?" Griffin said. "Locked up safely, I guess. Here—"

They paused on the threshold of the room where the dead Selenites lay. The girl cried out softly. Griffin's hand flashed to his belt, froze as a cold voice murmured,

"Hold it, Mister! Careful!"

Felix Lang stood just within the port, smiling crookedly, the Limestone a blaze of emerald flame in one hand. In the other he held a needle gun.

He said gently, "Before you can draw, I'll puncture you."

"You forgot—I'm a damn' clever little fellow. I waited my chance. I came in here, got the Limestone from Thurm's body, and found his gun. I'll give you your choice. Do you want to die now, or shall I leave you here on Titan? Eh?"

Behind Lang Griffin saw movement outside the port. He hesitated, puzzled, and then realized what it was. Sheer reflex action made him shout:

"Look out—Lang! Behind you—"

HIS cry came too late. Lang caught his breath, cried out and whirled. The ground outside the ship was carpeted with a living blanket of the skippers. One leaped up, tried to squirm over the threshold. Lang kicked it back and slid the door shut; then he bent to extract a long, needle-like thorn from his leg.

His face was chalk-white. "Thanks," he said. "My mistake, Mister. I should have closed the port when I came in. They can't get through beryllium."

Lang dropped the gun, laid the Limestone gently on a table. His fingers touched a key on the instrument panel, and the ship drove up with a shriek of cleft air.

He looked at the sharp, black spine. "Poisoned. It works quickly. I saw those little devils try it on some animal by the river, and death came in half a minute."

Griffin looked around, searching for medical supplies. "An antidote—permanganate—"

"No time. And you don't know what the venom is. Probably a neuropoison—" A shudder racked Lang's slight frame. He fell into a pile of cushions, and his hand went out to touch the green splendor of the Limestone.

Griffin bent over him, vainly searching his memory for some remedy. Lang's arm dropped to his side. His lips were cyanosed and swollen.

"A smart chap like me. . . ." Suddenly the lurking devil flared up in the dulled brown eyes. The man's wry smile had in it the soul of rakehell madness that had sent Lang into the spaceways as an outlaw.

"Don't forget, Mister . . . the Venusians . . . have . . . a proverb. . . ."

That was all. His dead stare was fixed on the Limestone that gleamed with green fires of hell.

Griffin straightened, and his glance through a porthole showed the globe of Titan dropping away, already a tiny disk against a great Saturn.

The Sun swung into view, and Griffin headed the ship toward it. Frances came to stand beside him.

Out there, somewhere hidden in the icy splendor of the stars, was Mars, where the Desert Nations waited for their fetiche. They would not have long to wait. For the Limestone was going home.