

FANTASTIC STORIES OF THE FUTURE

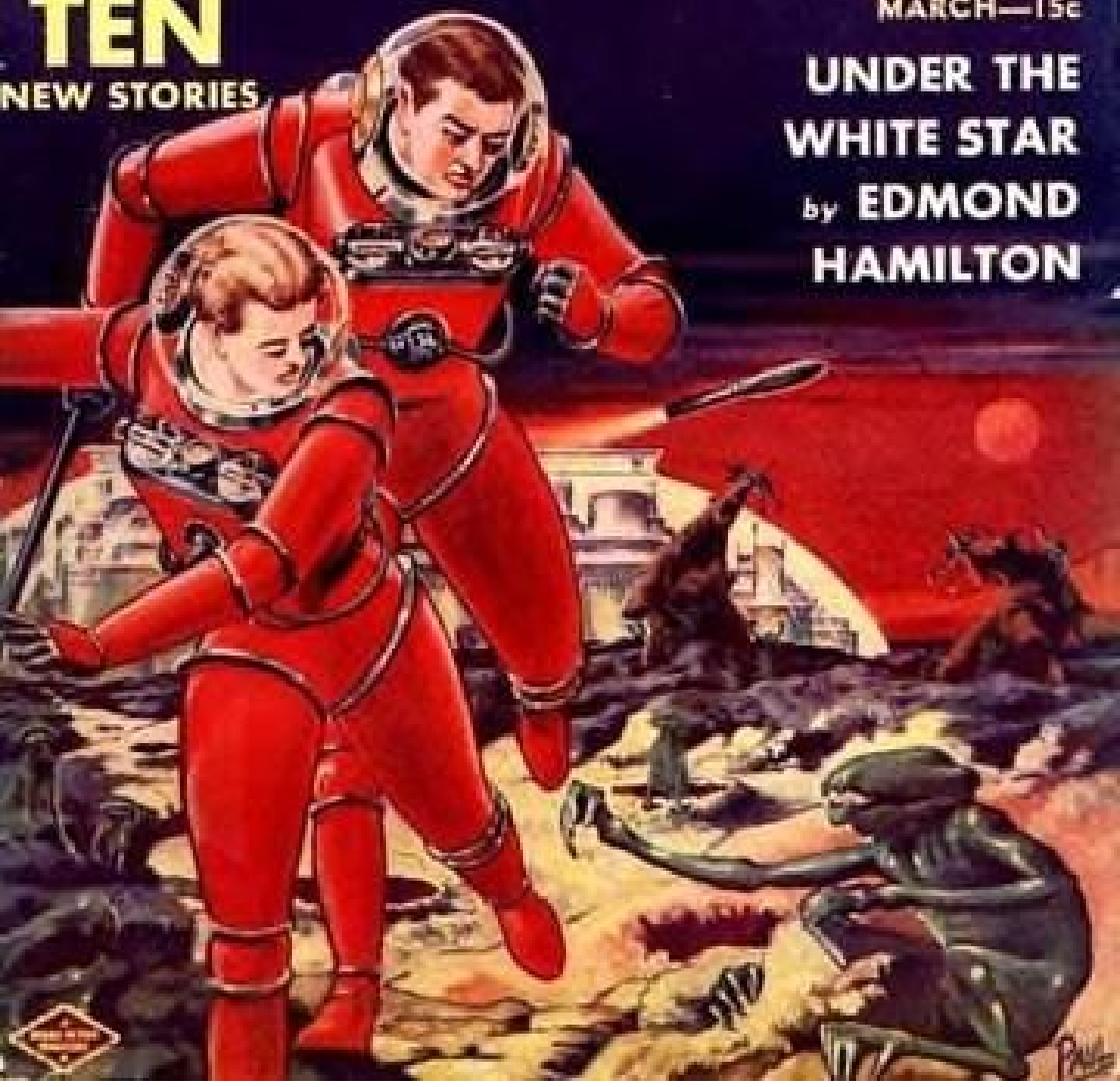
SCIENCE FICTION

TEN

NEW STORIES

MARCH—15c

UNDER THE
WHITE STAR
by EDMOND
HAMILTON



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OUTLAW OF SATURN

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym John Cotton.

First published *Science Fiction*, March 1939.

It was Lena's job to bring Bruce Lanning to justice—but the accursed world of the Minitors had planned a worse fate for him than the avenging arm of the law!

The heavy log floor, fast rotting under the eternal damp of Saturn, creaked as Bruce Lanning strode back and forth across it. Being a good one hundred and seventy pounds, and gaining one pound in five on the ringed planet, he gave the underpinnings of the hut plenty of work to do.

"It won't do!" he shouted at last, swinging around and jabbing an accusing finger. "You've got to get those plantations cleaned up before the mud-tides start, else you'll find yourselves without sugar! Get it? If you weren't such a damned shiftless race you'd have cleaned the seeds up long ago!"

The creature he faced stood only two feet high—an almost perfect miniature of an Earthian, save that his eyes were wide and innocent, his hair pink, and his skin deep amber. The Minitors of Saturn were literally vest-pocket humans—"Minitor" being a malapropism of the word "Miniature"—childlike, amazingly passive, exasperatingly lazy, and underneath it all, mysteriously vindictive. In their eyes this tough Earthian was a dynamo, a destroyer of their calm, somnolent peace.

Lifican, the Minitor, waved a thin arm timidly. His voice was like a badly played flute.

"Mister Lanning, please sir, plenty work is difficult. Opius seeds damn hard to collect. Beg for lots of time, please."

"You'll beg for nothing!" Lanning roared. "You've been lazing your time like all the rest of your pals. You're the boss of them, so it's up to you. Now scram out of here before I bump the baby daylights out of you!"

He strode forward menacingly, and the little creature twisted and flew outside with a yelp, perfectly accustomed by his small size to the rather heavy going of the giant, steamy planet. Lanning watched him go, rubbed a powerful hand through sweat-damp black hair.

"Rip Van Winkles!" he grunted irritably. "They'll never get the stuff away in time at this rate; then I'll be in a spot trying to explain to Davis. . . . I just wonder what the hell's the use of it all, anyway?"

He knew the use of it well enough. The common necessity of making a living had driven him into this business of racketeering, this illicit trading in opius seeds. Once the seeds reached Earth, various methods were utilized for their disposal. The wealthy were willing to pay any price for a few hours of glorious dreams, surcease from the boredom of 22nd Century perfection.

Dreams produced by opius, unlike its old-time deadly cousin, opium, left no ill-effects on the constitution. More, it produced a kind of sublime anesthesia, detached the mind from the

body.

Just the same, the business was still illegal, despite sundry efforts on the part of John Davis, chief of the enterprise, to make it a lawful occupation. Not that Bruce Lanning minded; the salary was worth it. The only drawback was climate. . . .

The ghastly climate of Saturn—that was the thing that got into him, particularly here on the North Equatorial Belt where the opius plants flourished. It wasn't so bad over at Green City, the civilized Saturnian quarter—but here. . . ! He was becoming wearied—wearied of the myriads of childish Minitor workers on the plantation, the seasonal mud-flows from Saturn's fifty-mile distant volcanic area, the senseless driveling of the mimical birds, the alternating lights of the arcing rings of Saturn, the wild glimpses of the ten moons ever and again through heavens that were almost eternally wreathed in green clouds.

In the higher levels, the air was unfit to breathe, but down here a preponderance of breathable oxygen remained. Unlike the penal world of Jupiter, where the vast pressures had crushed out all the oxygen, Saturn still possesses some, in percentage high enough to support life of an Earthly standard.

And the heat—all internal. An almost unvaried temperature of 115 degrees Fahrenheit. . . .

Lanning grunted with discomfiture and mopped his streaming neck and face. Then, arising from his musing, he went outside to the short ladder propped against the doorway. His hut was on stilts to raise it above the periodic mud-flows.

Steadily he descended the ladder and sank the accustomed two inches into the spongy loam of the clearing. He nodded in satisfaction as he beheld the Minitors at work again, dwarfed by the weird fern-like plants whose seeds they collected. They worked with a certain sullen persistence, reminding him of children who have received a tough scolding.

"Van Winkles!" he repeated again, and couldn't help smiling a little. "Just the same I'd rather be back on Earth. No Minitors, no jungle, no cock-eyed trees that are both organic and inorganic, no mud. . . ."

His blue eyes traveled over the packed mass of the flesh-eating and normal trees rearing to the green heavens. He listened in silence to the eternal chatterings of Saturn's jungle life—then his attention was suddenly caught by his own pet mimical bird, George, as his clumsy but skillful bulk came like a bullet from the upper air.

Far larger than an earthly ostrich, resembling a parakeet about the beak and face, his main qualities were a sublime gift of voice mimicry, sub-human intellect, and magnificent plumage. He landed in the muddy ground with a thud, folded his wings and scanned Lanning as he raised a lazy hand in acknowledgment.

"Hallo there, George. I wondered where you'd gotten to."

"Seed thief!" George retorted, in a voice that was quite unmistakably that of a girl. "Seed thief! Wash your neck!"

Lanning straightened up in surprise. "Say, wait a minute! Where'd you pick that girl's voice from?"

"Hellish hot! Seed thief! Racketeer!"

"Racketeer, eh?" Lanning frowned. "Sounds like you've been places where you shouldn't. Don't tell me you flew as far as Green City. . . . Here—come here."

George wasn't moving any. He stood on one leg and considered Lanning with beady eyes. The Earthman sighed.

"Maybe it was the Minitors," he remarked. "They're not half so darned innocent as they look, the lazy—"

“They’d be all right if you didn’t have to act like a modern Simon Legree.”

Lanning twisted around with sagging jaw, then gulped as he saw a slim, girlish figure in the customary shorts and silk blouse of the North Equatorial Belt advancing towards him. Apparently she had come from the side of the clearing facing the plantation. She lifted her broad welted boots with the air of a mud-trekking expert.

Lanning said nothing as she came level. Cool gray eyes looked into his; a stray, corn-colored curl peeked under a soiled white hat. His eyes moved to the neat, fast ray gun in her shorts belt.

“You’re Bruce Lanning, aren’t you?” she asked suddenly.

“Yeah, sure— Who the devil are you, anyway? Don’t you know that nobody in his right senses is allowed beyond the two-mile zone limit of Green City? That’s twenty miles north of here.”

“I know that; I came from there.” Her voice was level and cold. “I’m going back there almost immediately, and you’re coming with me.”

Lanning raised his eyebrows, noted the small but efficient pack on her back. “I don’t catch on,” he said. “Maybe we’d better go inside my place and talk things over.”

“Wash your neck,” agreed George, waddling after them as the girl turned to the ladder. . . .

“I suppose,” Lanning said, as they entered the little living room, “that it was you who called me a seed thief and racketeer within George’s hearing?”

“Well, aren’t you?” She took the restorative he held out to her and sipped it slowly. “I did call you that, anyway. I was annoyed; I lost my way, and called you names because you were responsible for it. I didn’t see this bird, though. Maybe he was above me somewhere.”

Lanning looked at her steadily. “Maybe I’m very dense, but I don’t understand why you came—why you trekked across mud and jungle to get here. You’ve no right here, anyhow.”

“No?” Her sensitive upper lip was contemptuous. “I guess you’re afraid of how much I’ll find out, eh? Well, that’s what I’m here for. . . . I’m Lena Tavistock.”

“Well, I’m Bruce Lanning, but I’m still puzzled.”

“Number 16 of the Outer Planets Service,” she embellished icily. “You’re trading in illicit drugs and I’m here to stop it and run you in. You’re under arrest, Lanning!”

Before he could recover from his surprise, she had jumped to her feet and snatched out her gun, covered him squarely.

“We’ve got to get moving,” she stated flatly, her eyes bright and hard. “You’re coming back to Green City with me to answer a few questions. You know you’ve no right to use the Minitors as workers. By interplanetary law they’re the natural inhabitants of this world, and not under the dictates of outlaw Earth men like yourself.”

Lanning smiled and shrugged. “It isn’t my doing. I take orders from my chief. He put the Minitors to work and I just look after them. They’re lazy, but they’ll work their heads off for a bag of sugar.”

“Your chief, eh?” the girl repeated. “Where does he hang out?”

“Green City.” Lanning laughed shortly. “Guess you might as well have saved yourself the trouble of chasing after me.”

“You’re wrong there, Lanning; I’ll run both you and your chief in. Come on, let’s move. You don’t need to pack; I’ve plenty of tabloid provisions.”

“Hot again!” whistled George, hopping about wildly.

"You're telling me," Lanning growled, turning to the door. Then, as he reached it with the girl inexorably behind him, he suddenly stopped.

"Listen!" he exclaimed. "Hear it?"

She tensed, frowned at the sound of distant rumblings and thunderings, gradually coming nearer.

"It's nothing," she snapped; "only a volcanic area blowing up. They're common enough, aren't they?"

"Sounds more like mud to me," Lanning muttered. He didn't argue any further, descended in silence to the ground. As the girl dropped beside him, a group of Minitor men and women came speeding up, chattering at the top of their voices. They clutched Lanning and the girl with tiny hands, nearly deflecting the steady pointing of her gun.

"Can't you call these things off?" she demanded impatiently. "I don't like being pawed—"

"Then you should have stepped away!" Lanning retorted. He swung around to the nearest one. "What's wrong?" he demanded.

"Mister Lanning, sir—seeds we no longer get. Mud flow coming this way. Plenty danger. . . ."

Lanning looked up sharply. The Minitors were fleeing pell-mell from the plantation, more active than they'd ever been before in their lazy lives. . . . The jungle trees were shifting in the advance drafts of the mud-wind, the superheated blasts of air engendered by the relentless periodic flow of mud from one portion of the Saturnian equator to the other.

As Lanning well knew, the stuff often wiped out everything in its path—hence the stilts on his hut. Saturn, with its ten-moon gravitations, together with a swift 10-hour rotation and consequent equatorial bulge, suffered from mud tides of paralyzing height and power. . . .

Lena looked anxiously around her as the wind blew hot and odorous into her face. Then she turned suddenly as Lanning clutched her arm.

"Put that toy away and be yourself!" he ordered briefly. "We've got to step on it. Come on!"

She tried to pull free, but he was too strong for her. Shaking clear of the whimpering Minitors, they raced swiftly across the clearing and plunged into the jungle. A little way inside it, Lanning stopped and surveyed a towering, notched tree, stabbing up against the misty, perpetual ring and moonlight.

"Up you get!" he commanded, turning, and the girl stared appalled.

"Up there! But why? I—"

"It's my safety tree," he interrupted. "I use it when there's an extra heavy mud flow, like the one coming up. It's notched, and there's a platform at the top. Either that, or drown."

"But I—" She broke off in bewildered surprise as his powerful hands suddenly clamped under her armpits and shot her to the first notch. His grim face was below.

"Step on it!" he barked.

She stared up at the lofty height, then began to climb, notch by notch. He came up slowly behind her; little by little the whole clearing and contiguous plantation became visible to them. By the time they reached the little platform at the top, they could see the mud sea rolling inwards from the north, plowing down weaker trees and undergrowth, frothing in great steamy globules of dirty ocher.

Lena looked apprehensive—"You're—you're sure we're safe?" she asked anxiously. All her former coldness and didactic manner had gone now. She was a woman, very frightened,

but she'd rather have cut out her tongue than admit she was glad of Lanning's brawny, tense body beside her.

"No, I'm not sure we're safe," he answered briefly, watching the stuff with keen eyes. "This tree of mine has stood tides before; it should do so again. If it doesn't— Well, I guess you won't need to run me to Green City—or yourself either, for that matter."

She didn't answer him. He looked at her strangely.

"You know something," he went on, "you're too nice a girl to go around arresting people. I'll hand it to you you've got plenty of nerve, though—coming through the jungle from Green City, I mean."

She shrugged, her eyes on the mud. "It didn't take nerve. I knew where you were and I hired some guides to help me. After all, I'm used to Saturn. I was born here. My father lives in Green City."

"And he approves of this Secret Service stuff?"

"He doesn't know. It's four years since I saw him—"

The girl broke off as George suddenly came whirring through the air and alighted heavily. The little platform swayed.

"Hellish hot!" George commented affably, folding his wings.

"It's going to get plenty hotter," Lanning answered moodily. "This is about the biggest flood tide I ever saw—and then some."

He stared over the fast approaching morass. It was only a matter of yards from his hut. He and Lena watched it tensely, caught their breaths as the whole hut and plantation vanished utterly in the smother. The surging, rolling mass bubbled swiftly beneath them, but since the tree afforded little resistance, they experienced little beyond a fierce swaying that quickly subsided. . . . But all about them the lower trees of the jungle swayed and collapsed.

"Funny, isn't it?" Lanning mused. "Saturn's surface, around here anyway, is nothing but successive layers of mud from each succeeding drift. The tops of the trees and plants get snapped off, yet the roots remain, to push through the hardening mud when the flow stops. Damned queer place."

"Where do the Minitors go?" the girl asked suddenly.

He pointed to a rocky cliff bounding the southern end of the clearing. "They live just beyond there in a sort of valley. There's a sort of cleft they go through. The mud never reaches high enough to get down there."

Lena nodded slowly. Since there was not a Minitor in sight, they had evidently all escaped in time. For a while she watched the flood in silence, then spoke again.

"How do we get away from here, anyhow? What's next?"

"We stop here," he answered pleasantly. "Do you mind?"

She stared at him. "I should think I do mind! I'm no pole squatter; I'm a detective. How long do we stop, anyway?"

"Oh, it depends. I usually reckon to stop here for three days and nights—that is, by earthly standards. There is never any dark on Saturn, of course. By that time the mud is usually hardened enough to be normal and new trees and things are starting to spring up. . . . It's not half bad up here. It's warm; and there's always light, be it the rings, Titan, Dione, or Hyperion."

She looked helplessly around her. The major force of the mud-flood had already spent itself. The vast, swirling brown river below was moving more turgidly, thickly, building up slowly to a solidity that would mean only a two-inch depth of upper plasma. . . .

“Wash your neck!” screamed George suddenly, flapping his ponderous wings. “Hellish hot! Wash your—”

“Hey, sit still!” Lanning yelled, clutching the platform edge savagely. “Stop it, you—”

He broke off in sheer horror as the bird flapped his vast fan tail violently. Even on the ground, the wind action from it was enormous: in the short area of the platform it was catastrophic. The whirling feathers caught Lena unexpectedly clean in the face, sent her falling involuntarily backwards.

With a hoarse scream, she vanished over the platform edge and went hurtling down to the turgid expanse below.

“Lena—!” Lanning screamed, and flung himself flat. He was just in time to see the girl strike the mud with a dull splash, begin to strike out savagely towards the distant cliff surrounding the domain of the Minitors. . . . Without hesitating a second, he dived after her, struck the mud feet first, and swam towards her.

Swimming in the stuff made him feel like a fly in warm treacle. It weighted down every portion of his body. He could see Lena’s head bobbing some distance away as she struck valiantly for the cliff base; but she was becoming weaker. He could tell that by the dragging movements of her mud-caked arms.

Cursing George, Saturn, and women who nosed around where they aren’t wanted, he struck out with renewed savagery, using every ounce of his strength. By degrees, he began to gain, but he realized that he had only the gradually ceasing mud-current to thank for it. The stuff was already beginning to congeal somewhat.

He reached the girl fifteen minutes later, as she was beginning to drag her laboring limbs up the stones to the cliff base. Catching up with her, he caught her around the waist, dragged her a little distance, then set her down carefully.

“I’m—I’m sorry about that,” he apologized. “It was George’s fault, of course. Thank God you fell feet first into the mud, otherwise—”

“I’d have been drowned,” she finished quietly, sitting up and clawing the slimy mud disgustedly from her hair and skin. “Would that have mattered so much? After all, I’m here to run you in. You can get ten years on the penal world for illicit trading, you know.”

“You can only get me to Green City now of my own free will,” he said grimly. “Your gun will be useless after this mud.”

With a start of alarm she pulled it from her belt and fired it into the air. Nothing happened. With a rueful glance at the ruined charge-drum she tossed it away.

“O.K., Mr. Lanning, you win!” She got to her feet and faced him steadily. Their eyes met—his curiously uncertain; hers cool and unafraid.

Then his eyes went beyond her to a cleft high up on the cliff face. For a brief instant he caught sight of a Minitor who had evidently been watching the proceedings.

“They seem quite interested in us, don’t they?” the girl remarked casually. “How’s chances of staying with them until the mud solidifies and we can get away from this glorified little desert island?”

“Chances not so good,” he replied, set-faced. “I don’t trust ’em—never have done. They’re like precocious children, and damned nasty ones at that. In fact—”

He broke off as there suddenly came the familiar piping voices of the little creatures. In another moment or two, the pass disgorged a veritable horde of them. They came swarming down onto the shingle, chattering and laughing amongst themselves.

“They’re armed!” Lanning said, with a start of surprise. “I wonder what the game is now?”

He and Lena stood waiting as the Minitors came up. The men were carrying spears in their hands, tipped with deadly ilifac poison, sap of the most lethal plant Saturn produced.

“What is this?” Lanning demanded, as a ring of the little men closed around them, as the women, looking like dolls out of a Christmas store, kept at a watchful distance.

“Well, what is it?” he roared, as they were silent. “Come on, Lifican, let’s have it.”

The boss of the seed pickers smiled innocently. His round, cherubic little face was as babylike as ever.

“Mister Lanning, sir, we want you. You and lady. To come down into our valley. You will? Better, you know!”

“Are you threatening me?” Lanning demanded, clenching a huge fist. “If you are—”

The ogling eyes widened in surprise. “No threaten. Just order. Ask you obey, please, sir.”

He glanced in bewilderment at the girl.

“Guess we’d better,” she said shortly; “though it’s the first time I’ve had an invitation in the form of a poisoned spear.”

Lanning nodded. “O.K., Lifican, let’s go—but make it short. We’ve got to get away from here as soon as possible. . . .”

Lifican beamed like a boy with a model motorboat. Proudly he led his file of people up the shingle to the cliff pass, waving his poisoned spear like a band leader as he went.

The pass was only short, leading down into a wide valley filled to a great extent with the humble hut dwellings of the lazy little people, huts that were surrounded by neatly planted palisades of ordinary trees, with a carnivora plant here and there for the consumption of carrion, waste, and unwanted foes.

When the center of the valley was gained, Lifican called a halt. His people gathered around him. Lanning and the girl stood like Mr. and Mrs. Gulliver amidst them.

Lifican bowed politely and showed his little teeth.

“Sir, we have honor to be revenged,” he stated cordially. “You make work in plantation, threaten my baby daylight with prompt bumpings if I not work. So sorry to regret it. You rule with iron rod and trouble plenty.”

Lanning’s eyes narrowed. “You blasted, traitorous little devil!” he breathed. “So you think you need revenge for the way I’ve made you and your lazy tribe work, do you? And take that damned friendly grin off your face!”

“I doubt if he can,” the girl put in. “As I understand it, these people are differently constituted than us. They have only one visible emotion—that of childlike innocence. The rest of the emotions sort of boil inside them—something to do with their adrenal glands. They’re under-developed, so they can’t express anger. . . . We know already that their pituitary glands are almost non-existent. That’s why they’re so tiny. . . . So I’ve heard, anyway.”

Lanning stared at her. “Yet knowing all this about them, you had the nerve to call me Simon Legree? As for you, Lifican, to hell with you! Come on, Lena—let’s go.”

He turned vigorously, but the little man made a prompt movement. In response, both Lanning and the girl found themselves suddenly smothered in the little people. Tiny though they were, there was an unbelievable power in their delicate-looking bodies and doll-like hands, begotten mainly of Saturn’s rather heavy gravitation against which they were always laboring.

In the space of a few minutes, the astounded Lanning found himself being carried by fifty of the men, and the girl by another thirty. When a corner of the clearing was gained, they were hauled to their feet, their hands jerked over their heads, and fastened by a length of tough creeper to the branch of a tree.

Lifican, at the forefront of his fellows, smiled again.

“So sorry,” he said affably. “Tree a Titan Bender. You know rest, Mr. Lanning, sir. No work hard no more.”

He bowed, turned about, and marched off with his men and womenfolk towards the mile-distant abodes at the remote end of this palisade.

Lena twisted her face between her updrawn arms. “What did he mean by Titan Bender?” she asked.

Lanning came to the end of an underbreath reel of oaths at her words. With a final glare after Lifican, he turned towards her as well as he could.

“It’s a tree peculiar to Titan. I’ve seen it work and it’s mighty weird. A carnivorous tree, of course.”

The girl studied its drooping branches, in particular the one to which her wrists were fastened.

“Looks harmless enough,” she said. “In fact, I’d say it’s asleep.”

“That’s just it,” he muttered. “It is asleep. Listen; you have seen an earthly sunflower turn its face to follow the sun, haven’t you?”

“Who hasn’t? What’s the connection?”

“This tree’s pretty similar. While the moon Titan is below the horizon, this tree is limp and resistless—but once Titan rises, it comes to life!—something to do with its origin. It came, in the first place, by seed spores blown across space from Titan’s Whispering Forest. On this world it starts to move and consume whatever living prey is near it the moment Titan comes over the horizon. Certain radiations from Titan stimulate its inner organs, just the same as the moon affects certain plants on Earth.”

The color fled from Lena’s face. “Then you mean it will attack us? Consume us?”

Lanning’s jaw squared. “That seems to be the idea. It’s just like those damned little devils to think of this. Torture and death rolled into one—and it took those china dolls to think of it! God, if I could only get my hands on them!”

The girl tugged furiously on the vine tethering her wrists, lifted her feet from the ground and threw her whole, weighted body into the effort. But it was of no use. The stuff only cut deeper into her chafed wrists.

Lanning tried with similar futility. They stopped at last, panting, surveying the twelve-inch length of vine that separated them from the branch itself.

“No go!” Lanning said breathlessly. “Let me think now—” He stared at the murky sky. “It’s Iapetus and ring-light at the moment. That means Titan will be up in fifteen minutes or so.”

“Fifteen minutes!” Lena gave a groan, waggled her cramped arms helplessly, stared with Lanning into the varilighted scum that was Saturn’s eternal sky. Then suddenly both of them twisted sharply at a faint cry.

“Hellish hot. . . . Seed thief!”

“George!” Lanning yelled. “I’d forgotten him. . . .”

He stopped and stared away towards the village. Typical of their race, now that their task of revenge was apparently accomplished, the Minitors were thinking no more about it. With their usual laziness, they had retired to their huts, probably to eat and fall into a long state of torpor.

Lanning searched the sky with a feverish intensity, until at last he caught a glimpse of an unwieldy flying ostrich.

“George!” he screamed desperately. “George! Come here!”

The bird turned at the sound of the voice, swept down in a flurry of wings and came waddling forward.

“Wash your neck,” he screeched; then his voice suddenly changed to a heavy bass. “No sign of plantation. Where’s Lanning? Damn, damn. Where’s Lanning? Darn the mud. . . .”

“That—that voice he’s imitating!” Lena cried. “Where’s he get it?”

Lanning was looking puzzled. “It’s the voice of my boss, as a matter of fact. Don’t know how George happened on it, though—”

“You mean the chief of the opius organization?”

“Sure. Why? We’ve got other things to worry about right now. Here, George. Nice birdie. . . . Come here.”

The girl watched tensely as George fluttered up and down, as Lanning issued tense instructions.

“Up!” he panted. “Up! Come on! Papa’s baby! Up. . . .”

“Oke,” George said briefly, and went up. His beady eyes shone in the pale, vague light as he listened to Lanning’s desperate injunctions.

“Down a bit— This way! Vine! Bite it! I said bite it, you blockhead. . . . Come on . . .”

Again and again he had to try, but little by little the bird’s subhuman intellect began to function. It swooped triumphantly, snapped its scissor jaws together, and went through Lanning’s vine like a razor. Instantly he dropped his leaden, aching arms. Then ripping his penknife out he cut the girl free.

“Nice going, George,” he breathed gratefully. “Remind me to give you some sugar.”

“Hellish hot,” George observed, strutting with tail outspread.

“Let’s get out of here,” Lanning went on, catching the girl’s arm.

They moved steadily through the shadows of the palisade, and even as they did so, the Titan Bender behind them suddenly came into life. Its branches writhed weirdly against the scummy sky, continuing their eternal, horrifying search for edible things.

Lena shuddered a little. There was something incredibly grotesque and horrible about this blind plant that was a born killer.

“Guess we only just made it,” Lanning muttered. Then as the girl remained silent, he looked at her sharply. “What’s on your mind, Lena?”

She looked up sharply, then smiled faintly.

“Nothing. At least, almost nothing. I’m thinking of the voice George imitated. Your boss’s voice.”

“Well? So what?”

“If he’s around I’ll have to run him in with you. I don’t know how I’m going to do it without a gun, but—”

“Suppose you skip it for the time being?” Lanning suggested. “We’ve enough to do to get away from here without being spotted by the Minitors. . . . Now come on.”

With extreme caution, they moved slowly away from the shadows of the palisade towards the clearing itself, skirting around the back of the huts towards the foothills of the valley cliff. George came strutting behind them.

“No sign of plantation,” he squawked. “Where’s Lanning?”

“Shut up!” Lanning hissed; then he glanced at the girl. “Must be something urgent that brought the boss here. Obviously he’s not far away, else George wouldn’t have heard him.”

“What’s your chief’s name?” the girl asked quietly.

“Calvin Davis. He operates this racket from Green City.”

“I see.”

Lanning glanced at her wonderingly as they crept along, but she said no more. With the utmost caution, they made their way along the valley side, keeping a good mile of distance between themselves and the huts of the Minitors.

Unseen and unheard, they finally reached the pass. In a few minutes they were through it.

“Whew!” Lanning whistled. “Thank Heaven for that! We’re safe enough now.”

“And of course you’re not going to Green City with me?” she asked quietly.

“After all, Lena, why should I? I’m not pining for ten years on the penal world. Besides, you can’t force me to go now. You’ve no dangerous toy to help you. Serves the Service right. They shouldn’t have sent you out alone.”

“They didn’t. I had two men with me, but they were killed on the way here. Got caught by a constrictor tree. . . .”

“I’m sorry,” Lanning said, awkwardly.

She regarded him with steady eyes.

“I’ve only one course—to go back and report failure. And that means being thrown out of the service. Maybe it doesn’t matter much, but I’d rather have retired honorably than be chucked out on my ear—”

She broke off and turned at the sound of a booming voice.

“That you Lanning? Why, so it is! Well, thank goodness I’ve found you. I thought you’d gone down in the mud flood.”

A heavily-built man of middle age, followed by a dozen raft-experts—Earthian pastmasters in the art of driving rafts through Saturnian mud-floods—came slowly up, brushing drying mud from his white ducks.

“Mr. Davis,” Lanning acknowledged cordially, extending his hand. “I’m glad to see you, sir. It isn’t much of a surprise, though. George gave me advance warning.”

Davis nodded as he glanced at the bird. “Yes, I found him flying around the site of the plantation and I told him to find you. Had a bit of trouble getting here. The flow was bigger than usual this time.”

“But why did you take such a risk?” Lanning demanded.

“It was worth my risk, my boy. You see, the Interplanetary Police have agreed to let opius seeds pass as legal merchandise from now on. Earth chemists have just discovered that they are the finest things out for producing a new form of anesthesia for severe operations—anesthesia which gives delightful dreams and leaves no hangover. Because of that, because we are the only two who own an opius plantation, and therefore have first rights, the charges against us have been canceled. Instead, I’ve an order to produce as much of the stuff as possible.”

“Why—why, that’s terrific!” Lanning cried in delight. “No more scraping, no— Lena, you hear that?”

The girl turned from the shadows of the cliff wall and Davis glimpsed her for the first time in the pale Titan light. He raised his hat.

“Hallo, there, Miss—I hadn’t noticed you.”

“Mr. Davis, Miss Tavistock,” Lanning murmured. “She came to run us in, but I guess that’s all washed up now by the new order. So you’re safe after all, Lena. You can return with dignity to your job, without having to admit failure—”

He broke off in astonishment as Davis suddenly shouted, “Good God, Mary, it’s you! What in Heaven’s name—?”

“Father,” she said simply, moving into his wideflung arms. “Oh, dad, I’m so glad that your trading is—is legal. Otherwise, I would—”

“You mean you’re a member of the Service?” he demanded. “That that’s what you’ve been up to ever since you left Green City four years ago?”

She nodded her fair head slowly. “Yes, Dad. I got sick of Green City; it was too slow. I told you I was going on a trip around the system, and sent messages to that effect from different places. Instead I became Lena Tavistock, of the Service. They assigned me to this job. . . .”

She paused and turned to Lanning. “You see, when George used the voice of your boss, I knew it was father. That was a shock to me. My duty was to turn him in, along with you—or else report it. To protect father, I’d have to admit failure. . . .” She smiled brightly. “But now it’s different. I can return to the Service headquarters with a clean conscience.”

“And a fresh assignment?” Lanning questioned gloomily.

“No, resign without the stigma of failure,” she said slowly. “I’m getting tired of wandering, anyway. And besides, you’re going to need help around here when the fresh opius sprouts. You’ll want a woman around to look after the cooking department when you import good American labor to work for you, won’t you?—labor to take the place of the lazy, treacherous Minitors?”

“Trouble with ’em, eh?” Davis said, catching on. “It doesn’t surprise me. I think you’re right, Mary—”

He stopped. She wasn’t listening.

“There’s only one way to do that,” she said naively, as Lanning swept her impulsively into his arms.

“Wash your neck,” agreed George, alighting with a thud from an aerial jaunt. “Hellish hot. . . . Hellish hot. . . .”

THE END

[The end of *Outlaw of Saturn* by John Russell Fearn (as John Cotton)]