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THE PLANET-SMASHERS

By Ray Cummings

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CHAPTER I

The Scarlet Festival

The momentous and terrifying series of incidents began near the midnight climax of the Scarlet Festival. It was about eleven P. M. when I stopped to get Dianne. In Venta the festival is annually held in the blue-water grove at the edge of the city, and from Dianne's nearby home we went there on foot.

If that midnight air-liner was not stopped, Venus would never see another dawn.

My name is Jac Hart. Nothing much of me is important to this narrative. I was born in Great-New York, the Earth; and with legal status at twenty, I gained the assignment as Junior Secretary to Earth's representative in Venus of the Triplanetary Union. I had always liked Venus, its way of life, its people, artistic, naturally gay, pleasure-loving. Descended from the earliest Latin settlers from Earth upon this then uninhabited planet, they were softened and yet enriched through five hundred years here in the lush climate and beauty that is Venus. And it was here in Venta that I met Dianne Donaldson, youngest daughter of Earth's present Ambassador. Love had ripened between us; we hoped to be married soon.

It was only a short walk from Earth-Embassy to the blue-water grove. A gay, holiday spirit was upon everything. The air of Venus is always warmly redolent with the perfume of the tropic blossoms, but tonight there was a spice in it, exotic incense to stir the senses wafting here from the festival as it drifted on the softly stirring breeze. Overhead, once we get beyond the thickly flowered Embassy gardens, the Venus mist-sky gleamed with the glorious mingled tints of the lights down in the festival grove. The colored search-beams were rainbow fingers moving and twining above us in the sky.

As we walked, the night breeze stirred Dianne's long black cloak so that her transparent festival robe was suffused with the blue and red and orange of the sky.

"You're very beautiful, Dianne."

She laughed gaily, squeezing my arm. "It's the spirit of the night, Jac. But it's nice to have you say so."

Now, as the descending thicket paths were converging upon the grove, other arrivals were visible ahead of us and to the sides—young men and laughing girls, their gay voices mingling in a babble of anticipation.

"Let's take a punt-boat, Jac," Dianne suggested. "Just the two of us."

It was our first festival since we became engaged—the comparative isolation of a small craft would let us be spectators rather than participants.

"Yes," I agreed. "Good idea—the boathouse, I think it's off here to the left."

We turned that way. The winding canals with tiny thicket-islands in their loops, from here were like tangled colored threads. Beyond the nearer patch of them, the big central lagoon was blood-red under the changing lights now—with little dark moving dots which were the boats upon it. To the right, from one of the big white pavilions where the crowds were eating, drinking and dancing, the soft music of an orchestra was audible—the plaintive strings of the native Venus instruments rising and falling with sensuous melody.

At the boathouse there seemed still to be some small boats available. I clung to the flushed and laughing Dianne, trying to fend off the plucking youths who were pelting her with blossoms as we pressed forward. Now, as the midnight hour was approaching, the festival was at its height...

From an island pavilion just across from us a group of young girls came running. Their cloaks fell from them; with long hair flying and white limbs flashing in the colored dimness, they ran for the water and plunged in... Showers of flowers, tossed by the admiring fringe of youths, came hurtling out from the mossy banks at them as they swam...

Every island thicket now held love-making couples.... We stood watching for a moment. Occasionally some of the

swimming girls would land at the dotted islands, only to be rushed upon so that with squeals of laughter and simulated terror they would turn and plunge back again....

"I have a punt-boat for you and the young lady here." The boathouse attendant stood obsequiously beside us. "Of what size would you wish?"

We turned to follow him down the jammed boathouse length. The rest-tables here were crowded with merrymakers, everyone gazing at Dianne, few at me, save to note me as her protecting escort.

Then as we stood at an interior corner of the boathouse, where the clothes racks made a fairly secluded recess, Dianne handed me her cloak and hood. She stood revealed, her dark hair bound on her head, the filmy pale-blue robe draped in folds about her slim white figure, with golden ropes crossing the breast and tasseled belt-ends dangling from her waist. She stood brushing the flower-petals from her hair and neck while I turned away to rack her cloak and hood in the small row of public locks near at hand.

"You are more beautiful than them all, Dianne. And don't tell me it's just because I see you through the rose glasses of a lover's illusion! That's nonsense. It's because—"

The words died on my lips. Dianne wasn't here! For that instant I stood more puzzled than startled.

"Dianne—" Had she darted behind some of these garments, with the impish spirit of the Scarlet Night merrymaking upon her so that she was hiding, waiting for me to find her and drag her forth, like the maidens hiding in the bosks of the islands of the lagoon?

"Dianne—I see you—come out of there!" But I didn't see her, and there was no answer to my calls.

The boatman came back from the slanting apron at the water's edge. "Your boat is ready, Sirrat."

"Oh—thank you. My companion—she was here just a moment ago—I can't imagine——"

His swarthy Venus face carried a faint smile. Respectfully he suppressed it, but his dark eyes under the heavy black browns were twinkling. "Could it be the little Sirrata found more attraction in someone who seized her? There is lightness of heart tonight. It means not too much, Sirrat. I will hold the boat. She will be back."

But we were fairly secluded here in the recess, nor would any of the gay and laughing youths have trespassed upon us. Or if one had, surely Dianne would not voluntarily have fled with him. And resisting him, I would have heard her least outcry since I had been only a few feet away.

The boatman and I searched the recess. A little dagger of fear now was stabbing into me. I sent the boatman away. Hurriedly, with growing puzzlement and apprehension, I moved among the crowd out in the open boathouse. There was no sign of her. Then I searched outside.

There was a small open door oval near where Dianne had been standing in the recess. I went out through it. There was shrouded dimness here, with a little path and the blue thickets crowding close and the pale blue-white sand of the ground gleaming beneath them.

"Dianne—"

My call, unanswered, floated away. Then I stood startled, gazing down at a small oblong object lying here on the ground. It was Dianne's purse.

The sight of it as I picked it up, identified it, with her familiar flowing signature embossed upon it, brought a flood of conjectures. Puzzling. I knew she carried her purse strapped under her cloak. I would have assumed it was there in the lock-rack. Why had she removed it to carry with her in the boat? Because there was something in it too important to be trusted in the lock-rack?

When I opened the purse, there at once I seemed to find the answer. Among the litter of cosmetics there was a sealed

envelope; but what caught my attention was a small square of stiff paper. I took it out of the unsealed envelope. A flight ticket! I stared at it in the dim sheen of the colored eave lights of the boathouse. It was a Class One ticket for tonight's flight of the Eq-2. Encircling the planet in 24 Venus hours, this passenger plane traveled in a perpetual midnight zone, with each of its stops exactly at the Zero Hour. It would depart from the Venta air-run at midnight, half an hour or less from now!

Why had Dianne planned to take the flyer on tonight's flight? Why hadn't she mentioned it to me? Surely it was so unlike Dianne! I stood stricken. Yet all I could think of was to get to the air-run and seize her, stop her if need be.

There was no time now to stand pondering it, and across the background of my consciousness there was the frightening realization that all my wild thoughts were implausible. Of her own volition, going to the flyer with her ticket in the purse, would she have dropped the purse so carelessly and not even missed it? Under what stress—or duress—she might have been I could only shudderingly imagine.

Within a minute now I was rushing from the blue grove. Out by the entrance I found a small taxi-flyer station.

"I've got to get the Eq-2 at midnight," I told the attendant. "I hadn't realized it was so late. Hurry now—don't argue about it." I showed him my identifying papers. "You will put the charge to me through the Triplanetary Union. I'll leave your car at the air-run. You can send and get it. Hurry now."

"Of course, Sirrat." He hastily wheeled out the little single seater. I jumped in, and in a moment the 'copters were drawing me upward.

I had risen hardly half a thousand feet, with the upper radiance of the festival grove painting me with its lurid sheen, when suddenly from down on the ground a pencil-beam of stabbing vibration darted up at me! A pistol-ray, trying to beam me down! I caught the source of it—a clump of thickets off to one side of the taxi station from which I had risen!

The first shot missed me. I swooped with a drop, and now a second one went wild, stabbing up through the night to where only an instant before my little taxi-flyer had been. Then I leveled off again, and with full power slid circling out over the festival grove.

There was no third shot; I was alone up here in the redolent airdrift of the languorous Venus night. But now my wondering perturbation over Dianne had mounted into the reality of terror. She and I surely had been watched and followed there in the festival—trailed by such desperate antagonists that openly they would fire on me to bring me down, probably kill me. I had escaped them. But what of Dianne?

CHAPTER II

Diabolic Plot

In a moment the dwindling splash of rainbow which was the blue-water grove was behind me. Beyond it the lights of Venta City were a diffused patch in the haze of darkness. Already I was dropping down upon the air-run field. The Eq-2, in Venta, takes off from its own private departure port, off to one side of the official and public field. I could see that I was still in time; the great cylinder of gleaming silver, with its spreading banks of disc wings, its 'copters, jet ports and propellers, and the glistening convex upper surface of the glassite deck-dome, stood like an eager but quiescent monster in its rack, ready for flight.

But I had only a minute or two to spare as I dropped the single-seater into a public landing cubby, leaped from it and ran. I ignored the check-in portal and reached the foot of the small ascending run at the side of the flyer. A Venus fellow, slim, swarthy and a head shorter than myself, with a stiff uniform and a peaked cap of gold denoting that he was the Eq-2 booking purser, barred my way.

"No bookings now. It is too late."

He tried to shove me back, but I resisted. "I'm going," I said. "Perhaps only to Carolah. But I'm going."

"No," he said.

"You're wrong." Warning buzzers were sounding. The faces of two or three of the Eq-2 crew showed at the entrance door. I shoved at the dapper little purser. "Get out of my way."

"Special flight tonight," he said. "There are few passengers, mostly it is freight."

"Triplanetary Union," I said. "Important business. If you want to lose your job—" But I was in no mood for argument. In a moment I was scuffling with him. It seemed then that somehow there was something queer about this purser. Just a fleeting impression and I had no time to think of it. For that moment briefly he tried to resist me.

He was mumbling under his breath. I thought I saw him fling a glance up to one of the watching crew, then suddenly he yielded and I dashed on board. He came up himself a moment later; the pressure portal slid closed after him.

The silvery metal catwalk here beyond the entrance portal, momentarily was empty. I shoved past the few crewmen who were loitering about. They gazed, but did not try to stop me. Was Dianne on board? I didn't see her.

Now the great flyer was throbbing as the 'copters lifted her. In a narrow corridor of the cabin superstructure, I gazed into several of the dimly tubelit cabins. Most of them were empty. There was no sign of Dianne.

On one of the narrow side decks of the three hundred foot liner, a level below the upper dome, I stood at a bullseye port, momentarily gazing out. We were still rising through the heavy, almost perpetual cloud blanket of the Venus lower atmosphere which shrouds all the planet—rising like an accelerating rocket as the giant 'copters pulled us. Already the lights of Venta had dwindled to a pinpoint and then were gone in the mist.

We were beginning to level off now, and I could feel the banks of propellers thrusting us and see the flow of mist sucking around the tiered discs of the great jutting wings, sucking and flowing past with our forward movement. In a great sliding ascent we were mounting, with the 'copters and propellers stopping and the huge jets coming on until in another moment we had burst upward through the mist blanket, and the purple sky with its myriad blazing stars spread overhead.

I turned from the catwalk deck, found an empty little cabin and sat down, with cold sweat bathing me, spewed by the agony of my indecision. Did I expect to come upon Dianne, laughing and gay, walking or standing around somewhere here on the flyer? I knew that was idiotic. Should I question the surly purser? Surely he would know if she had come aboard. But there had been something very queer about that purser!

Sitting there I found myself opening Dianne's purse again. Beyond the ticket for the Eq-2 flight, and the cosmetics and such, there was only a small amount of money, and that sealed note envelope. It was unaddressed, a blank envelope, crudely sealed. The face of it was smudged and dirty. I tore it open. Within was a folded sheet, closely, crudely written upon with an etch-burn pen. I gazed at it; began reading. And then I sucked in my breath with my heart pounding as I read. It began:

"Dear Lady-Sirrata—"

I turned to the etched, scrawled ending, nameless as it finished:

"So always as if should we continue to live, you will know I am,

Your grateful friend now in terror."

I am no linguist. My native English, so like the soft and musical slurring of it here in Venus that they are almost the same, was fully sufficient to my needs.

In my 'teens, once with my father, we spent a year or so in Ferrok-Shahn, the Mars capital. I learned a little of the clipped and guttural Martian then. But not much. Mars and its people never were to my liking. A totally separate race, the Martians. Despite that they are not too dissimilar in physical aspect—gray-skinned, angular and parched, most of them—by nature the contrast is enormous: their arrogance, their fundamental conception that each of them is in personal alliance with the Creator—his favored child whose ways are blessed always with Rightness.... I disliked it intensely. But I did learn a little of the Martian tongue.

This scrawled note to Dianne, I found now to be a curious mixture of English, Venusian and Martian. And it was illiterate as well. I deciphered it, with its horrifying import sinking into me as I read. But I can give it here only in English, the sense of it and perhaps the vague feeling of its earnest terror:

"Dear Lady-Sirrata—There was a time when maybe it is you do remember not, but dear Lady-Sirrata you and your father was very kind to this poor wretch, who then as always was greatly in trouble. Especially you, Sirrata, and never will I that forget. I am just in my blood a poor Martian with all his days most of them were spent in the prison at Ferrok-Shahn. Now because your dear father made it so, happy I have been here in Venus, as a free man and a little work to do, which sometimes I do. So really I am Martian, but in feeling I am for Venus, and for of course Venus's always ally and friend, the Earth.

"Now there is something terrible which I have learned, because I am a Martian and I listen much to what I hear around me. A thing terrible, Sirrata, so I tell to you for your father at once to do something to fix it or surely now we all die...."

I went cold as I read it—a plot by Mars to destroy the planet of Venus! Always the Earth and Venus had been a two-to-one alliance against Mars. It had been, indeed, the only thing which had held back the Martian ambition for war. We had always known that, of course, a little smug and secure, yet not too much so. Martians could not colonize Venus, any more than they could infiltrate the Earth. Everywhere they were disliked. No chance for them ever to make an ally of Venus, so that now they would destroy it!



Grim and ghastly plot! A thing gigantic, the future of three worlds, yet here it was, reduced to the essence of its diabolic simplicity, lying here in my lap, concentrating here in the Eq-2 as we sped forward in the starlight. The life or death of a great world, with fate thrusting its destiny now into my hands—fate thrusting Dianne and me so suddenly into the core of it.

This crew on board the Eq-2 tonight were Martian spies, not Venusmen! It was the climax of the plot which for months, perhaps years, had been maturing with all the grim and gruesome efficiency of Martian tradition.

In each of the leading Equatorial cities of Venus, atomic bombs already had been placed! A ring of them around the

Equator—bombs of inconceivable power, the result of these many hundreds of years of atomic fission since its original portentous discovery on Earth. They were bombs adjusted with directional charges so that their entire force would be directed downward at the core of the planet! Firing simultaneously, the world-girdling series of atomic dagger thrusts would split the planet in two, shatter it to bits, destroy it utterly!

Already a dozen of the bombs were in place—the frightened note said—hidden in the various cities along the route of the Eq-2. Bombs which lacked only detonators with the directional charge to set them off. And the detonators were on board the Eq-2 on this flight tonight! It was necessary to place them in the bombs at the last moment, since the charge of unstable material in the detonators could not remain potent longer than twenty-five hours. A dozen such detonators, with directional charges, were hidden here now, in charge of this brigand crew, and at each stop a Martian agent would come aboard, taking one off to his hidden bomb to be set for one hour after this flight was over!

Grim and terrible voyage, this night's momentous flight of the famous Eq-2!

I sat staring at my shaking hands holding the scrawled little note of the terrified Martian renegade, with my heart pounding and the sweat pouring out on me. Had Dianne read the letter? It did not seem possible, for of course she would have taken it to her father, and sent for me—we would never have gone to the Scarlet Festival at all. And the letter was sealed with what obviously was its original seal.

I could envisage now what must have happened ... the illiterate frightened Martian stopping Dianne, handing her the letter and the ticket ... perhaps in his awe of her, with only some mumbled words that he was trying to repay her former kindness; and Dianne without looking at them then, had shoved them into her purse and probably forgotten all about it.... And I could imagine what had then happened to the poor wretch. Suspecting him, the Martian agents had seen him with Dianne ... had caught him, doubtless killed him before now.... And then had gone after Dianne—and after me.... But what would they do with us?

For that moment as I thought of it, terror for Dianne's safety so flooded me that I could think of nothing else.... Had she been killed?... Where was she?

I jumped to my feet in the dim glow of the empty little cabin. Of what I was going to do I had only the haziest idea. The decision was lifted from me. There was a shadow in the door oval behind me, a little scraping noise and as I whirled, I stood looking into the rounded, ugly black grid-muzzle of a crewman's heat-gun!

CHAPTER III

Brigands of the Airways

"Stand quiet, Earthman, or you will die." He didn't have to admonish me. With a touch of his poised finger, the stabbing pencil-ray of heat from his gun would in a split second bore through me with its silent white-hot thrust. I stood stiffened, frozen, staring at him.

"Keep your hands out," he said.

I spread my arms. He was a slim but muscular looking fellow, clad in the knitted gray jacket and wide trousers of the crewman uniform, with the peaked cap pulled low over his forehead. A Martian. Not so much obvious in the English of his speech—the Martians are all good linguists; but here in the close range of the cabin light, I could not miss the look of his wide, thin shoulders, his head thrust forward on its thin neck, and the cosmetic flush covering the parched and grayish skin of his face to simulate the swarthinness of a Venusian.

"I have no weapon," I said. "A peaceful passenger here. Why should I need a weapon? What is the meaning of this?"

His thin wide mouth twitched with a faint ironic smile. "Of course you know nothing! Do you think I am a gullible fool?" He came cautiously forward, with leveled weapon and with his left hand skillfully searching me. Did I dare risk his shot by jumping him? I was tense with the thought, but he was too alert, I did not dare try it.

"Very good," he said. "Stand over there. What's your name?"

"Jac Hart. The Triplanetary Union. Now look here—"

He was unimpressed. "Suppose you tell me what you're doing on this flight," he said.

"I told you—a passenger. Triplanetary business, certainly not yours. I'm going to Carolah—"

"Stop lying. There was a girl—"

My heart leaped. Had they indeed killed Dianne? I tried to steady myself. "There *is* a girl," I said. "Dianne Donaldson. Look here, what all this means I don't know. I—"

"You lie."

"I was with the girl at the Festival. I—I thought she was taking this voyage—"

"She is," he said suddenly. I had to believe him, with so great a sweep of relief that momentarily I stood weak and shaking.

"She's here?"

"Yes. But she will not talk—or else in truth she knows nothing."

"Nothing of what?"

He did not answer me. His dark gaze had flicked to the chair where I had been sitting. Dianne's purse was there, and the scrawled note lay beside it. Still with his gun warily upon me so that I did not dare move, he glanced at the note. Then he was back facing me.

"Now we can talk more to the purpose," he said grimly. "You read that letter?"

"Yes."

"It was in the girl's purse? Had she read it?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"And so you know what this night will bring." He chuckled grimly. "Well, much good it will do you. The end of you, of

all this rotten world—"

"And you also," I retorted. "You and the rest of your murderous brigands—"

His smile broadened. "It might be worth it. But not necessary. When this voyage is finished and we are back in Venta again—there will be an hour before the bombs go off—an hour for us to hurl ourselves away by rocket. Have no fear; we will return to Ferrok-Shahn for the plaudits of the people. A few of us will be left in the different cities here along the route, of course. Noble suicides and they love the idea. But not me."

"What's your name?"

"Marok."

He seemed relieved, his first tenseness leaving him. They had feared, of course, that Dianne or I had been able to warn the Venta officials of the plot. Marok now seemed satisfied that we had not. With the tenseness of this desperate venture upon him—and aided perhaps by the carnival spirit of this Scarlet Festival Night—I could see that he had had rather freely of the Baccus-wine.

He told me now that luck had been with them so far on this voyage. Martian agents were in control of the little private air-runs. This brigand crew were flying the ship. The normal crowd of passengers here on board would have been a problem, yet they could not bar too many of them from embarking, it would have aroused suspicion, perhaps investigation before the voyage was over. But this night of the Festival was the one night of the year when almost no one wanted to travel, which was why they had selected it, of course. A few passengers were on board now, just a small group of them.

"We have them in the upper deck salon under guard," Marok was saying with his ironic grin. "They know nothing, of course, that the end of the world—and themselves—is so soon upon them."

"And now you're going to put me with them?" I said.

He shook his head. "You know too much. Why should we throw them into hysteria and panic? No, I think I will tie you up here."

"The girl, Dianne, she is with them?"

He only grinned at me. Now we could feel the ship's vibration again, and hear the throb of the propellers and 'copters as we sped along.

"Carolah," Marok said. "We're dropping down, a brief stop, Earthman, fortunately no passengers are booked, on or off. The freight and mail—" He chuckled again. "I think safely we can dispense with those. Of what use, really, with the end of the world so near?"

I saw now that at the cabin doorway threshold he had placed lengths of rope he had brought with him. I knew I had to stall, he still had never relaxed an instant with his weapon. Could I create an opportunity for a desperate try? Would the wine he had drunk perhaps have increasing effect upon him if I waited a little longer?

I tried to smile with what I hoped might intrigue him. "Carolah? They tell me the Scarlet Merrymakers are very bold, here in Carolah. And we land almost within the grove, don't we? Shall we watch while we are here?"

"Why not?" he agreed. He gestured toward the broad window port just behind me. "But don't think me a fool, Earthman. One move and I will drill you; it might be easier than tying you up, anyway."

It is strange, but a fact, that in very truth Venus and the Earth are indeed astronomical twins. Almost of the same size and mass, with axial rotation of almost the same duration. It was still the Midnight Hour as we dropped down upon the small private air-run at Carolah; and the Scarlet Festival here was at the height of its voluptuous climax.

As the Eq-2 settled into its rack for its brief stay, Marok stood with me at the window, the grid of his gun muzzle pressed

against my side. The glow of the festival lights shone upon us, a riot of color sheen in the dim little cabin.

The air-run field, in the hands of the bandits, seemed dim and neglected. Out beyond it, the festival grove was brilliant with its shifting rainbow glare. Upon a great dais raised in the center of the lagoon, the White Princess and her White Maidens stood grouped, sleek and dripping from their swim, triumphantly enthroned. But now, at midnight as we watched, the Scarlet Princess and her girls were just emerging from the pool. The battle of the vine-ropes and the flowers was beginning....

Marok's chuckle was appreciative, "You are right. They do it nicely, here in Carolah."

And the Scarlet Princess would win, of course. That was traditional. But my attention was hardly on it. In a moment, here at the dim air-run the cloaked figure of a man came darting. Two of the pirate crewmen met him at the boarding incline, handing him a small, black cylindrical package a foot or so in length. The Martian agent in Carolah, receiving the detonator with its directional charge, ghastly little trigger to be placed now in his hidden bomb here.

I stood watching him as he took it and darted away. Perhaps that messenger still might not be figuring he need be a suicide—he still could get back with local transportation to Venta, and join the escaping rocket ship.

Curiously irrelevant thought. Of what difference to me, to all of Venus? One bomb, at least, would in a few moments now be equipped and ready, securely hidden, inevitably detonating an hour after the end of this voyage. All I could do was stand here helpless, futile, afraid to move because a heat-gun muzzle was pressing my ribs!

Now the Eq-2 was swiftly rising again. With the festival dropping away, Marok turned from the window. He sighed. "Very nice, you were right, Earthman. Too bad we leave. Yet, in an hour we will see it again in Mizrah, won't we?"

Such pleasant sights of gay revelry to stir the primitive senses could never be seen in Ferrok-Shahn. They were too incongruous to the busy mechanical efficiency of Mars. And this was to be the last Festival of the doomed Venus. Perhaps Marok was thinking regretfully of that. He stood behind me, sighing again.

"Look!" I said suddenly. "Why, Marok, how queer—"

It brought him back to the window, intent as I excitedly pointed in a desperate effort to distract him. And as though fate were intervening to help me, at that instant the Eq-2 gave a sharp lurch—perhaps to avoid some private craft dangerously in our path of ascent as its pilot gazed down with his glasses upon the festival. Marok's movement toward the window, and the lurch, momentarily knocked him against me. His grid-muzzle for that second wavered aside.

It was enough. I tensed, shifted, caught his hand holding the gun at its wrist.

"Why—you—you—" He ripped out a Martian oath. As we struggled, the gun fired its split-second charge, missing me so that it hit the white-metal cabin wall with a low spluttering shower of sparks radiating back upon us as we fought. He was a wiry, strong fellow. He tried to turn the gun inward upon me. Then I had wrested it from his hand, but his fist caught my face with a blow that snapped my head back and whirled my senses.

Then I knew that I was falling, still clutching the gun, but dizzily falling, with him sprawled on top of me.

"So, you want to die now, Earthman?"

His blow knocked the gun to the floor beside us. As I squirmed and thrashed, I felt the lump of it under me, against my back. He had me by the throat now, strangling with all the power of his steel-like fingers. My ears were roaring; all the dim and turgid cabin scene was fading into bursting showers of silent lights....

"Dianne ... Dianne...." It was as though I wanted my murmuring lips to carry her name while my senses faded into the last abyss of death.... And with it, like the faraway fragment of a dream of someone else, I seemed to know that I had a cold and sweating hand fumbling under me for the gun. Then my fingers had gripped it, drawn it out. Marok gave a cry as he saw the gun; his hands left my throat, but he was too late. With what seemed my last despairing strength, my shaking finger pressed the trigger and the violet hiss spat and burned into his chest, drilling through his heart.

For a time I lay gasping, pinned by the weight of the dead slumped Martian. But in a moment my head cleared; I slid Marok's body off me and staggered to my feet. The cabin door-oval was still open. The fight fortunately must have been unheard, no one was coming in the glowing outer corridor. I shifted the door panel closed. There was a lock; I locked it.

What I could do now seemed clear to me. Certainly it was the only thing I could plan. Marok and I were about of a size. I discarded my outer clothing, stripped the body and arrayed myself in the crewman garb. With the peaked cap pulled low as Marok had worn it, probably I could pass for him if I could keep in the dimness and at long range.

There was a cabin cubby closet here. I shoved the body into it, with my clothes and the ropes which were here on the floor. In a moment I was slouching out into the corridor. Down at an angle of its further end, one of the brigands was standing. I tried to turn another way, into a cross corridor here, but he had seen me. His hand went up; he called,

"You, Marok. Is it all right? The Chief was coming to attend to it. The Carolah landing kept him busy."

I steadied my voice, with my heart racing. Would my voice pass muster?

"No need," I said. "Tell him that the fool Earthman knows nothing. I have disposed of him."

The fellow at the corridor end chuckled and I moved away, ducking into an ascending catwalk that led up to the dome-deck. Already the Eq-2 was up in the starlight, speeding on its way. Through the glassite dome the starlight filtered down. Up here the little open deck was dim, save for the starlight, and the glow of lights in the window ports of the control room forward, which sat like a little cube wedged into the narrowing deck of the bow. The smaller radio room was behind it, with windows that were dark.

I was moving forward, with Marok's heat-gun in my hand, close beside the racks of escape emergency equipment—'chutes and oxygen helmets, and the apparatus for fire-fighting. I had no warning, only a vague sound that made me see the dim shape of a black-cloaked figure lurking in the shadows of a rack—a figure which all in that same second flung itself upon me!



CHAPTER IV

Girl Prisoner

I must recount now what had been happening to Dianne, in substance as she afterward told it to me. I was quite right in my conjectures about her meeting with the Martian renegade. She had hardly recognized him when tonight, just before I had come to take her to the Festival, the fellow had accosted her in the Embassy gardens, ragged, whining, sniveling and reeking of the Baccus-wine which had been his lifelong undoing.

As I had envisaged, she had shoved his gifts into her purse, ignoring his mumble of a flyer ticket. Thinking idly that his mind was wandering with drink as he babbled of terror, and the purloined ticket if it was needed to help, and this thing of great urgency—she had hurried to meet me and had forgotten the incident.

Like mine, Dianne's mind had held no least presage of evil as we gaily stood in the boathouse clothes-recess and she had cast off her cloak, revealing her beauty to me, my admiring gaze flushing her cheeks. She took her purse from the cloak, stuffing its flat oblong under her belt-thong, with the thought that she very well might need her cosmetics.

I turned away. Dianne was brushing off the flower petals with which she had been pelted as we arrived. The little side door-oval of the recess was near her. Suddenly without warning, from the rack of hanging garments at her side, the dark-robed figure of a man appeared. His hand gripped her, his other hand went over her mouth, stifling her outcry.

His voice was hardly more than a whisper, low, menacing. "Quiet! You will not be hurt—"

Now he was shoving her back through the hanging garments. Dianne was able to struggle a little, but there were other hands clutching her now. Then they had her outside, holding her as with her puny strength she tried to fight them.

"Here, Marok, the chloroform! Shut her up, you fool! Do you want to bring all the place on us?"

It was a muttered admonition, partly in English, partly in the language of Ferrok-Shahn, which because her father was Earth's ambassador to Mars in former years, Dianne knew well.

"Silence her. Here, let me hold her!"

Dianne's purse, as she writhed and twisted in the grip of her captors, was knocked from her belt, lying unheeded on the ground. Then someone held the sponge of chloroform against her nose, its sickening sweet, volatile vapor wafted her senses away.

She did not quite lose consciousness. There was the dim knowledge that she was shrouded in a cloak and hood, being hurried away ... the feeling of a conveyance, rocking and bumping ... the whirl of 'copters of a small flyer.... Then somehow she realized as she was set on her feet and told to walk and mechanically did so, that she was in a dim little air-run ... then being carried up an incline and into the glowing interior of a great flyer.

Her senses wafted off again.... At last, vaguely with the realization that time had passed, Dianne felt herself stirring. She was lying on cushions on the floor of a cabin, dimly tubelit. A faint throb of vibration was distantly, dimly audible and she knew that the aircraft was in flight. At the door of the cabin a crewman—burly fellow in knitted jacket and pantaloons trousers stood lounging on guard.

And there was a man sitting beside her, here on the floor watching her—a slim, swarthy fellow, dapper with his stiff uniform and the peaked, gold cap of a purser.

"So the SIRRATA recovers?" he said softly. "Don't be frightened, my dear. I have been waiting for your senses to come. My name is Timko—I am in charge here."

"What—what happened?" Dianne struggled dizzily to sit up, with his solicitous hand steadying her, helping her up.

"The chloroform," he said. "It will pass in a moment more."

In Dianne's confused mind there had been a first thought of relief; she could remember being seized, brought here. Was this her rescuer? But in the same instant she knew it was nothing like that ... the faint irony in this purser's voice ... and the burly guard leering down at them, a heat-gun in his hand.

"What do you want?" Dianne demanded. "How dare you—this outrage—"

The fellow Timko dropped his bantering manner. "Where is your purse?" he demanded grimly.

"My purse? Why—why—" Then she stammered the truth. She could remember having it—had she dropped it, there by the boathouse?

"There was a letter in it," Timko said. "A wine-soaked traitor learned something, didn't he? He talked with you. Didn't he hand you a letter—about what he had learned maybe?"

"Handed me a letter? Yes, I remember that." Dianne was puzzled.

"And you told your father? Or that young Earthman?"

"I—I haven't read the letter yet. Why should I? Is it—important?"

He laughed softly; he seemed relieved. And as he questioned her further, with her startled wonderment so obvious, he believed her.

Then at last he stood up. "Stay where you are," he said. "You will not be harmed." He laughed again. "The beautiful daughter of Earth's ambassador—when Venus is gone and if war then should come with the Earth—we will have you in Ferrok-Shahn, handy as a hostage."

To the puzzled Dianne his words were as incomprehensible almost as though he had been talking in the language of distant Pluto's fabled inhabitants. But she could not miss that this was all something of tremendous and terrible import.

"I don't understand you," she said. "The death of—"

"I'm glad that you do not," he grinned. "It would have been very bad—had you told your father." He turned to the guard at the doorway. "She knows nothing, Zelo, we can thank the star-belt for that. No need of putting her with the passengers. I'll leave her here with you. Guard her well."

"Of course. Of course, Tor-Timko. Trust me for that."

The burly guard closed the cabin door as Timko left. Then for a moment he stood gazing at the beauty of his prisoner. He came and sat down on a little stool, drawing it up beside Dianne. His gray Martian face, swarthy with the cosmetic disguise, carried an admiring, ingratiating smile.

"And he leaves me here to guard you, perhaps for all this last great voyage of the Eq-2! What a pleasure for me, SIRRATA."

Dianne's heart seemed jumping in her throat, but she managed a smile. "Thanks," she said. "So we're on the Eq-2 are we?"

"Between Venta and Carolah." He gestured toward the window port, with its starlight outside. "At Carolah—why should we not watch the Scarlet Festival together?"

"Why not?" she agreed.

Like almost everyone this night, he had had his Baccus-wine. The smell of it was on him, and its blur was in his voice and flushing his face as his greedy eyes roved over her.

"You were in the Festival at Venta?" he suggested.

"Yes," she said.

"And more beautiful than them all." He shifted toward her, but she slid back a little. "We could be friends, SIRRATA. I am not quite what I seem, not just a poor Venus crewman. And you, of all prisoners here, only you will live to remember it."

"How nice," she retorted gaily. "Should we not drink to that, my friend Zelo?"

As she hoped, promptly he produced his flagon of alcoholite. He offered it to her.

"You first," she said. "Perhaps even it might injure me, with the chloroform fumes still in me. I had not thought of that. But you go ahead. I can drink to you in spirit, even if not in the spirits of the brew."

The sodden fellow laughed gustily as he drank. "Ho! Ho, the little lady is clever."

Some of the Baccus brews are very potent. Perhaps this one was, or perhaps already he had imbibed too freely. A clever, beautiful woman can add to anyone's intoxication. Dianne was plying him with the drink and he hardly realized it. Time was passing, she could not guess how much. There was in her mind only the urgency of getting out of here, to escape somehow from the ship when it landed at Carolah.

"I was the White Princess once," Dianne was saying. "Another draught—everyone drinks to a White Princess. It is tradition."

"And to the Scarlet Princess," he laughed. "Two drinks—to the Scarlet Princess—and to you—"

"And to me."

He lurched on the stool. The bottle in his hand was empty. For a moment she sat watching him silently as he swayed, with his eyelids wavering.

"If you would lie down," she said soothingly. "I could awaken you to see the festival at Carolah."

He mumbled agreement, and he stretched himself down, almost in a moment he was stentoriously breathing with the stupor of drunken oblivion.

The black cloak and hood in which Dianne had been brought here lay discarded in a corner of the cabin. She flung it around her. Zelo's smallish heat-gun lay on the floor beside him. Though she was not quite sure how to fire it, she dropped it into a pocket of the cloak. A thin-bladed dagger was in a sheath at the Martian's belt. She removed the sheath, clipped it to the tasseled golden cord at her waist.

The padded tubelit corridor outside the door momentarily was empty as she cautiously peered. Then she stepped out, pulling the door-slide closed after her.

CHAPTER V

Room of Racked Death

Disguised as Marok, I had stuffed the Martian's body into that cabin closet and gone to the dome-deck. The Eq-2 now was well past Carolah, heading for Mizrah. I had little warning when, in the starlight up here, that black-cloaked figure leaped upon me. I did not press the trigger of my heat-gun—all my life I will thank Providence for that! I would have done it in another second, but a low voice was gasping.

"Jac! Jac!—"

It was Dianne! She had escaped from her drunken guard as I have described. We crouched in a shadowed recess of the dome-deck, swiftly whispering, telling each other what had happened. There wasn't much that I had to tell Dianne!

Before the ship had reached Carolah she had been able to hide within hearing of a group of the Martian crew. They were talking in Martian, but she could understand it well. She was aware of the full plot now, and that I was a captive on board. More than anything, she wanted to find me, try and get me loose from my enemy guard.

She had located the room where the detonators were racked—a cage-like division at the stern of the big open space in the lower hull which was the mechanism room. Dianne crouched on an overhead metal catwalk, with the mechanism room spread beneath her, the great jet-engines throbbing with their murmuring hiss.

"I could see the detonators down through the ceiling bars of the cage-room," she was telling me now.

"Small cylinders? At Carolah I saw the Martian agent taking one away."

"So did I!"

"Oh, Jac, if only I could have stopped him! I couldn't get near the exit port. Small cylinders, yes. Cylinders in racks—a dozen of them."

Lethal room! The fate of a world was in that cage-room! And one of the diabolic cylinders already had been taken to its bomb!

"Dianne, we might get down there now," I suggested.

"We might. I did get in there myself—just for a moment before we arrived at Carolah!"

There was a small side entrance to the cage, off a lower runway at the very bottom of the hull. Dianne had gotten down there.

"Jac, I was in the cage. I didn't know what to do. I tried to examine them—I had to duck away, a guard was coming. He didn't see me in the dark runway. He took one of the cylinders—"

"The one that was taken off at Carolah!"

"Yes. I couldn't stop him—"

"Dianne, if I could smash those detonators—you can lead me—"

"All right. I—I want to show you—what I tried—I thought—"

Her agitated whispers died. One of the brigand crew was coming this way! Dianne was in deep shadow, but I realized that a little stray glow of starlight was on me.

He saw me. "Who is that?" he demanded sharply.

Perhaps I could have drilled him then, but someone in the control room might see it. I stood erect.

"Marok," I said. "I dropped something here, but I have found it."

"You, Marok, things go nicely for us, don't they? We pass Mizrah soon." He sauntered away, along the deck until his figure disappeared down an incline.

Dianne was up beside me now; the starlight was a glow on her white terrified face in the shrouding folds of the black hood. We stood a moment, watching our chance, then we moved like shadows along the inner face of the glassite pressure wall.

"Here," Dianne murmured. "I came up through here."

It was a small spiral staircase, leading vertically downward through the three levels into the lower hull. Heat-gun in hand I went first, with Dianne close behind me. There were small windows at the different levels. At the bottom of the stairwell we emerged upon a rather narrow grid-landing.

There was a window here, and a door-oval opposite it, at the threshold of which we stood gazing down upon the glowing eerie lights of the mechanism room. Four or five of the crew were there, moving around the great engines. From here a descending ladder went sharply down; and there was also a bridgelike catwalk at our level, spanning the overhead length of the room.

At my elbow, Dianne was whispering, "At the other end of the catwalk, a ladder goes down. We can get into the cage-room from there. I want to show you what I—"

Suddenly footsteps were sounding directly above us! Someone was coming down the spiral staircase! We scurried across the catwalk with the feeling that every instant one of the crewmen at the engines might look up and see us. Then we were across and down the other ladder, in a narrow corridor with the hull wall on one side and the bars of the cage-room on the other.

It was a feast of Tantalus. There were the rows of racked cylinders so close, with only the bars between me and them. Surely, if I could be in there for only a moment, with some heavy implement that might be lying around there, I could smash them.

Dianne was gesturing. "There's a small entrance at the end of the passage here."

I gripped her. "Dianne, when I go in, you'll hide out here—" The noise of smashing them would bring the Martians upon me, of course. Perhaps, for a shot or two, I could fight, but that would be all. My tensely whispered words were like a farewell. "If—if a fight starts, you run! Go back to that drunken guard. They said they'd take you to Ferrok-Shahn. Don't try to fight them, just to be killed—"

"Oh, Jac—"

I shoved her into a tiny recess where another ladder went upward. She crouched down, trying to murmur a protest.

"Do as I tell you, Dianne."

I had started along the passage when abruptly I realized it was too late! The jet engines had stopped; the propellers and 'copters were whirling. We were landing at Mizrah; and figures were visible now at the end of the passage directly ahead of me! One of them was carrying the cylinder for Mizrah; he went up an incline, but the others stayed, loitering.

I darted back to Dianne, with a new idea. If we could get off the ship without being seen, and escape safely from the Mizrah air-run which I knew was guarded by Martian agents, then I could report this bandit voyage to the Air-Police; the Eq-2 would be seized at its next stop, or if not, certainly hunted down and destroyed.

There was very little time. We went up a ladder, and from a corridor window on the level above, where cabin doors stood in a row, already we could see that the city of Mizrah was close under the dropping ship. The dark air-run was

visible; and beside it, the rainbow radiance of the Scarlet Festival, just reaching its excitingly brilliant climax here now at midnight.

Like scurrying, frightened rats we tried to avoid being seen. Several times, at intersecting passages, by seconds we avoided a head-on encounter. I was more desperate than ever now, with the realization that if we did not leave the ship at Mizrah, inevitably we would be seen, trapped, with a fight starting perhaps, which could only end in our deaths.

But we had no chance to get away! The ship was in its rack at the Mizrah air-run in a moment more, and we huddled together by a ventilator hood at the lower level, gazing at the landing door with the packaged cylinder being carried out and the gold-capped Timko and half a dozen of his men loitering around! We were close enough to hear them talking. No passengers, unfortunately, were booked to leave at Mizrah, nor to come aboard. Our stop would be unfortunately brief.

Baffled, Dianne and I could only stand gazing out at one of the window-ports. Outside, the cloaked Martian agent was receiving his cylinder. He was hardly a hundred feet from us. Dianne had taken a tiny photo-snapper to the Venta Festival. She had it in her hand now.

"I snapped the one at Carolah," she murmured.

She may have gotten a fair picture of this one with the last despairing possibility that if we could emerge safely from this grim voyage at Venta, during that last hour the police might hunt down some of these agents, and find the hidden bombs before they could detonate.

The agent with his packaged death hurried away in the dimness. The Eq-2 was rising again.

At the window we had a brief glimpse of the Festival climax—a great fountain here in Mizrah, where the Scarlet Princess and her girls—their skin stained crimson with the betel-juice—were running on the fountain rim, with long hair flying like flames and the red glare-lights on them.

"You, Marok? I've been looking for you."

Dianne and I stood frozen in the dimness; one of the Martian crewmen was at a cross corridor only a few feet from us. He came forward. My thoughts were whirling. Did I dare drill him, or were others too near?

He saw Dianne's black-cloaked figure, with a glimpse of her face framed by the hood. "Why, it's the little SIRRATA! So you have her with you, Marok?" His tone was amused. "I thought she was with Zelo."

Women are quick-witted. "That clod Zelo is drunk," Dianne said contemptuously. "He is asleep in drunken stupor. With Marok here, I like it much better."

The crewman laughed. "Good. I don't blame you. Bring her along, Marok."

"Bring her?" I echoed.

"To the forward salon. Tor-Timko wants to see you."

In the cross corridor two other Martians hailed us, were coming to join us, starting with us for the salon. Here in the dimness momentarily I could get away with my masquerade.

But now we were trapped!

CHAPTER VI

The Fight on the Dome-Deck

We passed the second level salon where the passengers were under guard.

We mounted to another level, and Dianne had a chance to exchange a few swift whispers with me. That time when she had listened to the crew talking, they had mentioned Marok. He had arrived in Venta on the space-flyer only yesterday from Ferrok-Shahn, sent by the Zar-Tor himself to join Timko in tonight's completion of the plot. So these brigands actually had seen him only briefly.

My only chance was to bluff it through. But at least, I seemed to have a chance. The upper salon was brightly lighted, but empty. One of the crew was passing.

I said, "Where is Timko?"

He gestured overhead. "The control room."

"We'll go there," I said.

The silent dome-deck already was brightened with star gleams; the Eq-2 had leveled off and was speeding forward through the night. Squeezed in the bow, the control room was a glare.

I could see the figure of Timko, just turning from the banks of controls with the ascent finished. He saw me as we approached, waved us into the radio cubby.

The little room was dim, much dimmer than by the controls. Helpful! I drew Marok's peaked cap lower on my forehead. As I flashed a glance at the big radio senders, it occurred to me that perhaps I could watch my chance, getting in here alone with them for a moment to send out an alarm call.

Timko joined us. One of the men with us explained Dianne's presence with me.

Timko had turned to me. "You questioned that Earthman well, you did, didn't you, Marok?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"He knew nothing? You are convinced of it?"

I nodded. "Beyond doubt. I have him bound and gagged. Leave him there."

"Or perhaps take him to Ferrok-Shahn?" Timko suggested. "The Zar-Tor mentioned—if we brought back with us anyone of importance—hostages to bargain with if war with the Earth should come."

"He might be useful," I said. "A stupid fellow. Have no fear that he knew anything to tell anyone before he came on board. But he is a Junior Secretary—"

"I see. Of diplomatic importance, you mean?"

"Yes. Like the SIRRATA here." I gazed toward Dianne. "We're taking her to Ferrok-Shahn, aren't we?"

The thin, sallow face of Timko under his gold cap bore a leering grin. "For your sake, we'll take her, Marok." Still grinning, he waved us away.

My arm was about Dianne as we went back along the dome-deck. "We'll hide," I said. "They'll think it's quite all right, a beautiful hostage and her Martian guard."

We sat huddled in a dark corner back by the stern where the dome was a peak, with the great starry sky beyond it and the

luminous jets streaming like tiny tails of a hurtling comet.

As we watched the control room, presently Timko went below. The routine navigator-pilot was at the levers. Two of the other brigands were lounging in there with him. No one was in the dim radio room except the operator, who sat alone now at his instrument to answer properly any routine call, or check signal of the Eq-2 flight. The official calls had to be answered or at once suspicion would be aroused.

I whispered, "If those two others would leave the control room, with just the pilot there—"

I told her what I had in mind. The pilot had his back to the radio room entrance, and with the humming and hiss of the mechanisms, he might not hear me if I crept in and drilled that radioman.

Dianne was shuddering, but we were so desperate that the death of an adversary had come to mean little. She showed me her sheathed knife.

"This, in his back, might be more silent," she said grimly.

Presently our waiting was rewarded. The two loungers left the control room; disappeared down the bow incline. Our chance had come!

"You wait here, Dianne. I'll try it now."

"No! I'll come with you! If—if the worst comes—I've got a heat-gun."

She was after me as I started forward along the edge of the starry deck. But suddenly we stopped, stricken, so frozen with horror that we could only stand clutching each other. A wild shout sounded from below. Then others, mingled with tramping, running footsteps, the turmoil of a spreading commotion. It seemed to be on the level under us.

"Oh, Jac—"

I could only stare at her mutely as we pressed ourselves back against the glassite wall. The pilot at the levers had locked them and run to the control room doorway. The radioman was on his feet. Both of them were calling startled questions at each other as all in those few seconds the silent interior of the Eq-2 was a chaos of shouts. Then from the narrow, cabin deck almost under us, one of the shouting Martian voices came clear.

"Marok is dead! Murdered by the Earthman! Marok is dead!"

They had found Marok's body there in the cabin closet; Marok's body, with my clothes piled there!

I shoved at Dianne; we ran, tried to duck down behind one of the ventilator hoods. It was too late! The pilot saw us. He shouted:

"Here they are! Still up here at the stern!"

Fugitives now, to be hunted down and killed. The radioman was shouting and he fired a heat-stab at us as we ducked—its violet pencil-beam hissed over us, hitting the ventilator hood with a puff of sparks. Now Timko's voice was added to the shouting of the underdeck. At the bow companionway, figures appeared, coming up from below.

"The Earthman and the girl—where are they?"

"At the stern! Careful, he's armed! He's got Marok's gun!"

The voices all seemed forward now. "Dianne, if we can get down into the hull rooms, down by this stern ladder—"

"Oh, Jac—" Dianne's voice was a faint gasp of terror. In my own whirling thoughts there was nothing but the desperate knowledge that we must run, try and hide, or if not, sell our lives as dearly as possible. Another shot from the bow crackled its sparks beside us as we jumped for the hooded top of the ladder I turned for an instant, fired two stabs at the control room, saw them strike the wall with fountain puffs of light.

"I'll go first, Dianne!"

I reached the dark, narrow segment of the deck underneath. The little stern plaza was a dim triangle beside me.

"Jump, Dianne! All clear!"

She jumped the last few steps into my arms, but in that same second a silent, burly figure rose from the gloom and flung itself on us! I had no chance to use my gun. Dianne's knife was in her hand. I tried to seize it as the Martian's blows knocked me backward. But suddenly there were other shouts, looming figures in the gloom, rushing us, engulfing us.

I was able to fire once—futile shot that struck the deck-ceiling and showered us with its colored sparks. Then I fell, with men on top of me, pinning me down; and I had a glimpse of Dianne's white face as she stood with her captors gripping her.

We were caught!

CHAPTER VII

Suicide Earthman!

They pulled me to my feet. Then Timko was here, facing me. "So? The Earthman thinks he is so clever!" He stared at me grimly as he added, "It is well for you that the Zar-Tor wants hostages!"

He turned to one of the men gripping me. "Put him in the lock room, Meegar. Keep your weapon muzzle on him from now to Venta, or your life will pay for it!"

"I understand." The burly, scowling Meegar glared at me, dug his gun into my ribs with an extra prod. "You come with me."

The steel-barred door to the Eq-2 prison cell was here near at hand. "Take the girl to the salon with the passengers," Timko commanded.

There was just an instant as the excited Martians moved away when Dianne was able to whisper.

"Jac, my heat-gun, I hid it in the deck scupper—" They shoved her past me as Meegar roughly pushed me to the cell door. He thrust me in; the door clanked and locked after me. Through the lattice of bars, his wide-shouldered figure was a silhouette with the deck glow behind him. Then his face, close against the bars, glared in at me.

"You heard him, Earthman! My gun is on you."

The prison room had this single door and a single window, its glassite pane covered on the inside with a lattice of steel bars like the door. There was a small chair and a narrow bunk. The room was unlighted, with only the deck glow, and starlight now filtering in the window.

I slumped and sat on the side of the bed, trying to think what I could do.

"I'm hungry," I said. "Am I going to be here all these last hours—no food or drink?"

"Timko will send them," Meegar growled through the door bars. "Save your breath, Earthman."

For me it was a long, despairing eternity as I sat there on the bed, idly watching the starlight at the barred window. The bars cast long shadows on the floor, a black barred pattern. Then the starlight was gone as the Eq-2 dropped down through the atmosphere for another stop.

At my door Meegar hardly moved. There was just his silhouette, with his gun-muzzle pointing in. Now, with the letdown of this hopeless imprisonment, I realized how tired I was. I sat watching the window—the starlight gone, the mist of the atmosphere, then the dimness of an air-run out there, and the colored sheen of Festival lights.... Another bomb detonator being taken off....

We were up in the starlight again in a few moments, with another interminable interval ... another brief stop as the dark details of this grim and terrible voyage proceeded so smoothly....

"I tell you I'm hungry, Meegar. I am a hostage. You heard Tor-Timko say it. Go tell them I want food and drink."

He hardly stirred. "It will come."

It came at last. I was desperately tense again. I was unarmed. They had searched me and taken my gun before they thrust me in here; but now, when the cell door opened and the food came—perhaps I could jump them?

I had no chance even for a wild plan. Meegar's weapon backed me to the window before another crewman opened the bars and thrust in the food and drink.

"There it is, Earthman. Enjoy yourself!"

I sat eating and drinking while the Eq-2 made another stop. For a moment I stood at the window. The Festival was on the other side of the ship here, but its riot of color brightened the little air-run, and I saw the cylinder taken out and the black-cloaked agent slinking away with it.

They had changed the guard at my door now. Like Meegar, this fellow stood silent, with his gun alert.

"What's your name?" I said.

"Jarrok. Hold your tongue."

I finished my meal. For a time I slumped on the bed....

I knew that I had slept. I opened my eyes. Nothing had changed. Starlight was at the window. The guard, Jarrok, was standing motionless outside the barred door. As I stirred, his gun rose. How long had I slept? I only knew I was refreshed, with my mind sharpened so that all at once I was thinking things that made my heart race with a last, wildly desperate hope.

A way to die quickly perhaps ... but I had to try it....

I lay pondering, fully awake now, every instant more tense and alert. Then I sat up.

"Is that you, Jarrok?" I mumbled. "I—I guess I slept. Where are we?"

"Next we stop at Menling," he growled.

"Good," I said. "Soon this voyage will be over." Menling was on Meridian 330 on the Equator. Differing from Earth, which changes from one day to the next at Meridian 180, on Venus the change is made in the zone between Menling and Venta—the Festival-midnight now at Menling, and two hours later, midnight of the following night at Venta.

I slumped back on the bed. My best chance would be just after we left Menling. Timko would be up in the control room then.

At Menling, the private air-run was dim like the others. I stood grimly at the window as the last detonator cylinder was taken away—twelve of them now. With only the futile opposition Dianne and I had so briefly offered, the monstrous Martian plot was completed! A ring of planted, triggered atom bombs of monstrous power, thirty degrees of longitude apart, studded the Venus Equator!

Two hours from now, again the Eq-2 would be at Venta. An hour after that the simultaneously timed bombs would detonate—the titan dagger thrusts at its core splitting the planet apart. The sudden end of a world....

The glaring, dazzling radiance of the Scarlet Festival beamed in my window as the Eq-2 rose from the air-run. It was a thicket grove here at Menling—a spreading fairyland of flowered thickets in which the White Princess and her girls were dancing. In the darkness high overhead, a balloon platform was poised, wholly concealed by the black shadow-beam upon it.

Now at the Festival climax, from the invisible platform the Scarlet Princess and a horde of her girls were leaping into the air. With blood-red little parachutes opening and swaying above them, they came fluttering down the thousand-foot drop ... scarlet moths fluttering in the floodlights from below ... landing, and with flame-hair flying, rushing to battle....

The gay, sensuous scene dropped away. Grimly I turned from the window, faced with my desperate reality ... my last wild hope.

"Jarrok, Jarrok! Have you poisoned me? Oh—"

I suddenly slumped in the center of the room. I was clutching at my middle, groaning.

"What is it, Earthman? What's the matter?"

"That food—that drink—" I staggered to the bed, sat down. "Killed me," I groaned. "You fools—fools—if only you knew—"

Jarrok's call brought another crewman. "Something's the matter with the Earthman!"

"Bring Timko!" I gasped. "No! Get me to him. I tell you—if I die—Get me to Timko, I tell you—carry me—help me—"

They were startled. "He's sick; he thinks he's poisoned!"

"That's impossible! Timko said to guard his life."

"Yes. Important. The Zar-Tor wants him for hostage."

They were confused, in doubt what they should do. With a prayer that I could convince them, I made my stricken plight sound as urgent as I dared.

"Timko, get me to Timko. There is something I must tell him. Oh, I cannot die, with a secret like that locked in my mind—the great Zar-Tor himself would want to hear it!"

They had unlocked the bars of the door. I sat slumped, groaning, ignoring it. "Oh, help me, take me—to Timko—"

Surely they had to think it best not to take the responsibility here....

"Hold him, Bahl, if he can walk, help him." Jarrok stood back, with his gun-muzzle pointing at me. "He says some secret—we'd better take him quickly—"

"I—I can walk," I gasped. "Help me—"

Bahl gripped me, supporting me as I staggered. Jarrok, with his poised weapon, was at my elbow. Out on the narrow side deck, groaning and as though my knees had buckled, I slumped and fell. I had tried to gauge where Dianne had been standing when the Martians had leaped upon us here and caught us. I remembered her furtive whisper to me. There would be no time now to fumble for her heat-gun. As I fell, groaning, my hand was sliding into the scupper in the darkness.

"Lift him up, Bahl," Jarrok muttered.

"Yes, I have him. Can't you walk, Earthman?"

"I—I'm trying—"

With Bahl helping me, I staggered up, and the little heat-gun was in my pocket!

Bahl held my arm, helping me as he led me to the ladder, with my knees buckling and my feet dragging. We went up the ladder. Starlight gleamed down through the dome; the Eq-2 was leveling off, speeding toward Venta. The radio room was empty. In the control room, Timko was just handing the levers over to the routine pilot as my captors brought me staggering in.

"Well! What's this?" Timko roared.

"The Earthman, he's sick. Something's the matter with him," Bahl said.

"We didn't know. He thinks he's dying," Jarrok gasped it. "A secret, before he should die—something for the great Zar-Tor himself—"

"Timko! I'll tell it!" I groaned. I was staggering, and I got free of Bahl's supporting clutch and lurched with my back against the wall. The four men here were all in front of me. Timko was only a few feet away.

"An Earth plot," I said. "When the Zar-Tor finds out—" Suddenly I was erect, stiff and tense and steady, my hand steady as I held it at my hip with the muzzle of my gun covering the Martian leader! "Don't move, Timko! My life is gone. What

do *I* care, so long as you die first!"

I ripped it out and surely it carried conviction for I meant it!

"Why—why—" Timko recoiled, his arms spread wide over his head. "Don't, don't kill me—"

My gaze flicked just for a second on the other men. "Timko dies an instant quicker than you can kill me," I snapped. "Do you doubt it, Timko? Tell them—"

Oh, I had gauged him right, this craven fellow! I could see the color fading under the cosmetics of his cheeks.

"Tell them to drop their weapons, Timko!"

"Bahl, Jarrok, do as he says!"

Their guns clanked to the grid. My words and Timko's faltering agreement backed them into a corner of the control room. At the levers, the young pilot stood frozen.

"Lock the levers! Get out of here," I told the pilot. "Go below. Tell the crew this suicide Earthman is in charge! I expect to die, but there will never be a second but that your leader will die first! You believe that, don't you, Timko? Tell them all!"

The death of a world, millions of people, of what importance was a death or a life here? But there was a difference to Timko! Certainly he had envisaged the death of Venus without quailing, when his own escape had seemed assured.

"Do what he says," Timko gasped.

I jerked my head at Jarrok and Bahl. "You two go with the pilot! Go to the salon. Send the SIRRATA Dianne up here at once! You'll die with my heat-flash through your heart, Timko, if she is not here, unharmed, in sixty seconds."

"S-send her," Timko murmured. "Send her."

"And you three—you tell your men, if the engines falter, Timko will die and I'll plunge the ship! Death for us all!" I called it after them grimly as they dashed away.

Timko and I were left alone. "Take the levers, Timko! Stand with your back to me!"

As he obeyed, I snapped down the blinds of the windows, and in a moment Dianne was here, white-faced and grim, but her eyes were gleaming as she mutely gazed at me inquiringly.

"Lock up the radio room, Dianne! Pull down its blinds! Leave the connecting door open!"

She hastened to do it. I slammed the control door. Locked it. We were barricaded in here. I handed Timko the engine room communication tube.

"Tell your men at the engines that if anything goes wrong I will crash the ship! Tell them, Timko."

He told them. "And we're flying to Venta on the regular course," I said. "Tell them to stand by for your landing signals, or we will crash."

My muzzle was at his back as he commanded the engine crew.

"The radio sender," Dianne said. "You want me to—"

"Yes, of course." I knew Dianne could operate the sender. She had one of her own, her hobby, on the unofficial length, at home in the Embassy. "Call your father, Dianne! Then get him on the audiophone if you can. Tell him everything. Have the cities searched for the bombs—whatever can be done—"

"Yes! Yes, Jac, I understand!"

"And have the Venus Police board us at Venta!"

I prodded Timko's back as I stood close beside him. "Land us skillfully, Timko. If I drill you, we would crash! That would be too bad, wouldn't it? I'm watching the flight indicators. Don't let us leave our course!"

Dianne was at the radio-sender, snapping out the call. Then presently she had voice connection; I could hear her tense swift voice as she was talking with her father. Then she came back to the control room. Her grim, strained face was pallid.

I could envisage the frantic activity in the Embassy, the calls to the various cities, with desperate hunting for the hidden bombs; the search starting now in Venta itself for the bomb there.

Here in the barricaded control room of the Eq-2, we stood tense and silent through the remaining minutes of the fatal voyage. With my gun against him, Timko stood mute, swinging the levers, watching the indicators with terror that some error would creep in. But I saw they were running true; at correct altitude and speed, we clung to the doomed planet's Equator.

The engines did not fail. Well did the brigands down below realize that they could not trifle with me, and at intervals, with shaking voice, Timko reminded them...

Then Timko was ringing the signals; the jet-streams ceased, the propellers and 'copters came on, with the starlight obscured now as we dropped down through the heavy cloud-mists of the Venus atmosphere.

The blue-water grove was dark and silent now, this midnight of the day after the Festival. But the air-run glared with lights, and search-beams darted up and clung to us. In its distant rack, I could see the Eq-1, ready to start on its alternating flight; but of course the run had now been cancelled.

The air-run was dotted with dark figures as we settled into place. Beyond a stray wild shot or two, the terrified brigands offered no resistance as the Venus Police swarmed aboard.

Only an hour left now. The terrible moments of that last desperate hour are blurred in my memory. Dianne was taken to the Embassy, but for a time I lingered at the air-run, doing what I could.

It was so horribly little. Futilely we sent out the two photos she had taken, and the Martian agents in Carolah and Mizrah were hunted.

Only an hour.... Then half an hour. It seemed that two or three of the bombs had been found and nullified. But so many were left it could make little difference.

And now only fifteen minutes remained to us. The end of the world.... The sure presage of it was here everywhere around me now—the white faces of the scurrying officials, the rings and buzzing of the communication instruments ... the terrified cries of the milling crowds of people thronging the streets, dazed with their doom upon them.

There had been some official talk that some of us might escape in a space-flyer—that the rocket-ship of the brigands might be found and used.... All that came to nothing. The swift-flying minutes went by, and suddenly everyone realized that now there was no time to do anything.

Ten minutes left ... "Dianne ... Dianne...." I found myself murmuring her name.... There was nothing to do now, everything abandoned.... "Dianne ... dear...."

I realized that I was running through the thickets of the slope pushing through the hysterical crowds until I got to the Embassy. Dianne was in the lower foyer, with a mute and silent group.

"Jac—Jac—"

We clung to each other, with the big clock above us ticking away the last few draining sands of our lives.

"Dianne, darling...."

We crouched on the floor, holding each other ... dazed and blurred ...

Through our closed eyelids, the glare was dazzling.... I know now that in that instant, the whole of the planet was bathed with that white glare.... The blast and roar of the concussion was monstrous....

With a dim and puzzled wonderment I held Dianne.... I was still alive.... I saw the Venta detonation then through the great glassite window at the end of the foyer—a monstrous jet of upflung gases, concentrated to be like a titan sword-thrust, knifing up through the atmosphere, hurtling out into Space!

And we were still alive, with only a litter here in the room, and the winds outside, tumbling like a crazy storm!

Dazed, I was murmuring, "The bomb-thrusts—not downward—harmlessly upward...."

Now Dianne was babbling, "I tried to do it—I wasn't sure—I just hoped—"

It was what she had so tried to tell me, but always something had interrupted. That brief moment when, before the Eq-2 had reached Carolah, Dianne had been alone in the cage-room with the detonators. She had managed to reverse the directional indicators, so that the titan thrusts of the great bombs had not been downward to split the planet, but harmlessly upward into space.

Concentrated beams of the radioactive gases so swiftly rising that only far above the Venus atmosphere could they mushroom out, lost and gone! The monstrous Martian plot to smash a world had passed into grim and gruesome memory.

I crouched, still dazed, holding the shuddering Dianne. It is good to hold the one you love in your arms, with the knowledge that life and happiness lie ahead of you.

[The end of *The Planet Smashers* by Ray Cummings]