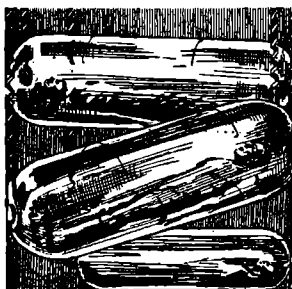


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A Novel of the Future

THE SLEEPER IS A REBEL

By BRYCE WALTON

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Cover Painting by Earle Bergey—Illustrating "The Sleeper Is a Rebel"

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Read Our Companion Science Fiction Magazine—STARTLING STORIES

The Long Way Back

By JOHN BARRETT

Carl Reese and Thela Brill dodge the Martian death in their space ship—only to face a far greater threat!



BR A I N -
ARD died
o n t h e
third day after
they set out from
the wreck. Carl
Reese and the
girl, Thela Brill,
scraped a grave
in the sand with
flat pieces of rock,
and laid him in it
on the litter they
had used to carry

him. They covered it with rocks to keep the sand wolves out, and set off again across the desert.

That day they did not go far. The sun came down through the cloudless Martian sky like a hammer. Every hour or so they had to creep into the shadow of the rocks and rest. It was about mid-afternoon when the girl collapsed. Carl carried her to one of the shallow caves in the cliffs that were growing more numerous, and gave her the water flask to sip.

Her blond hair was grayed with powdery sand, and Carl saw there were hollows now under her reddened eyes, but even with the strain of fatigue, her clean-featured face was beautiful. He watched her slender throat as she sipped the water.

He thought, She can't stand much more of this. She's not built for it.

The flask was still heavy when she handed it back.

"You'll need more than that to keep you going till sundown," he said.

She shook her head. "You better go on alone. It's getting so I can't see very well."

Carl Reese looked out at the crumbling rock and sand. It was not the heat that got you. The middle of this desert was no warmer than a cool day back on Earth. But the sun, pounding down through the thin air

dehydrated you and did funny things to your brain. And if you stood up under that, the glittering sand drove you blind.

"We might as well stay here for the night," he said. "It's as good a place as any."

"How much water is there left?" she asked.

"There's a quart in the other flask," he said. He knew there was hardly a pint, but if he had said so, she wouldn't take any more.

She leaned back against the rock, and squinted at the shimmering wasteland. "Do you think Brainard really saw a ship?" she asked.

"Of course he did. Brainard wouldn't lie about a thing like that."

"How could he see a ship on the ground when we were falling at six hundred miles an hour?"

"He could see the sun flash on the metal," Carl said.

SHE pushed the grayed curls back from her cheek. "But if there was a ship we should have found it by now."

"Not necessarily," Carl said. "We haven't been traveling very fast."

The girl looked at her hand that was covered with gray dust from her hair. "I'm a mess," she said.

"You ought to try and sleep a little," Carl said. "You were taking care of Brainard all last night."

"No, I'm not sleepy."

Carl sat there watching her. In a few minutes he saw her eyes close and her head droop forward on her knees. She did not wake up when he laid her down at the back of the cave and shoved his jacket under her head.

When the sun sank and the chill began to make him shiver, Carl went outside to look for fuel. As usual there were no plants, not even a blade of dried grass, but in the face



There beside Thela, Carl waited for the ripping explosion which would send them into nothingness

of a nearby cliff he found again a ledge of coal. At least, he thought, the desert furnishes us one thing, and it keeps us from turning to ice in the night.

He carried back an armful, and followed the procedure of the night before, breaking the lumps into little pieces, and grinding a few of them into a black powder that would burst into flame with a second shot from the heat gun.

When the fire was going, he gathered enough coal to last through the night, and sat down to doze away the hours.

Nights were the worst. In the day-time there was always the next patch of shade to be reached, or you had the compass to check. Even the job of putting one foot ahead of the other was something to concentrate on. At nights, with only the flames of the fire, and the moan of the wind in the rocks, your mind wandered, and once more you were streaking through space in an Interplanetary Patrol ship with home port on Earth only twenty hours away.

You were in the pilot's seat pointing out interesting landmarks on the planet Mars to the pretty, blond girl from cabin three who was standing beside you. And you were wishing that her smile and good humor meant something personal, knowing all the time that it was only because she and you and the five men in the main cabin had uncovered information that was going to stop a threatened invasion of Earth by the little men of Jupiter. And then the dream suddenly turned horrible as the ship was caught in an invisible net that jammed the controls under your hands, and hurled you down upon the face of the Red Planet.

Carl woke up sweating, his fists clenched, his arms aching from the fight with a phantom rudder lever.

The flames had dwindled to red coals. He saw the girl was shivering in her sleep. He built up the fire and lifted her closer. She opened her eyes.

"I was dreaming I was still working in the consular office," she said vaguely. "And the director told me to put a note on the bulletin board informing the employees that we were about to enter the one hundred and forty-third Ice Age."

"The sun will be up in an hour," he said.

They sat watching the rocks and the cliffs take shape in the half light of dawn.

"Sometimes I wish you weren't such a good pilot," she said wearily.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the way you pulled the ship out of that dive so that only four people were killed, instead of seven."

Carl stared into the fire. If we don't find something today, he thought, she'll crack up.

He handed the water flask to her. She shook her head.

"Take some," he said sternly. "You've only had a couple of swallows since yesterday noon."

"How much have you had?" she asked.

"I've had my share," he said. "I feel pretty good."

"You're a liar," she said evenly. "You haven't had any."

CARL swore to himself. What could you do? You couldn't hit her over the head, and force it down her throat when she was unconscious.

Outside the rocks changed from deep rose to light pink and then to glaring yellow. Already the sand was beginning to sparkle.

"If we do find that ship, what good will it do?" she asked. "It'll be a wreck like ours was—only worse."

"Brainard said he thought it wasn't wrecked."

She covered her eyes from the glare of the sand. "To me that doesn't make sense," she said. "Those fiends from Jupiter aren't stupid. They'd know that if they let anyone get through their electronic beam net from either side, the cat would be out of the bag."

"But the last news report we received before we hit the net had an item in it announcing Dekmar had just landed on Mars with his new, experimental ship."

"Dekmar has a reputation as a crackpot. Maybe he was transmitting from space somewhere near earth. With him it might have been some sort of a publicity stunt."

"I think you've got the wrong idea about Dekmar," Carl said. "He's a crackpot in some ways. Lots of bright people are, but he's sincere. If he said he was broadcasting from the Lusarian Desert on Mars, that's where he was."

"Then why didn't he say something about the net?"

"They said his broadcast was cut off right after it started."

"If he was smart enough to get a ship through the net, why couldn't he get a visa-phone signal through it?"

Carl felt the anger swell up in his throat. He stood up. "All right then. Have it your way. It was all a hoax, and Brainard didn't see a ship, and maybe we're going to fry out here in this desert. What of it? Is it a crime to be an optimist? Just because—" He stopped. She was sobbing.

"I'm sorry," he said gently. He thought, It's beginning to get me, too.

She stood up slowly and brushed the sand from her clothes. "No, you're right," she said. "I don't know why I talk like that. I guess I just want you to argue against me. When you tell me I'm wrong, it makes me feel better."

Carl rubbed his prickly chin. She was sure a hard one to figure out. "We better get moving," he said, "before it gets too bright." He started to give her the water flask, and then saw she was going to balk again. He took two swallows himself and handed it to her. She took two swallows, also.

They made good time for the first two hours. After that the sun was torture. By midmorning they were forced into the shade again. Carl felt his leg muscles begin to quiver as he eased himself back against the rocks. He looked at the girl and saw that her face was white.

"You lie down for a while," he said. "I'm going to climb this rock pile and look around." He got up.

"I'll go with you," she said. "Just let me rest a few minutes."

"You're too tired," Carl said.

"I'll be all right in a few minutes."

They rested for a half hour, and then the girl followed him up through the jagged boulders. He kept looking back, waiting for her to say she had had enough. She followed him silently. Her finger tips were bleeding, and there was a long red scrape on her calf. It took twenty minutes to reach the flat top.

Carl stood up shakily and looked around. The desert stretched for miles, a waste of rock and sand, shimmering under the wavering air. He looked west and saw that their way would soon be blocked by deep, sheer canyons.

HE FACED the southwest, and something bright made him blink. He opened his eyes wide. On a low mesa-like outcropping near the edge of one of the canyons lay a rocket ship. The metal was smooth and unscarred. It rested there as if it had been landed gently.

"I can see it," he told the girl. "It's about three miles away." He leaned down and helped her up beside him.

"Fire your gun at a rock," the girl said. "If there's anyone aboard, he'll hear the explosion."

Carl took out his heat pistol and aimed at a large flat rock near the base of the pile. A long blue flame speared out. Carl kept his finger on the trigger, and the rock suddenly exploded with an ear-shattering crack. They looked toward the ship. There was no sign of a response.

The walk across the last stretch of sand seemed endless. There was no chance to stop or rest. The sun drove them on. Carl thought, If there's no water aboard her we're finished. Fifty feet from the big hull he stopped.

"Dekmar!" he called out.

The metal rang to his voice. In the canyon beyond he heard a tiny rock slide rattle into nothingness.

"Maybe it's not Dekmar's ship," the girl said. "Maybe it's been here for years."

"It's Dekmar's ship, all right," Carl said. "I can tell by those ridges running down the side of the hull. I happened to be at the factory one day last spring when he was having them put on."

They walked around behind the tail pipes and found the hatch in the other side. It was partly open. Carl started toward it, but the girl grabbed his arm.

"What's that?" She was pointing to a wide trailing furrow in the sand by the hatch.

Carl felt a prickling sensation along his spine. "I don't know," he said. "It looks like the track of some animal." He swung open the door. "Whatever it is we've got to get in out of this sun." He stepped over the high threshold.

The inside of the ship, protected by the heavy insulation in the hull was cold. Carl blinked into the darkness and yelled out, "Dekmar!"

There was no answer. He began rolling back some of the shutters covering the ports.

The girl came up beside him. "There's a light in one of the forward cabins."

Carl looked down the alleyway and saw a small light burning over a desk. They walked cautiously toward it, and came out into the control room near the nose of the ship. The light threw long shadows over a big panel of levers and dials. In one corner of the panel three meters were glowing red.

"His visaphone set is still on," Carl said. "He must have been interrupted while he was broadcasting." He stepped toward the panel and almost fell over a chair lying on the floor. He picked it up and saw the back of it was splintered. He glanced quickly around the cabin. On a table by the control panel was a small metal box. The lever on the side of it was almost twisted off. Then he saw the door hanging crazily by one hinge.

"It looks like there's been a fight," he said. He found a switch and turned on the lights and heat all over the ship. Walking back along the alleyway, he saw that the bulkheads had long scratches in them, and two flush lights overhead had been smashed.

He reached the hatch and stepped down to follow the trail in the sand. It led to the cliff edge. He was bending down, trying to make sense out of the furrow when he heard the girl scream.

LOOKING up, he saw her standing in the hatchway. She was staring wildly behind him. He did not wait to look around. He ran to the ship, jumped inside and yanked the door to. At the same instant something hissed through the air and whammed down across the hull. Carl bolted the hatch.

"What is it?"

"A snake." The girl's voice was faint.

Carl looked out the port and his stomach seemed to turn over. The snake had a body as thick as a big tree, and a wide, plow-shaped head. It thrashed at the hull. Carl winced as its teeth scraped across the metal surface.

"Well, we know what happened to Dekmar," he said. "He must have left the hatch open while he was using the visaphone and the thing got him."

The girl was swaying on her feet. Carl caught her as her knees buckled. He found a cabin with a couch and then hunted for the ship's stores. There was water, gallons of it, and he found some biscuits. For the next half hour they sat in the cabin sipping water and gnawing at the biscuits. The girl kept looking out of the port.

"How could anything as big as that live out here?" she asked. "There's so little food, so little water."

"I've heard reports of these snakes in the Lusarian desert," Carl said. "The biologists say they're a hangover from an old type of

animal. They don't have a carbon system metabolism. Their chemical system is based on silicon, and they can grind up pebbles and small boulders and get nourishment out of them. They have teeth like rock crushers."

"Rock crushers." The girl shuddered.

Carl stood up. "Get your mind off it," he said. "See if you can find us something a little more substantial to eat. I'm going to look over the ship and see if I can figure out how to operate it."

He was still checking instruments when the girl came to the door of the control room twenty minutes later.

"Well?"

"I think I can run it," Carl said. "Everything seems to be standard except for one thing." He pointed to the square box on the table by the panel. "There's a mess of tubes and coils in there that don't make any sense. They must be important. They're connected by wires to the cables that run down the ridges in the hull."

"If it doesn't have anything to do with the controls, why can't you just forget about it," the girl said.

Carl frowned at the box. Above the twisted lever was the word *Reduction*. There was an arrow showing which direction the lever should be moved.

"I found something to eat," the girl said.

They walked back to the cabin that had evidently been made for a small dining room. The girl sat down opposite him and Carl suddenly stiffened in his chair. She was transformed. Her hair was soft and shiny again. The gray dust was gone from her skin. She had found some silky green cloth and made an impromptu skirt and a cross hatch halter above. He looked down at his torn clothes, felt the gritty powder on his arms and legs.

She laughed. "It's at the end of the hall," she said.

The shower was warm and there was soap that smelled like spices. As Carl rubbed himself dry on the big yellow towel, he looked around at the soft green and black tiles and thought, If this is the life of a crackpot, I'm all for it.

The meal and the sight of the girl opposite did something to him. When he walked back to the control cabin he was whistling. The girl came and stood in the doorway.

"Are you going to try and get through the net?" she asked in a nervous voice.

"Now don't get worried," he said. "If Dekmar got through, the ship must have some protection around the hull."

HE STARTED up the rockets and boosted the ship gently off the sand. After two wide circles over the desert to get the feel of the controls, he pointed her up and turned on the power. The girl moved over into the acceleration seat. Out of the corner of his eye Carl saw her strap herself in. She gripped the arms tightly. Her face was pale.

The net was a thousand miles up. When the altimeter showed eight hundred miles, Carl slowed down and felt his way along. At nine hundred the controls began to drag. He shut off the power and the ship dropped back. The controls were freed.

He tried it again, nosing up slowly. This time the levers almost jammed before he could shut off the power. The ship fell, whirling and looping crazily. It dropped five hundred miles before he could pull it out. Carl was sweating when he brought it down gently on the desert.

"Let's not try that again," the girl said.

Carl stared out at the sky. "I see how they're doing it," he said. "They have a power plant sustained on an antigravity ray somewhere above the Rapathian Mountains, and it shoots out a beam shaped like an umbrella clear across the solar system." He swung around to the control panel. "Still, Dekmar got through." He reached across and fingered the dial of the little box on the table.

"Do you think we ought to fool with that?" the girl asked.

"We can't stay out on this desert forever, can we? Besides, if we don't get that information back to the home government offices pretty soon, it'll be too late." He found a switch at the back of the box and pressed it. A strange throbbing ran through the ship. Carl moved the twisted lever gingerly in the direction of the arrow. Sparks shot out of the loose contact points and the throbbing speeded up.

The girl cried out. "Look! The rocks are changing."

Carl spun around in the chair. For a second he thought his eyes had gone bad. The rocks outside the port were swelling up out of the desert like balloons. He realized what it was.

"Reduction! Of course! It's not the rocks.

It's us. We're getting smaller."

Outside the port little pebbles were expanding into gigantic, rough-hewn boulders.

"But I don't feel any different," the girl said.

"Of course not." Carl had to raise his voice above the throb of the Reducer. "Everything inside the ship gets smaller proportionately. The ridges on the outside of the hull must create a field." He turned back to the panel. "And I've got a hunch this is going to get us through the net."

He leaned over to the table and moved the lever down another notch. The girl came over beside him.

"Look," Carl said. "The net acts on big things. If we were reduced to the size of bacteria, there wouldn't be enough power concentrated in one spot to affect the controls. We could slip through."

The rocket rolled suddenly as the flat sand surface under it became an uneven plain of craggy rock. Carl turned on the keel jets and lifted the ship clear. He looked out at the faces of sand grains that had expanded to glassy mirror-like sheets. "The ship's about two inches long," he thought. His stomach felt as if it had a lead ball in it. He tried the controls. The ship responded perfectly.

"But we can't keep getting smaller," the girl said. "You just can't keep concentrating a thing."

"Now take it easy," Carl said. "Evidently there's some sort of a mass dissipater connected with this. I don't know how it works, but Dekmar must have known what he was doing."

WITH a jerk, he started the tail jets and the ship roared forward and upward. The air was no longer clear. It was filled with hundreds of little particles that bumped gently against the hull. The girl started back when one touched the port.

"Dust particles," Carl said. "At our size they look big."

He turned on full power. The ship sputtered upward through a gray storm. The dust, Carl saw, was not impeding their progress. The particles touched the hull and bounced away. He set a course for Earth and turned on the interplanetary drive. At this size they would need speed to get anywhere.

With his hands still on the controls he turned to the girl. "Move it back to zero," he said, jerking his head toward the box on

the table, "but don't shut off the switch. I don't want to take any chances of the ship going back to its original size."

The girl shoved back the lever slowly. The throbbing noise sank to a low surging sound.

"The lever's loose," she said.

"Just be careful with it."

She came back to the port. "The air's clear now."

"I think that means we're in the beam," Carl said. "Ionized air would dispel the particles." He felt the ship buck slightly. Through the port he could see flashes of blue light crackling along the hull. He jiggled the controls. They were a little tight, but they weren't jammed. Suddenly he felt them come free. At the same moment something bumped the hull.

"It's a dust particle," the girl said. She pressed her face against the port, staring forward. "It's as big as a house."

Carl laughed. "We're through." He checked the course to make sure it was set for Earth, locked the controls, and stepped over to push off the Reducer switch.

Afterwards he thought that his elbow must have hit the lever as he reached for the switch. It happened too fast to be sure. He was aware only of the blinding blue flash and the jerking contraction of his muscles.

When he came to the girl was kneeling over him, wiping his face with something wet and cold. His ears were aching with the throbbing scream coming from the reducer. The lever to it was lying on the floor.

"How long have I been out?" He had to yell to make himself heard.

"About fifteen minutes."

He started to get up and pain like a knife stab shot through his skull. He eased back and felt his head.

"You hit a ledge on the bulkhead," she shouted. "I bandaged it. I tried artificial respiration, ammonia, everything. I thought you'd never come to."

He shook his head and stared at the table. Suddenly he began to laugh. "Automatic control," he yelled, pointing to the letters that were flashing on and off. "It says automatic control. What a joke. There isn't any control."

He saw the girl watching him, saw the fear in her eyes, the tight line of her lips. It sobered him instantly. He struggled to his feet. "Let's get out of this racket," he yelled.

They crossed the alleyway to a little cabin,

and Carl closed the airtight door. The reducer was still screaming, but it sounded far away. Carl leaned against the door, listening. It was like a siren out of control, climbing, climbing.

"I've got to stop that thing somehow," he said.

"You can't get near it," the girl said. "I tried once myself when you were lying on the floor. I touched the table and the shock almost jerked my arm off."

"But can't you see? I've got to stop it. If I don't we'll shrink. We'll shrink to the size of a molecule, an atom, an electron, and then— Well, there isn't anything smaller. We'll disintegrate into a quantum of energy, or something."

"Wait!"

CARL took his hand off the door latch and turned around.

"All right, then," she said quietly. "Let it happen that way. I'd rather have it like that than seeing you on the floor again, blue and not breathing."

Carl looked at her eyes that were calm now and steady. He thought, And I was scared to death she was going to crack up.

He said, "I'm going to try and cut the wires to the thing, anyway. If we can shut off the current supply, it'll stop." He stepped out into the screeching din of the alleyway.

They found a small torch in the ship's stores and Carl tried cutting the metal bulkhead on the outside of the control cabin where he calculated the current supply would run. The metal was hard and the torch cut slowly. After ten minutes he pushed up his mask and took a breather. The bulkhead was hardly marked. Carl tapped it.

"Must be another of Dekmar's inventions," he yelled at the girl. He put down the mask and tried again. Finally he gave up and shut the torch off.

He walked to the doorway of the control room. He took out his heat gun and aimed it at the box. The blue spear of flame did not reach it. It stopped short about a foot away, and splattered as if it were ricocheting against something hard. Carl tried it from another angle, another. The gun began to heat up under his hand, but an invisible shell of energy blocked off its beam from the box.

He walked back into the cabin across the alleyway. The girl came in behind him and

fastened the door. Carl laid the hot gun on the table.

"Well, I guess that's that," he said. He sat down on a bench by the port and contemplated the deck.

The girl came over and sat beside him. For a long time she gazed out through the glass, saying nothing, and then in a weak voice she asked:

"Do you suppose those are molecules?"

Carl looked up. Outside was a tremendously enlarged section of a dust particle. It was almost transparent, and made up of little dots that jerked to and fro.

"I suppose so," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. Molecules, he thought. Molecules, then atoms, then electrons and then—

He closed his eyes and tried to banish the dancing dots from his mind. He could feel his heart thumping heavily in his chest. When he opened his eyes again, the dots had expanded. Each dot, he saw, was made of colored spheres arranged in a pattern—four blue, one red and two orange. The patterns twisted slowly, passing through one another like squads of soldiers in a complicated drill, yet all the time holding their arrangement. Far out from the port he saw another group of three green and two yellow spheres.

The scream of the Reducer went up another notch. The lights in the ship dimmed and went out.

"It's drawing off all the current," Carl said. Splashes of red and blue light were playing over the girl's body. She moved closer to him, wide eyes fixed on the port. Carl felt her fingers searching for his hand.

A red sphere floated up to the port. It bulged and faded to a blurred pink, and the pink was darting lights that spread out, enclosing the ship.

This is an atom, Carl thought. We're inside an atom. The tightness around his chest grew into a constricting pain.

Then far out in the distance, the core of the red sphere swung into view—a mass of glittering diamonds. It drifted toward them, holding its shape till Carl was certain it was going to crash the ship. Then it separated, and one diamond hung before the port.

Carl, gripping the girl's hand, waited for a ripping explosion that would send them into nothingness. The explosion did not come. The trembling light floated toward them, and slowly dissolved into silvery powder that spread itself across a backdrop of blackness.

STAGGERING up to the port, Carl dragged the girl with him. Distant points of light hurtled past them. The ship was plunging into an abyss. No, it was plunging toward one of the tiny white points of light that was expanding, brightening into a ball, a sphere, a gigantic solid sphere with a scarred surface, with—

Carl was aware that his ears were ringing. The Reducer had shut off, its scream replaced by the deep, familiar roar of tail jets. The girl was shaking his arm and pointing.

"Don't you recognize it?" she asked. "Don't you recognize it?"

And of course he did recognize it, even though every ounce of logic in his makeup rebelled when he finally said:

"Yes, it's the Earth. The land mass right in front of us is North America." He went into the control cabin and shut off the interplanetary drive.

It was quite a few minutes later, when they were skimming over the peaks of the Rockies with everything ready for a landing, before the pieces began to fit together in his mind.

"You know," he said slowly, "I guess it does make sense. We say space is curved. We say a beam of light, if it went far enough would end up at its starting point. In fact, some astronomers say that nebulae in one part of the sky might be the same nebulae we see in another part of the sky, and we're actually seeing them twice because the light has traveled clear round the universe. Well, then, if the universe is curved and self-contained in one way, it must be curved and self-contained in every way. It's like the old symbol of the serpent swallowing its own tail."

Carl looked over his shoulder. "Are you listening?"

She was frowning at the shiny plates in the after bulkhead. "Yes, I'm listening."

Carl turned back. He studied the topography unreeling itself on the visiplate, and eased back the accelerator lever a trifle.

"The way I see it, if light comes back to its starting point, there is no infinitely distant place. In the same way there would be no infinitely small size. There's no end or beginning to anything, and if you travel far enough in any one direction, you always come back to where you started from. Do you follow me?"

"Well—" She kept staring at the after bulkhead.

"Did you ever study Kant?"

"Kant?"

"Yes, he's a very ancient German philosopher—lived way back when they didn't have a world government or anything. It was all in a required philosophy course I took at the University."

"I always steered clear of philosophy," she said. She did not take her eyes off the after plates.

"Well this fellow Kant claimed that time and space were just creations of our own minds, and he tried to prove it by extending the logical implications of them into the structure of the universe till they contradicted themselves and became meaningless. Let's see, how did he put it?"

Carl leaned back in the pilot's chair and scratched his head. "First of all he said the universe must be finite, because it's made up of the sum of its parts, and as its parts are units, you could never add up finite units and get infinity. Then he took the other side of the argument and pointed out that if it was finite, it must have limits, and if it has limits, it has limits in relation to something beyond it. And the universe is everything that is, so there couldn't be anything beyond, except more universe, and if it keeps on going like that, it isn't finite. But it's not infinite either, so what is it?"

THE girl started to say something, but Carl held up his hand. "Wait a minute. I'm not through."

"Kant's conclusion was that space and time were handy, man-made illusions. But maybe it's the idea of infinity that's the man-made illusion. It's the idea of infinity and beginnings and endings that cross you up when you try to reason out how small things can become, or how large the universe can be.

"We admit the universe is curved and self-contained in one way when we say light returns to its starting point. It must be curved and self-contained every other way too. And just as there's no infinite distance, so there's no infinite size, large or small. Whichever way you look at it, it's part of a circle, and if you travel far enough in any one direction, you always come back to the place you started from. Maybe exploding atoms and expanding galaxies are the same things from different points of view." He took a breath. "Now what were you going to say?"

"Are we going to land at Francisco City?"

It took him a few seconds to get his mind down to the question. "Those were the orders that came through fifteen minutes ago. What's worrying you?"

"There'll be visigraph reporters and cameramen, won't there?"

Carl twisted around in his seat to see what it was she kept looking at. It dawned suddenly. The shiny after bulkhead plate made a perfect mirror. All that time then, he had been talking to himself. She probably hadn't even been trying to listen.

"Don't tell me you're nervous."

"No, but—" She spread out the fold of her silky skirt. "Do you think it looks funny? It's really just a piece of an old parachute."

Carl hung on to the controls till the dizziness cleared from his head. She dragged herself across a Martian desert, she fell through a hole in the Universe, and you were scared to death all the time for fear she'd go to pieces, and she comes out of it worrying about the cut of her dress.

"You look fine," Carl said. "You look wonderful." And as he circled the field and brought the ship down on the runway, it dawned on him that she really did look wonderful, and in two minutes she would be stepping out of this ship, and maybe out of his life for keeps.

He got up from the pilot's chair, and caught her before she reached the hatch.

"Thela," he said. "There's a crowd of people out there. I'll be taken to the director's office right away to answer questions about this ship, and the government officials will be quizzing you all night about everything we found out and—"

"Yes?" She moved away from him, eyes narrowing.

"After it's over let's get together."

"To discuss some technical aspects of space curvature perhaps?"

"You—" He started to pull her to him, but she twisted away. She was looking at the ports, jammed now with peering faces.

"I'm listed in the consular directory like all the other employees," she said. She smiled and opened the hatch.

Two government officials helped her down into the crowd. He watched her walk away, and kept thinking about the smile. It was like the Reducer. You thought things were over with and then you suddenly realized they were just beginning.