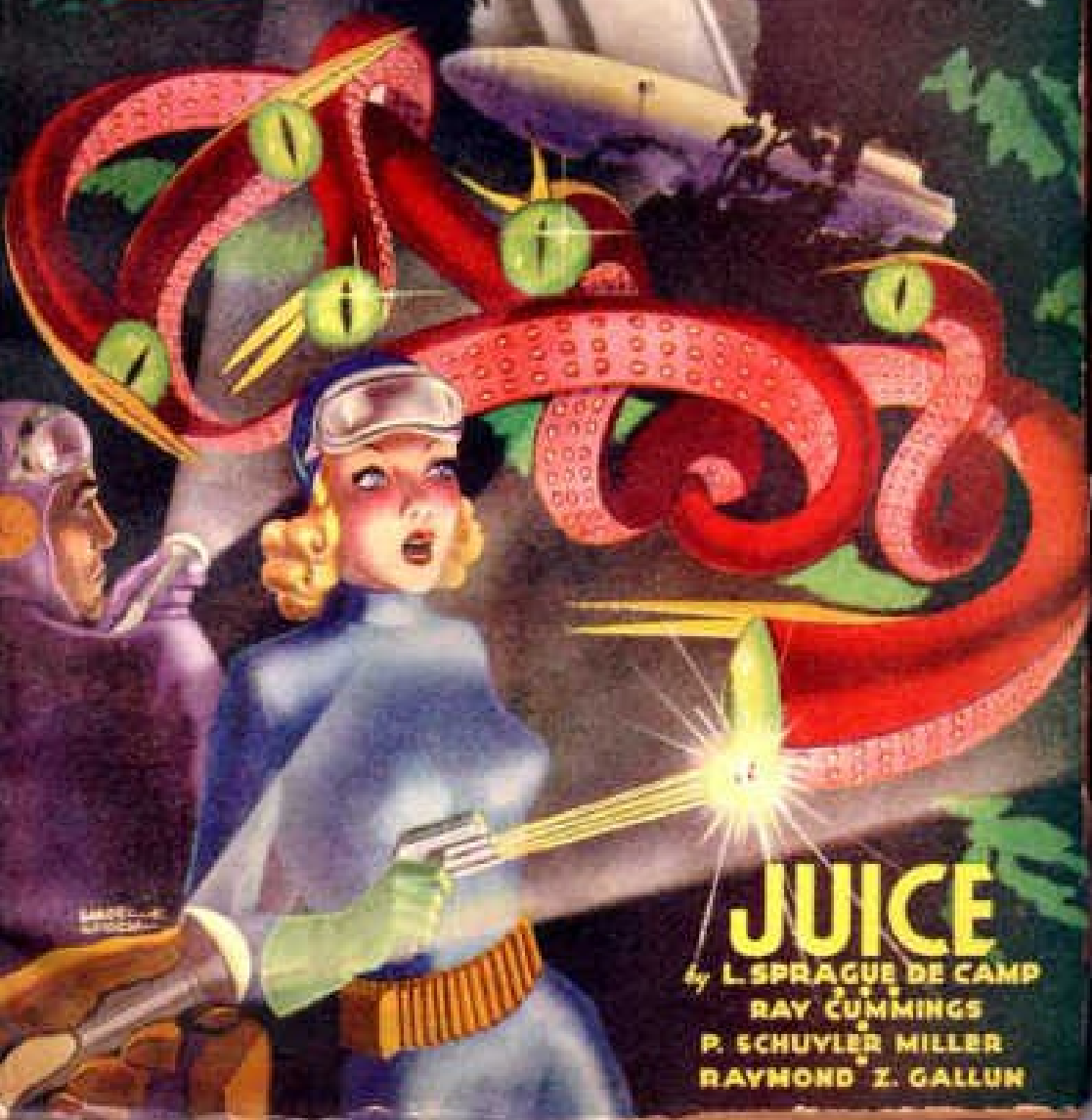


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SUPER SCIENCE

STORIES



JUICE

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP
RAY CUMMINGS
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RAYMOND Z. GALLUM

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King Cole of Pluto

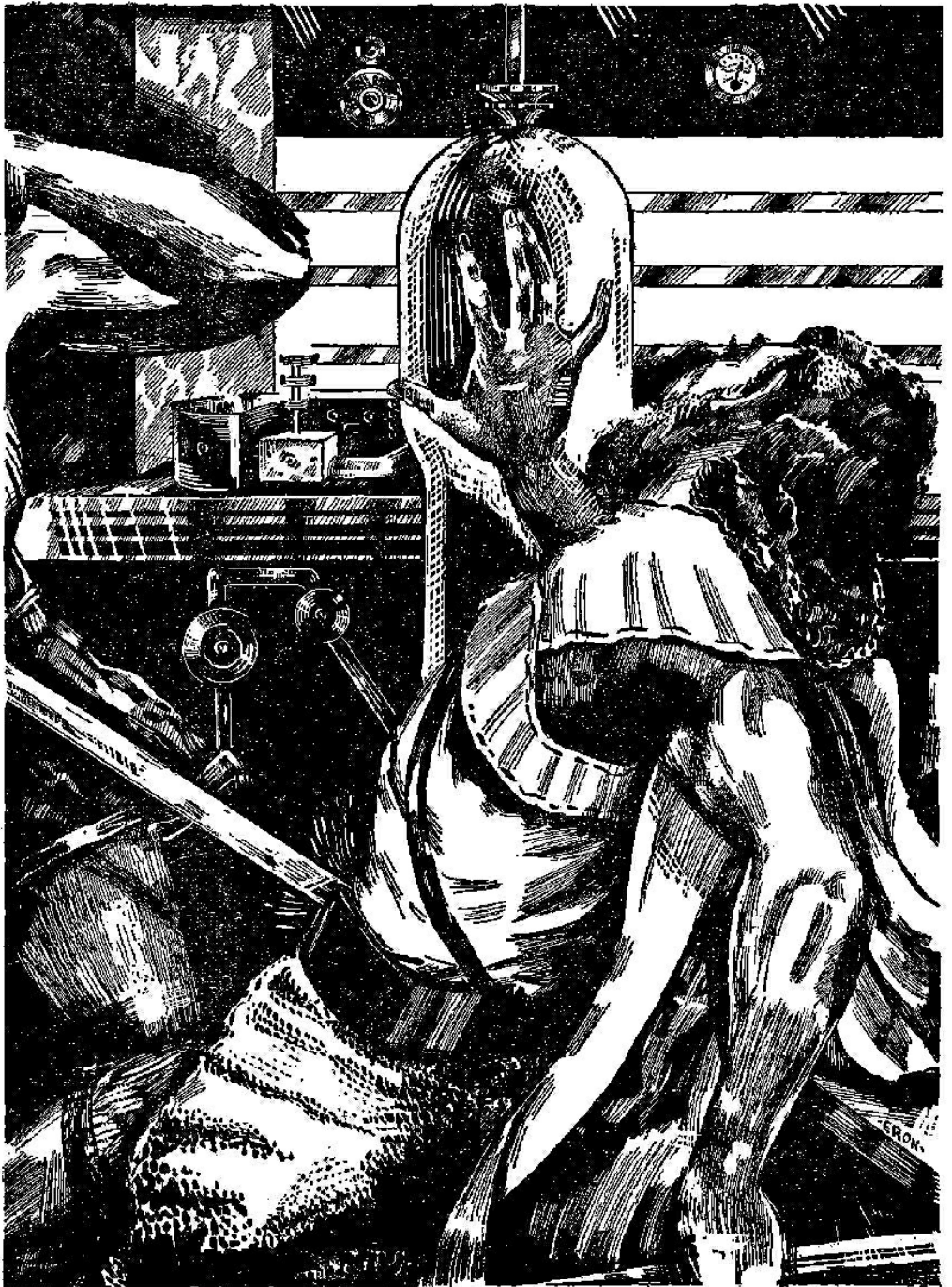
Cyril M. Kornbluth

Writing under the pseudonym S. D. Gottesman.

First published *Super Science Stories*, May 1940.

This Old King Cole wasn't especially merry, and his hideously-seamed, grey face inspired no merriment in those with whom he came in contact. Especially if they were the victims of his lawless career of space-piracy.





CHAPTER ONE

Leigh Salvage, Incorporated

Sunlight gleamed on the squat, stubby space-ship. Its rocket exhaust flared once; then paled into nothing. It was drifting through the meteor zone though not the undirected object it seemed to be. Captain Jerry Leigh had his scow under control; the control of a man who was born in the space-lanes, and knew them as his own face.

Captain Jerry was in the cramped cabin of the ship, scribbling at endless computations. "Allowing for Black's constant," he muttered, "plus drift, plus impetus, less inertia . . ." He turned to a calculator, stabbed at its keys, and read the result. He yanked a bell pull and a clangor sounded through the ship. Men filed in—a full crew meeting. Jerry rose.

"As I estimate it," he said, "the *Argol* lies in quadrant III of the meteor belt. Its coordinates are alpha—point oh oh four; beta—seven point three oh two; gamma—zero!" There was a shocked pause, and a big man stepped out of the crew. "Will we go through with it, captain? Gamma—zero is a small margin of profit, to saw nothing of safety." He spoke slowly and precisely; the flat "a" of his English indicated that his tongue had once been more used to the Scandinavian languages.

Jerry smiled: "Sven, caution is caution, and maybe the salvage money isn't worth the risk." His face hardened. "But I'm not working for money alone, and I hope that none of you others are."

A voice spoke from the floor, "Glory's glory, but space-bloat is a damned nasty way to die!"

Jerry frowned. There were trouble-makers everywhere and all the time. "Wylie," he said, "if you've ever seen a wrecked liner you'll know what we're here for, and what our job is. We salvage and tow the ships wrecked by meteors or mechanical flaws, and we get paid for it. But—and it's a big but—if we didn't do our job, those ships would run wild. With no crew, tearing through space at the whim of the governor, plowing through the shipping lanes, never twice in the same place, and finally coming to rest as permanent menaces to trade and life—*that's* our job! They carry water condensers to Mars: they carry radium to Earth. Para-morphium from Venus, and iridium from Neptune. Without us salvagers there would be no shipping; without shipping the structure of interplanetary union would topple and fall. This isn't a job or even a career—it's a sacred duty that we do for each and all of the nine

worlds of the solar system!

“Coordinates, I said, are alpha—point oh oh four; beta—seven point three oh two; gamma—zero. Carry on; full speed ahead.”

The exhausts flamed; the stubby, rusted prow turned once more—into the meteor zone!

Jerry droned figures to the helmsman, with his eyes glued at the vision plate of pure fused quartz. “Meteor in our third quadrant—distance about five hundred kilos. Deflect into first . . . back on course.

“Cloud of aerolites ahead. Carry through.” Ahead loomed a blotch of darkness. “Unknown particle in second quadrant. Our coordinates, helmsman.”

Sven, at the tiller, read off. “Alpha—point oh oh four; beta—seven point four oh oh; gamma—point oh oh two.”

“Hulk *Argol* ahead. Carry through into gamma—zero.” The big man wet his lips and deflected the steering bar. “Carried through, sir,” he said. Jerry, his eyes never leaving the plate, whispered tensely, “Cut steering to master’s board.” Sven snapped a switch. “Cut, sir.” Delicately Jerry fingered the firing switches. A blocky black mass boomed down on the ship from the East; violently the little scow looped over and down, clearing the path of the particle. This was just one of the reasons that men were prejudiced against gamma—zero. Too much loose junk zipping around for comfort.

The *Argol* was squarely on the cross-hairs of the vision plate. Captain Jerry studied the battered piece of wreckage. It had been a supertransport once—loaded to the observation blister with para-morphium from Venus to Earth. She had encountered an unexpected cloud of meteorites; probably too big to run away from, and so had been riddled and gone under. From then on her career had been a terrible one of shooting wildly through space on almost full fuel tanks; demolishing a refueling station a million kilos of Mars; smashing into a squadron of police rockets and shattering them into bits—and finding rest at last in the meteor zone to upset orbits and hurl cosmic rubbish into the trade lanes. He examined this corpse of a ship, estimating its size and Martian weight. He thought he could handle it. Through the annunciator he said, “Make fast with magnet plates.” And to Sven, “Take the master’s board for emergencies. I’m going over to supervise.”

Jerry crawled into his space-suit; a terrible cumbersome thing of steel alloy and artificial membrane, and dropped lightly down the shaft of the ship to the big space lock that characterizes the salvage vessel.

“Wylie,” he ordered. “Take Martin and Dooley with a cutting torch to open their

sides and then look at their fuel tanks. If they have any left we can use it, I don't believe they're empty, from the lie of her."

"Macy, take Collins and Pearl. Secure grapples, and allow as much slack for towage as you can get. If you allow too little, you'll never know it, by the way—we'd be smashed like an eggshell on the first turn bigger than thirty degrees.

"Dehring and Hiller, come with me. You need supervision. Take cameras and film."

The boarding party bolted their helmets on and swung open the space lock. Wylie, unrecognizable in his swathing overall, braced the cutting torch against his middle and turned on the juice. The powerful arc bit through the wall of the *Argol* as if it had been cheese, and the men filed through. They had cut one of the cargo rooms, piled high with metal cylinders of para-morphium, the priceless Venerian drug of sleep and healing. A few of the containers were sprung open and the contents spoiled; still, seventy per cent of the remaining cargo went to the salvager, and eighty per cent of the hulk.

Jerry took his crew of two to the steering blister that bulged from the top of the ship, picking his way between damaged bodies. In the blister he found the captain, staring permanently at a hole in the observation plate where a meteorite—one of many—had pierced the armor of his vessel. With a crowbar Jerry pried off the top of the recorder and photographed the tracing needles on the graph that charted the course of the ship with all its crazy tacks and swerves through space.

"Dehring," he ordered, "take up that corpse. We're going to stack them and see that they get decent burial when we reach a planet." And with the callousness of years of space travel and the coldness that the hard life of the salvager instills, the man obeyed.

Jerry wandered at random through the ship. It had carried some passengers. One of the cabin doors was open, and the figure of an old woman, face mercifully down, was sprawled over the threshold. She had heard the alarm in her little room as the air drained out of the ship; unthinkingly she had flung open her door—gasped for breath when there was nothing to breathe—and fallen as she was.

He picked up her tiny frame, and carried it to the stern of the ship. He wondered who she was—why she was returning to Earth from Venus at her age. Perhaps she had wanted to pass her last years among the green and brown fields and again see a mountain. Perhaps—he thought he knew how she felt, for he, too, had once been homesick.

Mars—red hell of sand and cloudless sky. Home of "wanted" men and women,

where the uncautious were burned in the flaming bonfires of the Martian underworld. Haven of every swindler and cutthroat in the system, it was but a dull gem in Sol's diadem. Some day they would clean it up—raid the sickening warrens that snaked through and under its cities; fill them in with dynamite. That day would be a good one

...

Gently he deposited the body among others; brushed away his random thoughts and called, "Macy! Grapples fixed?" Macy's thin voice trickled through his earphones, "Yes, sir. I gave them twelve hundred meters."

"O. K." he snapped. "Return to the ship, all except Wylie. You'll stay aboard, Kurt, to stow displaced cargo."

"Yes, sir," said Wylie, in a growl. "And shall I comb the corpses' hair, sir?"

Jerry grinned. "Why not? And see that it's done or I'll fire you and bust your rating on every scow out of Mars." Discipline, after all, was the thing.

Jerry resumed his place at the firing board. "Stations all," he called sharply over the annunciator. "Brace for seven Mars gravities in seventeen seconds. One—"

His hands flew over the board, setting up the combinations of rocket discharges that would be able to stir the huge *Argol* out of its inertia and snap it after the scow of Leigh Salvage, Incorporated, like a stone on a string, at the end of a ponderous osmiridium cable.

"Nine!" The men were strapping themselves into hammocks.

"Eleven . . .

"Fourteen!" He tensed himself, sticking in his stomach muscles against the terrible drag.

"Sixteen!"

"*Fire!*"

And the ship roared sharply up and out of the asteroid belt, its powerful rocket engines—designed to move twenty times the weight of the scow alone—straining to drag the ponderous cargo hulk behind it. Soon the initial speed lessened, and they were roaring along at an easy thousand K. P. S. The captain rose and set the automatics; tried to shake some of the blood from his legs into his head. He could rest now.

Assembled, Jerry and the men drank a toast to the trade in ethyl alcohol—"To salvaging: the greatest game of all!" They drained their cups. Then big Sven rose, some of his Norse reticence vanished in the universal solvent. "My brothers in labor," he began. "We have gone far on this trip, and there is no one here who will not agree with me when I say that we could not have done it without Captain Jerry. I give you our boss and the best of them all, Jerry Leigh, of Leigh Salvage,

Incorporated!”

The flask went the rounds, and when it was emptied there was another and yet another. In just a few hours Jerry was standing alone in the middle of the room, looking owlishly about him at the collapsed forms of the crew. There was a cup in his hands—a full cup. He spurned a nearby body with his foot.

“S-s-sissies!” he said derisively, and drained his drink. Slowly he deflated onto the floor.

An alarm bell smashed the silence into bits; men dragged themselves to their feet. “Mars,” said one, absently.

“Don’t land easy, captain,” another urged Jerry. “Smear us all over the field. It’s about the only thing that’ll do this head of mine any good.”

Jerry winced. “That’s the way I feel, but I’d like to get that hulk in before I die. Landing stations, all men.”

Their ship and its huge running mate hovered over the red planet. Irritably Jerry dove it near the atmosphere and blearily searched its surface for the landing field. “Damn!” he muttered. “I’m in the wrong hemisphere.”

The ship roared over the face of Mars, and slowed above the Kalonin desert. Jerry found Salvage Field beneath him, and cut the rockets sharply to one side, swinging the *Argol* like the lash of a whip. They swooped down, and Jerry, drunk or sober, shifted his salvage neatly above the ponderous pneumatic cargo-table and cut it loose. It fell the thousand feet with a terrible crash, landing comparatively easy. At any rate he had not missed it. “So much for Wylie,” he muttered.

The exhaust sputtered and died; the ship dove to within a hundred feet of the surface. On rockets! And down she drifted, landing without a jar. Jerry held his head and groaned.

CHAPTER TWO

An Unexpected Rival

The owner, manager and founder of Leigh Salvage, Incorporated, was only human. In turn he visited the offices of the other salvage companies and said, in effect, “Ya-a-ah!” Or that was the plan.

Burke was first on his list; a sullen, red-headed man with a grudge against everybody. He threw Jerry out of his office before half the “Ya-a-ah” was out. The Captain was too happy at the moment to start or finish a fight, so he brushed himself off for a call on Rusty Adams, of the Bluebell Salvage Company.

He entered their office and what appeared to be a secretary or receptionist or something said to him, “Can I help you?”

“Yes,” he said absently, looking for Adams. “What are you doing tonight?” She scowled prettily. He noticed her hair, blond. He noticed her eyes, blue-grey. He noticed, moreover, her face and figure, very neat—but this was business. “Is the proprietor of this ramshackle space-tuggery in?”

“Yes,” she said, “the proprietor is in.”

“Then drag the old dog out; I would have words with him.”

“I,” she said, “am the proprietor.”

Jerry smiled gently. “Enough of this,” he said. “I refer to the illustrious Francis X. Adams, alias the Rusty Nut, alias the Creaking Screw—”

He paused. Her eyes were full of tears. She looked up. “He was my father,” she said. “You’re Leigh, aren’t you? They told me of your ways. Father died while you were in space. I’ve come from Earth to take care of his business.” She blew her nose on a silly little handkerchief, and said, “If there’s anything I can do for you—”

Jerry felt lower than a snake’s belly. He stammered an apology of some sort and went on, “As a matter of fact I did have a deal to talk over. I want to buy out your concern.” As a matter of *fact* he had wanted to do nothing of the sort, but he thought it out quickly. The expense would cripple him for a while, but he’d be able to dispose of the *Bluebell* at a loss and get some operating capital, and one more job like that *Argol* and he’d be right back where he was now with only a little time wasted and she *did* have blue-grey eyes and what did a woman know about salvage anyway—

“Not for sale, Mr. Leigh,” she said coolly.

That shocked him—he had thought that he was doing her a favor. He decided to

be a big brother. “Miss Adams, I think you ought to accept. Not for my sake, but for yours. You have had no experience at the work; you’ll be at the mercy of your employees, and salvage men are the toughest mob in space. Your father could handle the company, but—”

She set her pretty jaw. “Just that,” she said. “My father could handle them, and so can I.”

What was a man to do in the face of such madness? Perhaps—“What about a ship-master, Miss Adams? Your profits will all run into his salary.”

“No, Mr. Leigh—my father did it and I can do it. I’m going to pilot my own ship.”

With that he exploded—no woman had ever piloted a rocket ship, he said; and also he said that no woman ever would pilot a rocket ship, and that if she thought she was going to learn to pilot a ship she was just plain crazy to try and learn on a salvage scow; and further he said that the salvage scow is notorious throughout all space as the crankiest, most perverted, perverse and persnickety brand of vessel that flies; that to run a scow you had to be born in the space-lanes and weaned on rocket-juice—

“I don’t know about the rocket-juice,” she said, “but I was born on the Jupiter-Earth liner.” Jerry gasped for breath.

“Is there anything else?” she said. “Because if there isn’t I’d like to get some work done on my father’s accounts.”

“No,” said Jerry thickly. He was dangerously near apoplexy. “Nothing else.” And he walked out of the office muttering, “Accounts . . . get some work done on my father’s . . .” Dammit! A woman *couldn’t* fly a scow, and she wouldn’t believe that very obvious fact until she was smeared over half of the landing field.

Like a man in a dream he found himself at the offices of the Salvage Field Commission, paying his field dues. An official, dazed, asked if anything was wrong. Did he expect to die, or something?

“No,” said Jerry thickly, “but I expect to get potted in about twenty-five minutes. Would you mind coming along?”

“Not at all,” said the official. In fact he felt the need of a drink after having beheld the ungodly spectacle of the Leigh Salvage Company paying up on time.

Many hours later all that was left of the two was a very small noise in the corner of a saloon on Broadway, at the corner of Le Bourse. Half of the small—*very* small—noise was saying to the other half at intervals, “*Wimmin* can’t never fly . . . *Wimmin can’ never fly* . . . *Wimmin can’ never fly* . . .” And the second half of the

very small noise was replying to the first, “*Yeh . . . they cer’nly don’t . . .*” At length the proprietor told a hackie to please take them away, and what happened to the official nobody ever found out, but Jerry awoke next morning in his hotel room with a pair of blue eyes wavering in front of his face. They weren’t real, though—vanished with the first draught of bicarb.

His phone rang, and he winced. It was the Salvage Field Commission, and they wanted to know what he had done with Sweeny. Sweeny? Oh, yeah—no; he didn’t remember a thing. To hell with Sweeny. Were there any jobs to be done? He wanted to get off Mars before he got drunk again. There was a long pause while the commission looked up today’s sheet. Yes—one bullion ship wrecked between Mercury and Venus. Carrying iridium. Speed was essential; therefore the agreement was on a strictly competitive basis; any or all salvage companies registered could try for it simultaneously. The owner of the ship agreed to buy back the cargo falling to the salvager at market quotations out of hand. First scow to get a grapple on, had her. Laufer and Burke had filed intention claims, and were starting off in a couple of hours; so had Bluebell.

“*Who?* What master?”

“Er . . . Adams. Holy smokes! *Alice Adams!*”

Jerry swore. “You’ll have to stop that kid. She doesn’t know how to fly.”

“You’d better come down, then. You seem to know more about this mess than I do. Hurry up if you want a crack at the *Carpathia*—that’s the bullion ship.”

“Expect me in twenty minutes or less.” Hastily he dressed, his hangover forgotten, muttering to himself things about slap-happy blondes. Schopenhauer, he decided, had approximately the right idea.

For the second or third time in his life he was not late for an appointment; twenty minutes saw him bursting through to the office of the commissioner.

“Well?” he demanded violently. “Are you going to let her fly? In a race like this is going to be, she’ll not only smash up herself and her crew but any of the rest of us who get in what she seems to think is her way.”

The body wrapped around the telephone voice answered heavily, “There’s nothing to be done about it. For some obscure reason the ‘sons or other issue of the deceased licensee shall retain the towage and salvage permits of the deceased, and all appurtenances thereof,’ according to regulations.”

“The license for towage, etc., includes an operator’s card; therefore we discovered that a crack-brained female who has never flown before inherits a flying permit without physical examination or experience. I’m going to write my congressman; that seems to be all that anyone can do about it just now. Shall I fill out

an intention claim for you on that *Carpathia*?”

“Yeah. I won’t be back,” he snapped, half way through the door.

He found Sven in a cheap rooming-house near the port.

“You round up the rest of the crew!” he yelled, “and be at the field by twelve noon or you’re all fired and busted.” He tore away and jumped into a taxi. “To the salvage field, buddy, in a helluva rush!”

He was oiling the space lock when the others arrived, led by Big Sven. He stared at them. “Often,” he said, “I have wondered what happens to space lice when they crawl off the ship. I now perceive that I should have known.” Each and every man of them had at least one black eye; each had cuts and bruises about the temples. “Well—forget the good times. There’s iridium drifting free between Mercury and Venus, and we’re going to snag it. And if we don’t sink our grapples into that hulk before any other space-tramp, you worms go hungry. Clear? Now get to stations; in ninety seconds we take off. I said *ninety*!”

The men filed into the stubby ship holding their heads. A hangover is nothing to take with you on a space-flight. If they could have left their heads behind they would have done it. With creakings of abused muscles and battered bones they strapped themselves into hammocks and pads.

The crew of Leigh Salvage, Incorporated, was in a bad way.

The take-off was uneventful as such things go; Jerry mentally noted that he had blown away a small corner of the salvage table, just another item to subtract from the profit, if any.

Once again in space, the captain was at the look-out plate, eyes and hands and brain bent five hundred kilos out into the vacuum. “Particle sighted ahead,” he droned, “in our third quadrant. Salvage scow *Bluebell*. Full speed ahead to pass her.” His fingers played over the master’s board, and the blunt ship roared ahead. They were near—dangerously near—the *Bluebell*. A blast from the steering fins and the scow jolted into a new course. Jerry never took chances—hardly ever. They slowed acceleration far in advance of the other vessel; that was another contract tied up and in the bag. The captain relaxed—That Adams girl . . . of course she couldn’t handle a ship. Anybody could make a not too disastrous take-off, but she’d smear hell for leather when she tried to land.

A signal light flashed on his board, and he snapped on his communication beam. There was a long pause while the power built up, then a voice from the grid—

“Scow *Bluebell* calling scow Leigh Salvage, Incorporated. Give way. We’re going to pass you in your first quadrant. That’s all.”

Jerry gaped. Unheard of! “Scow Leigh to *Bluebell!*” he snapped. “Listen, insane female; you’re not driving a French taxi. There are ethics and rules in this game we’re playing. Do you want to be black-balled and become an outlaw tug?” There was another reason than need of that cargo for his anger—maybe, just *maybe*, she could get back onto the field without busting herself wide open if she were alone, but with a cargo as big as the *Carpathia* she wouldn’t have a chance in a million. He thought of what a short towing line could do, and grimaced.

“We’re passing, Scow Leigh. That’s all.” The light on his board died. That *was* all. Well . . . for her sake . . . and for his own . . .

“Full speed ahead, and then some more, Sven. It’s a race.”

But it wasn’t much of a race; the *Bluebell’s* port fin exploded, and her acceleration stopped. Jerry grinned. “We’ll pick her up on the way back and leave her ship there. The farther apart those two are the safer for both of them . . . *Hey! Stations! Hulk Carpathia ahead!*” And the salvage ship jockeyed for position, drew alongside of the bullion transport and clamped on with a clash of metal against metal. The crew prepared to board.

CHAPTER THREE

Crime in Space

Jerry reached for the phone, his brow grooved. “Broadway three thousand,” he said. The voice with the smile answered, “One moment, please,” giving him time to reflect on the superfluity of machinery. Less efficient than a dial-phone, maybe, but that touch of warmth and humanity—“Here’s your party, sir.”

“Central Office, Interplanetary Police.”

“This is Captain Leigh, of Leigh Salvage, Incorporated. I wanted to see you about—”

“About the peculiar state of the *Carpathia*, Come on up.”

“Yeah,” said Jerry, baffled. “That’s what I wanted to see you about.” How did they know? And maybe they had a lead on the vanished Miss Alice Adams? He hoped so.

He was received in the offices of the Interplanetary Police by a very old man who introduced himself as Major Skeane. Jerry took a seat and opened the valise he had brought. “I don’t know how much you know about the business of the *Carpathia*,” he said, “so I’ll begin at the beginning. Please examine these—exhibit A.”

“These” were the contents of his valise—small, heavy chunks of metal. Skeane grunted. “Once spheres,” he said, “apparently cast in a shot tower; then sandblasted to suggest natural formation. Some filed by hand, even. These, I take it, were the particles that wrecked the bullion ship?”

Jerry wet his lips. “Yes,” he said, “it looks like a put-up job for sure. And Alice—that’s Master Adams, of the scow *Bluebell*—she’s disappeared. We were racing her for the *Carpathia* and she broke down about half a million kilos from the hulk. I meant to pick her up on the way out to Mars and maybe tow her ship in, too, but when we got grapples on her we found her scow deserted—not a man left on her! Have you people got any dope on that business?”



Major Skeane scratched his head. "Captain," he said, "I'm sorry to inform you that while you do not jump to false conclusions, neither do you shine in the formulation of true ones. Do you see no logical relationship between the two events?"

Jerry considered, and paled. "None," he said angrily. "And instead of antilogising you might be out hunting down the swine that would try to profit by the deaths of two score men."

"The rebuke is undeserved," smiled the old man. "We have the wrecker of the bullion ship—or at least we know who did it, and how."

"Anybody I know?" asked Jerry.

"I believe so. The saboteur is Miss Adams, of Bluebell."

The younger man stiffened in his chair. "No!" he cried. And then persuasively, "she might be crazy as a flea, but wrecking—never!"

"You do us an injustice. We were warned to watch her the moment she landed on Mars. Our agents assured us that she was a girl with ambitions; they kept track of her, reporting to us for the customary considerations. One man in particular—LeMouchard—has kept us posted, and he's as much to be trusted as anyone these days. To my mind—and I am the officer in charge of this case—the alleged disappearance of Miss Adams is conclusive proof of her guilt. She failed to cash in

on the particularly rich opportunity that she created for herself and thus destroy the evidence, and so was picked up by a confederate, with her presumable equally guilty crew. I expect her now to continue her career from another base; possibly another planet, until she makes a slip. Then we shall trace her and deliver her to the execution cell.”

“I see,” said Jerry, fighting to keep calm. But he didn’t see and somewhere there was a horrible mistake which had cost the lives of a score of men and would yet cost the life of that girl with the blue-grey eyes who had tried to pass him and had nearly wrecked her ship and his own, he thought.

Skeane broke in. “Will you leave that valise of junk here? We need some material evidence. And I want you to swear to a description of the girl.”

“Sure,” said Jerry vaguely. “Anything you say.”

“Right. Hair, blonde; shade thirty-three plus on the I. P. scale. Eyes, blue-grey—shade nine. Weight—Captain! Come—”

Jerry was walking slowly through the outer office, his mind in a state of terrible confusion. He didn’t know what to do for himself or her. Attack it with logic, he decided fuzzily. For effects there are causes. Assuming flaws in the line of Skeane’s logic, discover the points of specific strain and test them. Hah—he had mentioned “agents”—those, he supposed, were informers. And—what was his name?—LeMouchard. Weak link number one: now to test it.

He walked into a store. “A bottle of olive oil, please. A big one.” That was the first step.

In Mars there are many hidden ways. For every city there is a shadow-city twisting its tunnels and warrens beneath the sunlight and air. It was through these dark passages that Jerry wandered—to check, as he thought, on official deduction, of course.

Reeking with oil and dressed in the rags of an outlaw space-tug’s crew he passed into the dismal underworld as one of its own creatures. In not many hours he was to be found in a low dive swilling the needled ethyl that passes as potable among the scum of a solar system. It was easy to make friends of a sort there—the price of a drink took care of it.

Jerry wasn’t drunk, in spite of the terrible cargo of rot-gut he had been stowing away, but he was just a bit ill, for his stomach was well lined with olive oil, sovereign remedy and anti-intoxicant. He was buying liquor for a slimy little man through no altruistic motives; for this was LeMouchard, informer to the police. Gently he questioned him. Of course, he was strictly on the legit, but he hadn’t always been,

no? And those camels of the gendarmerie that made themselves the great ones, a good man—like our comrade here, yes?—could wrap them around his finger, no?

And surely he was not such a fool as to play with only one master when the pay from two was twice as great? He thought not. Oh, yes—that clever business of the *Bluebell* girl! He, Jerry, would give a pretty penny to know in whose dazzling intellect that task had been conceived and brought to fruition. Was it—could it be—that he, Jerry, was standing in the presence of the man? But no! But yes! Then surely that was worth another drink of the so gentle ethyl. And so the great LeMouchard was in the pay of the police and one other. Might he, Jerry, be permitted to inquire as to who had availed himself of the services of so great a man?

LeMouchard looked owlishly over his drink. “Oui,” he croaked. “It is permitted.” His face flushed abnormally, and he shook his head like a dazed fighter. “The English, I forget how you call him . . . *Le bon petit roi d’Yvetot*—the king with the little orchestra. It is . . .” he bowed forward, his eyes bulging. “*Carbon?*” he said. “*Sa Majeste Carbon.*” His ratty face hit the table-top. Out cold.

King Carbon—coal. King—Cole? *Old King Cole*? That seemed to be the idea. But what was a merry old soul with a small orchestra doing on Mars with a stool-pigeon?

He returned to his hotel room and phoned the Interplanetary Police.

“Major? What do you know about Old King Cole?”

There was a pause. “I believe,” said the thin grey voice of Major Skeane, “that he died just fifteen years ago. A bit before your time.”

“As I understand it he never lived. What are you talking about?”

“Early space pirate. Good man, too. Crashed on Pluto two days after I was assigned to his case. I was a terror in those days; he must have been afraid of my rep. They all were, then. Did I ever tell you about Ironface Finkle, the Mercurian Menace? I brought him down . . .”

“Very interesting; very—this King Cole—I want to know more about him. I suppose you found his remains?”

“On Pluto? Don’t be silly. When they crash there they stay crashed. This Ironface lad had a better position than I did, naturally; I made it a point never to be unfair to the men I was assigned to, since my name alone struck terror—”

“Naturally, Major. How did King Cole work?”

“The usual way; ramming and boarding. Now Finkle had a tricky twist to his technique and had me baffled for a time—”

“That’s too bad,” said Jerry tiredly. “How old was Old King Cole when he—ah—crashed?”

“Rather young. In fact, he had just graduated from a tech school on Venus when he took up his career and ended it in about a year. But the Mercurian Menace was older and more experienced. He knew how to handle a ship. I was hard-pressed, but soon—”

Jerry hung up. It was fantastic! How many men had been to Pluto and returned? If his hunch was right—and it sometimes was—at least one more than the records showed. He phoned room service for the *Marsport Herald*.

“Yes, sir. Morning or afternoon edition?”

“Both, Oh, yes—I want them as of this date fifteen years ago. Better get me the year’s file.”

Room service turned to linen and said, “That man is mad as a hatter.” Then hastened to the Herald building for the files.

In due course the files reached Jerry, who had been calculating the location of the *Bluebell*.

He flipped the pages to January and read a report of the King’s first appearance. He had struck like a demon at an excursion ship, gassing it and gutting it with thermite bombs, leaving a message pinned on the chest of the mutilated captain:

“Old King Cole was a merry old soul,

And a pirate, too, was he;

He wiggled his toes, and he thumbed his nose,

And said: ‘You *can*’t catch *me*!’”

From that and subsequent clues his identity had been traced. He had been Chester Cole, honors student at Venus-port Tech and had led his class at the Academy of Astronavigation—but was just a little cracked, it seemed. He had, as a student, fought a “duel” with another boy, crippling him. All that had saved him from prison then had been the loyal lies of his classmates. His crew, in the days of his career of crime, seemed also to have been made up of like contemporaries. It was a strange and striking picture, this mad boy roaming space in a ship of his own, striking out at will at women and children.

Now to the end of the files, to investigate his death—

CHAPTER FOUR

Pursuit Between the Planets

Approximately on the line which Jerry had calculated, a ship of strange design was speeding for Pluto. Like every space-ship, it was highly specialized. The super-powerful motors and grapples of the salvage scows were not hers, nor the size and luxury of the passenger liners. This was no huge freighter, jammed to the blister and built for a maximum of space to store to a minimum crew. Yet she had a purpose, and that purpose screamed from every line. This rocket was a killer, from bow to stern. Her prow was a great, solid mass of metal toughened and triply reenforced for ramming; a terrible beak of death. Above her rear rockets protruded a stern-chaser that scattered explosive pellets behind her in an open pattern of destruction.

But this very efficient machine was not entirely lacking in comfort, for Alice Adams rested easily in a chamber that might have graced—and once, perhaps did—the costliest luxury liner. She had awakened there after that peculiar odor through the *Bluebell* had laid her out and her crew. Then a courteous knock sounded on her door. “Come in,” she said, baffled by the anomalous situation.

A man entered. “I welcome you,” he said, “to my vessel. I trust that you will find ___”

Alice looked at his face, and screamed.

The man recoiled and muffled his features in a scarf. “I can hardly blame you,” he said savagely. “It is the wind of Pluto. You will find that my entire crew is like that, I warn you. Skin grey and dead, the scars of the Plutonian sleet over all the face. For five years we lived unsheltered in that hell—five years that might have been a thousand. Can you know what that means?”

“But who are you?” asked the girl. “And I’m—I’m sorry about . . .”

“I was once known,” said the man, “as King Cole. Bright boy of the space lanes; pirate *par excellence*. The whimsical butcher—that was me. Fifteen years ago I died on Pluto, they think. Maybe I did; it’s hard to say for sure these days. We lived in the broken open hull of our ship where it fell, breathing in helmets, feeding from crates and cans of food. One kid thought he could melt the snow outside and drink it. He was very thirsty, and he went mad when he saw the snow boil up into yellow-green gas. It was chlorine. It’s cold out there where we’re going.

“Many years it was, and then another ship crashed, and we took off our helmets

and lived in that and sang songs with the men of it who survived. They were technicians, and tried to fix their rocket, but one of my boys killed them. He thought he liked it there; he must have been crazy.

“A long time later a first class pirate ship landed. We crawled across the snow to her—two hundred kilos. They took us in because they hadn’t a mechanic worth the name, and all of us were fine tech men. I said I could fix her, and I could. Then one night my men killed all the crew of this new ship and I patched it with stuff from the other two rockets so we took off and sneaked into Mars.

“I had been a fool once, and that was enough, so I meant to do it the right way this time. You don’t strike without warning if you want to be a success; you give plenty of warning through agents and policemen you’ve hired, and steer them just a bit the wrong way so that they suspect nothing and honestly believe that they’ll get you the next time.

“I met a lot of friends I knew on Mars, and made some new ones when I’d disposed of the ship’s cargo. The boys and I have been cruising around for some time now, doing nothing spectacular—it doesn’t pay. We’ve been knocking off a ship here and there, laying the blame square onto a rival or somebody. Our home is still Pluto—we don’t like it, in a way, for what it did to us, but in a way we do because nobody else does, and it’s so *damn* far away from anything half the time.

“I’m sorry that you didn’t get the *Carpathia*. I thought that with a father like yours you could fly sideways and beat any other scow in the ether to a contract.”

She stared at the madman. “What did you know about my father?”

“He was my instructor on Venus. He got me out of a piece of trouble when I killed a man that swore at me. He was a good instructor, and I’m pleased that I have the chance to do him a favor through you. You see, I wrecked that bullion ship for you. Then I was going to pick you up and the junk, but I see I’ve only got you. Well—perhaps that’s enough. You can’t return to Mars even if you want to. I suppose the police have their cruisers out looking for you and your crew. I buttered the crime onto you for both our advantages. I hope you don’t mind?”

“No,” she said, “and you wanted to do my father a favor by permitting me to join your—band?”

“Exactly,” came from the muffled features. “And you will?”

The girl sobbed, “Never! Space is clean and cold; why must you make it a thing of Terror? Isn’t that pain enough without you and your kind?”

The pirate laughed. “The whimsical butcher is not displeased,” he said. “You will have your uses anyhow. It will be a long time before a soul suspects King Cole—the late King Cole—of the atrocities perpetrated by Miss Alice Adams and her

cutthroat crew. I know how the police mind works. That's my business, now. Good day—you may ring for food." He left, and the door closed behind him.

Vainly the girl sprang to the door and tried the knob. It was locked firm. She returned to the bed and shut her eyes, trying to blot out the memory of that grey, horribly seamed face.

On Marsport Jerry had not been idle. He had been to see the major again, and tried to convince him of the truth so self-evident to the younger man's mind, but the placid old idiot listened blandly and blankly. When Jerry was finished he said, "Through an accident, I believe, we were cut off in our telephone conversation a while ago. I was about to describe the position in which Ironface and I found ourselves—"

But Jerry was gone with great curses on his lips. Patiently Skeane sighed. It had been six years since he had been able to finish that story; the last man to hear it complete had been a convict extradited to Venus from Jupiter. Skeane had strapped him down in the little two-man rocket and whiled away the long hours of space travel with the tale in its gruesome entirety. He thought, now, that it would be nice if he could find somebody else to strap down and tell the story to. He was even a bit afraid that he was forgetting the details himself. . . .

A taxi was driving through the muddy streets of Marsport; Jerry snapped a bill under the hackie's nose. "This for you if you step on it," he said. They pulled up, brakes squealing horribly, before a battered, weatherbeaten tenement. Jerry took four stairs at a time and burst into the close, dirty room. He shook the sleeping figure. "Sven! *Sven* dammit! Wake up, you loose-brained lump of soggy Norwegian caviar! We have the biggest job we've tackled yet!"

The helmsman rolled over, and dizzily asked, "We tow, captain?"

"Yeah, we tow—a full-armed battleship that doesn't want to be towed. Get the men to the field in twenty minutes—fare is on Leigh Salvage, Incorporated."

As the big man struggled into his clothes Jerry was down the stairs and into a taxi. "Salvage Field," he snapped, "in a helluva rush."

He had often boasted that the engines of scow Leigh were the most powerful things in the ether. Well—he would see how powerful they could be—shifting feed lines and adjusting nozzles to move the traction power, terrific as it was, into a different channel. The scow was to haul nothing but her own weight this trip, but it was essential, to put it mildly, that she haul it *fast*. The men lined up before her as the job neared completion. Briefly but clearly Jerry outlined the dangers and invited men to drop out.

“Wylie,” he said, “since I shipped you we’ve been getting complaints from your quarter about work. This is going to be work the like of which you never dreamed. You can take out that pistol of yours; sure as leather you’re going to use it this trip, unless somebody gets you first.

“Anybody leaving? No? Then pile in and strap tight. In ninety seconds we take off under fifteen Mars gravities acceleration.”

There was a little glow in his chest. These were men—his men! Comrades of flight and wreck, he’d stood by them and they were making good this day. And for a crazy woman? That was the part that baffled him—why? He had had practically no respect for her father; his ethics, or lack of ethics was notorious on the field. But she couldn’t fly a ship! That, he said to himself, was what had convinced him of her innocence of the highly technical charge of piracy.

“Strapped in?

“Eighty-nine—

“Fire!”

With a roar they took off. Such acceleration was unheard of, even on this field, where rules of astronavigation were scrapped daily and the laws of the space-lanes broken as a matter of course.

In a moment they had vanished from the sight of observers on the field; a moment more and they were into space, beyond air and warmth.

“All hands,” rang out over the Leigh Salvage annunciator. “These will be battle stations when so ordered. Sven, be ready to take the tiller in anything happens to me; Wylie, choose and arm eight men to form a boarding party. Two others stand by with repair-paste in the event that our periphery is punctured. One man stand by the manual controls in case the electric board is blown by anything they have in their bag of tricks. That is all—flight stations!”

A long silence followed, Sven’s hand white on the helm. “Deflect into first for particle in third,” said Jerry, at length. “Meteorite.” The ship shifted. “Good God, Sven—did you see that thing?” cried Jerry.

The helmsman said, puzzled, “Yes, captain.”

“But Sven—we passed it—going in the same direction! The first time I’ve known that to happen. Swede, we’re traveling plenty fast.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Contact Off Pluto

Out in space time depends most of all on the man concerned, but for all those on the speeding little scow, the days flashed past. They saw Jupiter pale behind them, and Saturn, and Neptune; then, one day—

“Helmsman,” said Jerry tensely, “turn control to master’s board. I think I see them.” Uneasily the big man surrendered the guiding of the vessel; he was the sort who likes to know what is going to happen next. Jerry’s fingers touched the panel, his eyes never leaving the glinting speck far ahead of him; the speck that grew as he overhauled it with dizzying speed. His own exhausts glared less bright; he was slowing down that there might be no mistake. A telescope brought to bear on the point screened out the rocket’s dazzle and enlarged the features of the vessel. And there was something about it—he was almost sure.

He *was* sure. That tube astern was a chaser, meant for him and his scow. He turned on the annunciator, his jaw clenched. “Attention all hands,” he said. “To battle stations. Check on your paste, repair crew; check on your weapons, boarding party. Pirate ship—” he squinted through the telescope—“Pirate Ship *King Cole* in sight. That is all.”

He snapped on a beam of communication to the pirate ship, closing up the distance between them, and sent a call along it.

“Scow *Leigh Salvage* calling unregistered *King Cole*. Scow *Leigh Salvage* calling unregistered *King Cole*. Answer if you hear me, unregistered *Cole*. Scow *Leigh* to unregistered *Cole*.”

There were etheric cracklings, then a dry voice. “Answering, scow *Leigh Salvage*. If you know who we are, what do you want with us?”

Jerry was close enough to see their chaser turn into his quarter and extend for firing.

“Heave to, *King Cole*,” he said. “We’re commissioned as a converted warship of the Interplanetary Police.” This was neither strictly true nor untrue. As a matter of fact Skeane had said, “Go on and make a fool of yourself if you plan to. You and your ship have my full permission.”

“Captain,” said the voice from the pirate ship, “your letter of marque won’t take *us*. I advise you to turn your garbage can back to where it and you belong before we rake you *just once*.”

“Second of three warnings,” said Jerry, wetting his lips. “Heave to in the name of the Interplanetary Police.”

There was a long chuckle from the beam-grid.

“Third and last warning: heave to!” With the words Jerry tore the ship up and over into a great, ragged loop as the pirate gun belched pellets of destruction. He had thought he would be well outside the scattering pattern, but the scow trembled as a fragment exploded against its side. “Repair crew to larboard!” he shouted into the annunciator plate, his eye on the air-pressure gage. Its needle dipped once; then rose to normal. “Plate blown in and patched, sir,” came Hiller’s voice. “All clear.”

“Stand by, all,” said Jerry. “We’re going to attack.” The ship rose, under his sensitive fingers, above its foe. “Prepare to swing grapples,” Jerry warned. “Check magnetic plates, O. K.?”

“Magnetic plates O. K.” answered Wylie.

“Then *hold on!*” The ship swooped and fluttered, at times seemingly inviting the fire of the pirates, at times seeming disabled, and darting away as the killer vessel swung itself to deliver a *coup de grace*.

The scow’s grapples swung free—ponderous curved plates at the end of long osmiridium chains. Then down she darted, the grapples clanging against the sides of the pirate and sticking like plaster, and magnetized plates in the ship herself adhering to the other.

Jerry turned to the annunciator. “Wylie, cut through, take over the board, Sven. I’m going down for the fun.”

“Yes, captain,” said the big man.

Again in Wylie’s skilled hands the burning paste oozed from his tool and ate through the metal of the pirate’s hull as the crew bolted on their space helmets. Guns clicked in readiness; the oval of weakened metal was closed. The salvagers stood back as Jerry kicked down the section. Gun ready, he and his men stepped through. They were in an empty storage room, it seemed—one that would never again be crammed with loot.

Through his head-set Jerry ordered, “All out of the scow. Come through and bring sealing material.” The rest of the crew filed through the ragged opening, stepping cautiously. “Seal that,” said Jerry. “Either we fly the pirates’ ship to Marsport or we don’t fly at all.”

The breach was sealed, and the crew stripped off their space suits. Grimly, weapons poised, they moved in a solid line for the bulk-head that sealed them off from the rest of the ship. They heard running feet through the wall. There would be a

corridor on the other side. Jerry flung open the bulkhead and stepped through guns blazing. Before him was a mass of men, their faces grey, horribly seamed things. Three fell under his fire; others struggled vainly to raise a semi-portable gun against him and the men who came trooping through, their weapons hammering madly in their hands.

Tactics were discarded, and the two groups sprang together, locking in combat. Muffled groans and the thud of fists were heard; gunbutts rose and fell on skulls and faces. Finally the salvagers stood above their foes, bloody and victorious.

“Neat work,” said Jerry, wiping blood from his face. “Now let’s get up this cannon of theirs. That wasn’t a quarter of their crew.” Wylie spread the tripod of the gun and locked its barrel into place. “I think,” he said, “it’s in working order. Shall I try a squirt?”

Jerry nodded and the gun cut loose, hammering shells down the corridor, battering through the steel door.

“Enough,” he said. “The plan from now on is to stay in a lump and keep moving systematically. If we begin at one end and work towards the other we may get there. Otherwise—” He left the words unsaid. “Wylie, go ahead of us, carrying the barrel. Collins, carry the stand.”

CHAPTER SIX

Return From Battle

Slowly they advanced through the shattered door. They were in an engine room. “Wait,” said Jerry. He turned to the complicated maze of pipelines and tore one loose; he twisted valves and shut-offs. The trembling drone of the exhaust died slowly. The pirate ship was free in space.

“We go on from here,” he said. “Give me the gun-barrel.” Wylie surrendered it, and his captain fired a short burst at the lock of the door. It sprung open and silently the men stepped through. It led to an ambush; a score of the grey-faced horrors sprang to the attack as his gun cut loose with violent, stuttering squirts of destruction. Men fell on both sides, and Jerry dropped the clumsy weapon to use his fists and pistol-butt.

He was grappling with a huge man, smashing blows into his middle, twisted over his back. He struggled vainly as he felt his tendons about to give, then—a club rose and fell on the head of his foe, and he slid to the floor saved by Sven. “Thanks,” he said hastily, scrambling to his feet and sailing into another pirate. A kick to the groin disposed of the man; this was small season for the niceties of combat. He turned as an arm snaked about his neck, and jerked out his pistol, pressing it into the belly of the stranger. He pulled the trigger, his jaw set, and the pressure relaxed suddenly.

From knot of men to struggling knot he swung, firing till his gun was empty, and not daring to stop for a reload. In a few short minutes all was silent save for the panting of the bloody victors—Jerry’s men. Two had fallen forever. Gently Jerry straightened their twisted bodies and turned his back on them.

Gruffly he said, “I believe that we are in a position to make an attack on their main forces, which would be concentrated in the control-room. Follow me.”

And grimly, without a backward glance at the carnage behind them, they followed stealthily down a corridor to pause before a door triply sealed against them. Jerry pounded on it with a pistol. “This is the fourth call to surrender,” he shouted through the steel.

There was a mocking laugh. “Come and get us, garbage man,” answered a voice dry as dust. “We’re ready for you.” Jerry’s face hardened. “Give me the torch,” he said. They passed the tube to him, and primed it.

He braced himself and touched it to the door, opening the torch to its widest capacity. The arc sprang out; he swung it in a great oval over the steel. The door

glowed a fiery white; then the slab of metal fell inward with a clang. Through the opening they saw a score of men, guns poised. There was a pause, then their own semi-portable cut loose and tore through a half dozen of the pirates before Dehring, who was feeding ammunition, fell twisting to the floor.

Guns blazing, then the battle-mad crew of the scow leaped to the attack. Men paired off and swung fists and boots; only Jerry stood aside—Jerry and one other. His face a grey ruin, one of the pirates stood aside and watched, taking no hand and seeking none in the destruction. Jerry walked up to him. Again the strange, knightly drama of conflict in space was to be enacted.

“You, sir,” said Jerry, “are the captain?”

The dry, bleak voice that he knew answered from the head without features. “Captain Cole, at your disposal, Captain Leigh. Shall we withdraw?” No insults now—the archaic code of the space-pirates demanded this rigidly formal procedure on the meeting of the two enemy captains in battle. Jerry nodded, and the pirate chief led the way into a luxurious room.

Alice sat up. “Jerry!” she cried. “Has he taken your ship?” He smiled. “No—just the opposite. Our men are fighting it out in the control room; Captain Cole has been so kind as to offer me individual combat.”

The pirate chuckled richly, “Pray speak no more of it. I thought you would be pleased to see your Alice again—she is an extraordinarily high-principled young lady. She has refused to join my little band. Well; perhaps she was right—we shall soon see.

“I believe the choice of weapon is mine?”

“Certainly, captain,” answered Jerry according to formula. “And they will be —?”

“Boarding pikes,” said the pirate succinctly. “There is a pair here, if you will excuse me.” He opened a locker in a corner of the room and withdrew two of the vicious five-foot pole-arms from it. Jerry accepted his weapon with a murmur of thanks and examined it briefly. He struck its shaft over his knee and smiled at its satisfactory weight. “Shall we fight free or formal?” he asked Cole.

“Formal, if Miss Adams will be good enough to referee.” The girl nodded, her face white.

“The line of combat is not to be departed from,” she began in the traditional phrasing, “and will extend along the center of the room from the door to the bed.

“The first figure will be low-crossed; challenger, Captain Leigh, attacking. The defender, Captain Cole will attempt to disarm the challenger within three

disengagements.” She poised her handkerchief, “At the drop of the scarf,” she said, “the challenger will attack.”

It fell to the floor, and Jerry hooked a tine of his weapon into the pirate’s guard and swung upward, then darted at the chest of his enemy. There was a clash of steel, and—his hands were stinging and empty. He had been disarmed. Cole stood smiling, his pike held easily, waiting for the next figure, as Jerry’s mind raced furiously back to the days of his school training. He remembered another such disarming at the hands of an old, quick instructor. He had been padded then, and the blades of the pike could not, dulled, penetrate his quartz practice helmet.

Faintly he heard or seemed to hear, the instructor’s voice say, “Counter once conventionally; then engage, and rocking from the heels twist and thrust at once to disarm.” Grimly Jerry smiled. He would not forget again.

“Second figure,” said Alice faintly. “The defender will attack highcross; the challenger will attempt to disarm within three engagements.” Again the handkerchief—“scarf” in the language of the pike—fell, and again the steel clashed.

For many minutes they battled through twelve figures; Leigh had again parried Cole’s blade, and they turned to Alice. But she was in no condition to continue, having fainted when the pirate’s blade had swooped past Jerry’s cheek a moment ago.

“Since the referee is incapacitated,” said the pirate, after a moment of thought, “shall we continue fighting—free?”

“Challenger agrees,” said Jerry. “On guard!” And again the vicious pikes glistened in the light, swinging madly. Jerry abandoned the formal line of combat and cut fiercely at Cole’s head, who grinned and swung at his enemy’s chest with a practiced flick of his wrists. Jerry sprang back, blood pouring from his side and shortened his grip by three feet of the haft, leaped through an opening, and stretched his body into one terrible blow that sent his blade through the belly of the pirate and out the other side.

The salvage man fell to the floor, and the transfixed body of Cole remained erect, propped on the pole of the weapon.

Jerry’s own eyes closed quietly; his hands sought his side, and were wet with blood.

Jerry awoke in a very soft bed with those eyes swimming before his face and a sense of pressure on his lips. “What happened?” he asked, dizzily.

“I kissed you,” said the eyes.

He considered. “What did you want to do a thing like that for?” he said.

“Just a hunch. It worked on the Sleeping Beauty, you know.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Thanks. Where am I?”

“Marsport County Hospital,” said the eyes. “Officially you are Gerald DePugh Leigh, master of the salvage scow *Leigh Salvage, Incorporated*, if there’s anything else you want to know. That DePugh nearly changed my mind about you, but I decided that you could bury it as a crossroad with a stake through its heart and maybe it wouldn’t bother us.”

“This *us* business,” he said reflectively. “Just what does it mean?”

“Why, *Jerry!*” said the eyes, deeply pained. “Don’t you *remember?*”

“No,” he said, “but whatever it was it seems to have been a good idea. Did I propose to you?”

“Yes,” she said, crossing her fingers. “And I accepted in good faith and here I find myself jilted practically at the altar—”

“Oh, *all* right,” said Jerry irritably. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” said the eyes.

There was a pause. “I wonder if you would know how I got here,” he sleepily asked.

“I flew the ship back after you ran that Mother Goose murderer through and got your own appendix clipped. You’ll be out of here soon—”

“*Who* flew the ship?”

“I did.”

“A woman can’t fly a—”

“This one did.”

“Well . . . I suppose so—I feel myself getting drowsy. Do you think the Sleeping Beauty technique will work twice?”

“I’ll try—” Jerry heard footsteps, and the eyes retreated. A thin, grey voice spoke up, “Ah, Leigh, I thought I’d call. As you no doubt remember I was telling you of my space-battle with the Mercurian Menace. We were jockeying for position when—”

“Alice, darling,” said Jerry.

“Yes, dear?”

“Will you kick that man very hard, please?” He closed his eyes, heard a yelp of pain, and the slam of a door. He smiled sweetly in his sleep.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *King Cole of Pluto* by Cyril M. Kornbluth [as S. D. Gottesman]]