

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: Blockade Runner

Date of first publication: 1941

Author: Malcolm Jameson

Date first posted: June 22, 2016

Date last updated: June 22, 2016

Faded Page eBook #20160624

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines

[Source: Astounding Science-Fiction, March 1941]

BLOCKADE RUNNER

By Malcolm Jameson

A good technician can make unlikely things turn into highly effective weapons, and weapons don't always have to kill to be effective!

"Thar she blows!"

While the alarm jangled, Red Leary, the quartermaster, cocked an eye at the pulsating ruby pick-up light, noted the bearing, and then laid a hand on the jet-feed cut-off valve. He looked expectantly at the skipper.

"Hold it," cautioned the latter, "until they challenge. Sparks! Is your board manned?"

"Aye, sir."

"Rebel cruiser coming up on the port quarter. He'll be calling in a minute. Don't chance talking to him—stick to code. I'm just a little afraid of your dialect. One slip and we're done."

The call came almost instantly, strident and insistent. First it was QF, QF, QF, and on the heels of that came the peremptory BWB—"What ship?" "Heave to to receive boarding party."

"Vast blasting," ordered Kemp. "Tell 'em O.K., Sparks."

Red's hand moved. The *Cloud Queen* trembled, then lurched backward as she dropped her acceleration. The three men looked at one another. Here it was; in another half-hour, at most, they would know. Their elaborate masquerade was about to be tested. They would know the answers to a lot of questions. Whether they would meet the unknown fate of the fourteen ships that had preceded them; whether the Martian-Jovian blockade was really unbreakable; whether they were to live or die; whether, indeed, there was a chance left for the Earth Empire to live or die. Red swallowed hard, while Sparks moistened his lips with a nervous tongue. Kemp, the skipper, was surveying the room critically, on the alert for any item, hitherto overlooked, that might arouse suspicion. Seeing nothing, he relaxed. The stage was set—from now on it must be acting.

No one who had formerly known Jack Kemp, resourceful and trim young lieutenant of the Tellurian Space Force, would have recognized him as he appeared at that moment. His face was all but covered by a newly grown, fierce black beard that had been artfully threaded with gray by the experts of the chromosurgery section of Intelligence. It matched the equally artificial grayness of his temples. The deep tan of the ray-burned spaceman was not synthetic, but somehow seemed to be set off and augmented by the threadbare old uniform trimmed in tattered, greenish-gold lace. In every inch he looked to be what he was pretending to be—the somewhat bedraggled skipper of a second-rater out of

Venus. The crew as well, likewise ratings of the Space Force, were similarly disguised.

As for the ship, no one familiar with the well-found ships of the Cosmos Line would ever guess that this dingy vessel was in reality the *Violet*, well known before the war along the Saturnian run. Her metamorphosis had been as thorough as that of the men in her, thanks to the creative imaginations and the accurate memories of a dozen operatives at Lunar headquarters.

No detail of hull, equipment or cargo had been overlooked. The framed register screwed to the bulkhead in the cabin was puckered and stained with ugly brown water marks, as if a negligent quartermaster had left the lock doors open while cradled in the steamy atmosphere of her home port. The crew's quarters were decorated with intimate snapshots of alluring females taken against the fantastic background of Venusian scenery. Every man on board was not only provided with forged licenses and passports, but with personal correspondence written in many hands on the damp-proof paper of Venus and bearing appropriate stamps and cancellations. Outside, clinging to every irregularity in the hull, were patches of the hardy Venusian moss that thrives even in the void, planted there by a crafty technician from London's great interplanetary botanical garden. And, of course, bolted to the hull just over the ship's nose was the inevitable hemi-cylinder housing the infrared headlight by which the master could find his way through the misty ceiling down to the landing field of Aphrodite's Haven. If anywhere among all that artistry there was a single flaw, it was not from want of foresight or trying.

A slight shudder marked the coming alongside of the cruiser's boat. Kemp pushed the switch that turned on the lights in the lock and loosed the guard on the outer door. Then he reached up and plucked from its brackets a Mark IX Heimnitz blaster—the sporting model. Sticking that into his holster, he walked along the passage to greet his adversary.

He knew from the clang of the outer door and the hissing of air that the boarders were already in the lock. In a moment the door burst open and a scowling officer stepped out, followed closely by two bluejackets with drawn ray guns of the latest heavy-duty model. Kemp knew at a glance they were Callistans from the silver lozenges embroidered on their uniforms. Only a Callistan would wear such a device. In the beginning, when Callisto was a Tellurian penal colony, lozenges were woven into the cloth of their garments as the stigmata of criminality. Yet so shameless is that race that upon gaining their independence ten years ago, they adopted the lozenge as their national insignia and thereafter flaunted them openly throughout the system.

"Jig's up," said the Callistan briefly as he stepped into the ship. Without ceremony, he snatched the blaster from Kemp's belt and handed it to one of his men. "Save the act until later," he added contemptuously as Kemp jumped backward, registering indignant astonishment. Then he turned on his heel and strode toward the control room. Kemp followed, silent and perturbed. The boarding officer was not going to be an easy man to deal with.

"Swell job of camouflage," commented the Callistan after a

quick inspection of the control room. "If they had faked your first ships like this, you might have got by with one of them." He studied Kemp insolently, and then, "O.K., buddy. Go into your song and dance now—I'm listening. It's been dull out here, waiting for you, and we need a laugh. And I hope you've thought up a new one. The gag about being an innocent Venusian merchantman just trying to get along in the Universe has been worked to a frazzle. But shoot, anyway. Only make it short and snappy, because I already know the answer."

Kemp shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands in a gesture of hopelessness. So far the Callistan was bluffing, and Kemp knew it.

"What else can I tell you? But look us over—our papers—our holds—everything, if you doubt us."

"Doubt you?" roared the big Callistan with a hearty laugh. "Why, Mr. Tellurian Space Force Whatever-your-rank-is, I haven't *any* doubt about you. There's a couple of things I don't *know* about you—like what your real name is—but out at the mines that won't matter. They'll give you a number, anyway."

He started his search methodically, missing nothing, however trifling. He thumbed through the log, squinted at the makers' nameplates on each bit of astragational gear, scratched the mold-resisting paint to see what was under it, and sniffed the air appraisingly. Thanks to the still-hanging fumes of huil-huil, it had a thorough-going Venusian aroma. He glanced at the big jar of crushed, dried huil-huil leaves sitting on the radioman's desk. Not more than a handful of the weed so prized by space-going Venusians was gone from the jar—no more than half a dozen

men could smoke in the day or so since the *Cloud Queen*, as she claimed, had escaped internment at Luna Base.

The flat, brutal face lit up with that I-told-you-so joy, and he pointed triumphantly at the nearly full jar.

"An empty one might have fooled me," he fairly shouted, "but now I've seen all I want to see. You guys always overdo your stuff. Look, stupid—you been interned on Luna, where you can't get that weed—a year, you say—locked up all the time in your ship. And then, two days ago, you hop off all hunky-dory with a nice full jar. I ask you. How does that add up?"

Kemp smiled patiently, letting his meticulously yellowed teeth show through his beard.

"My friend, you are too, too suspicious. We have tons of it. In the hold you will find ten thousand pounds. Look in the manifest; it is part of our cargo—bound for your country, for Ganymede. It is true we have swiped a few hundred pounds, for our own use, a matter we will have to settle for with the consignee, but our laws permit us to make use of cargo in an emergency. And being captured by those accursed Earthmen is an emergency."

The Callistan looked a little dubious, but he accepted the manifest and the invoices. He looked through them and then went on a tour of the ship. For an hour he prowled through the cargo spaces, but nowhere could he find any irregularity. They were filled with products of Venus, all articles of common commerce with the Jovian satellites. Nor could he find any

indication of concealed armaments. The ship was plainly no Q-boat, as a quick look at the engine room proved. There was only the usual auxiliary generating equipment. The ship could not possibly be made into a commerce raider.

Back in the control room, the boarding officer dropped his taunting, bullying air and listened more politely to Kemp's story, although it was clear he was reluctant to release the vessel and permit her to complete her voyage.

Kemp kept on talking, telling of his hard luck at being picked up during the very first week of the war, and of the hardships of internment, of the pitiful inadequacy of the Tellurian fleet and the incapacity of its officers, and of the general state of despair prevailing on the Moon. He also made much of the fact that he had successfully resisted all efforts to take the cargo out of his ship and put it to use on the grounds that it would be a violation of Venus' neutrality and might force her into war on the other side.

The Callistan frowned, obviously in a quandary. He was still unconvinced. He had uncovered nothing that was not plausible, yet nothing he had seen could not have been faked. He meant to take no chances on letting a prize slip through his fingers. Yet he knew that Venus was opposed to this resumption of the war and was itching for an excuse to patch up her differences with the mother planet and come to her aid. Kemp sensed his hesitation, and by an almost imperceptible twitch of an eyelid got the signal across to Red Leary. The time had come to play their trump.

Red's freckle-specked hand stole behind him and fumbled for a button. On the third try he managed to trip the latch on a small

cupboard, the one where the star charts were ordinarily kept. Kemp went on talking, pleading now to be allowed to go on to his destination.

"Hell and damnation!" yelled the Callistan, leaping frantically. Something disreputably ragged-looking and dirty white was clinging to a wildly kicking calf.

"So sorry," cried Kemp in dismayed apology, and dived for it.

For a moment he was busy dodging the boarding officer's scuffling knees, but after a false grab or two he came up clutching a queer and malodorous little animal by the scruff of the neck. "I should have warned you about Flo-Flo. She doesn't like strangers."

The creature was a full-grown trigglemouse, one of those feathered rodents peculiar to Venus. For some reason unfathomed by the remainder of the inhabitants of the Solar System—unless it was blind superstition—the men of Venus cherished the beasts. No ship from there ever took the void without one as a mascot. Yet they stank and they stole and they nipped friend and foe alike with their sharp, chiselly teeth, and they had other habits that, to say the least, were not nice. In fact, the aversion to them was so strong among most Earthmen that when Flo-Flo was requisitioned, all the zoos of the Earth had to be combed before she could be located.

The Callistan glowered for a long time after he had blasted the miserable animal out of existence, but as his curses died away it was obvious enough that whatever lingering doubts he

may have had as to the authenticity of the *Cloud Queen* were dissipated. With a snort he stalked to the chart rack and entered the fact of his inspection in the log and indorsed it. Then he flung off down the passage, beckoning his two men to follow him.

"Get this stinkpot out of here. I'm through with you," he said as the lock door closed behind him.

"Aye, aye, sir. Thank you, sir." Kemp felt he could afford a little politeness. He was *through*; and in his hand he held a scribbled memorandum of the correct answers to challenges for the next three weeks—the time necessary to reach Ganymede. The Callistan had given him the recognition signals to expedite his trip, so convinced was he that he was dealing with a genuine Venusian.

"Well," said Kemp as he set his jets going again, "that's that. Now all we have to do is straighten out for Oberon, fake a new set of papers, trade this stuff for what we want, and then get back in again."

"That last will be tough, I'm thinking," remarked Red.

"Tough?" was Sparks' contribution. "Damn near impossible, I calls it."

"As long as that 'near' is in we're O.K.," said Kemp cheerily. "Give 'er another G, Red. We can stand it."

Three times before they cleared the last of the asteroids they were challenged by roving cruisers, but thanks to knowing the answers and also to the general belief that the Earth blockade was break proof, she was not halted and searched again. Kemp had time to consider his next steps.

The more he pondered the enormous task assigned him, the more he was struck with the irony of the situation. The Earth, mistress of the remnants of what had been the far-flung Tellurian Empire, and a hundredfold more populous and rich than all the other peoples of the Solar System combined, was lying helpless before the might of two of her erstwhile colonies. They lacked the men and the resources to invade the mother planet, but they could, and had, cut her off from all inter-course without. Their strategy was simple. While holding the Tellurian fleet immobile, they would sweep up the remaining Earth colonies—the Saturnian System and what lay beyond. After that they would control the only known supply of the fuel upon which civilization had become dependent. Earth would thereafter have to pay through the nose, for the ultra-powerful Eka-Uranium existed only on Oberon.

This anomalous state of affairs had been made possible by the weak and parsimonious policy followed by the grand council after the successful War of the Rebellion a decade earlier. Having granted the three revolting planets their liberty and signed perpetual treaties of friendship, the Earth allowed its fleet to deteriorate until it was no more than a mere customs patrol. On the other hand, the colonists, embittered by long years

of misrule, wanted more than independence—they wanted revenge. Hence they at once began building on a vast scale, but secretly. And when those fleets were strong enough, they struck. Earth, caught utterly unprepared, could not strike back.

They built feverishly, trying to make up for the error of unpreparedness. Every sky yard on the planet worked night and day turning out ships. Soon, every week saw sleek new units, bristling with the most modern armament, making the short jump to Luna, where they were given crews and joined to the fast-growing fleet. In the course of a few months they almost equaled the blockading squadron. A few more months and they would excel it. And then a shocked world learned the awful truth—there was no fuel for such a tremendous fleet. The pacifistic and incapable council had not foreseen this contingency and had provided no reserves. There was only fuel enough for one take-off, and that one necessarily of short duration. What there was must be conserved for emergencies—such as sudden destructive raids on the great Earth cities themselves. Therein lay the delicious irony of the situation. The blockade prevented the arrival of the fuel by which the blockade could easily be broken. Given fuel, the Earth could have all the fuel there was; without it, she must soon capitulate, for it was needed for civil purposes, also. There was already much suffering.

Ship after ship had made the attempt, trying every sort or ruse and trick. None had come back. Kemp had been permitted to make one last try. If he returned within the allotted time, the war would be won; if not, it was to be surrender.

It had been left to him what disguise he would use, and what plan. He chose the simplest one of all—that of a straight

merchant ship with no reservations. He had the feeling that the others had been unmasked by their secret armament, and therefore he resolved to carry none. No matter how cleverly concealed, weapons—if adequate—could not escape a really thorough search. The thing must be done by guile, and to that he bent every effort, knowing that success or failure hung on some tiny detail.

Once past the blockading cruisers, he was confronted with the next step—the acquisition of a thousand tons of Eka-Uranium at Oberon. He soon learned, by listening in on the enemy radio, that Oberon had long since fallen and was garrisoned by an expeditionary force from Mars. The *Cloud Queen's* papers would have to be altered to meet another hostile scrutiny, all mention of the fictitious sojourn on Luna must be deleted, and the destination changed. When he had completed his work, the documents purported to show that the ship was straight out of Venus for the outer planets, with cargo unconsigned. Her captain was authorized to trade at discretion and return. He took good care, too, that the page bearing the endorsement of the boarding officer was left in the record. It showed the ship to have been inspected and passed by a control officer.

All went smoothly in Spriteburg. A shipload of Venusian products was most welcome on the desolate planet, and no one raised embarrassing questions. Beyond some haggling as to price and considerable well-simulated indignation at the interplanetary exchange rate quoted, Kemp was called on for little effort. The afternoon of the second day, after he had

discharged his cargo, he shot the *Cloud Queen* over the Elfin Range and laid her into the landing docks at the mines. Twenty-four earthly hours after that he was chockablock full of the precious Eka-Uranium. There were a thousand tons of it—enough to fuel the entire new Tellurian fleet to capacity, and with some to spare.

It was not until he called at the captain of the port's office for his clearance papers that he had any premonition of trouble to come. The day of his arrival he had dealt with a deputy, but now it was different. A man sat there whom he had seen before. In a moment he placed him. At the time when he had been in the circumsolar patrol, four years earlier, this captain of the port had been resident on Venus as consul general for Mars. As such he could be expected to be fairly familiar with Venusian shipping. Kemp was thankful for his beard and grayed hairs, for on several occasions he had dined with the man.

The captain of the port signed the papers without a word. As he handed them across the desk to Kemp, he said, in an offhand way.

"I see you are owned by Turnly & Hightower. Please give my regards to Mr. Turnly when you hit Venus again. By the way, how is the old boy? Someone told me he had not been well lately."

"Oh, he keeps going," laughed Kemp, pocketing the papers and the Manual for the Guidance of Neutral Vessels that was handed to him with it. He was affecting a casualness about it that he was far from feeling. In his researches in connection with outfitting the *Cloud Queen*, he had been unable to learn much

about her fictitious owners. There was a photo on board showing Mr. Hightower in the front door of the home office, surrounded by the clerical staff, but concerning the senior partner Kemp had been unable to learn anything. It was the weakest link in his armor, and he was ardently hoping the conversation would take another turn.

"So he keeps going," murmured the port captain dreamily, drumming softly on the desk with his plump white fingers. "Hm-m-m. Most uncanny, really." He regarded Kemp thoughtfully for a moment, and then, suddenly, as if aroused from a deep daydream, rose and took his hand. "Well, captain, you may as well take off. Follow the trajectory assigned and you'll have no trouble. A clean void and a happy landfall to you. And don't forget my message—Horntrimmer is the name."

As the *Cloud Queen* sped along trajectory XXX-B-37, dutifully doing all the things required by the Martian-Jovian rules, Kemp turned this little talk over and over in his mind. He didn't like it. There was something vaguely ominous about it. Why uncanny? Horntrimmer's attitude had been peculiar, to say the least. Yet he had permitted the ship to clear when it would have been easy to hold her. If he had been suspicious of her, again why?

Kemp had no answers to these questions, but they troubled him, nevertheless. He spent his spare hours prowling the ship or standing in the auxiliary motor room, studying the equipment. He was racking his brain for a means to improvise a method of

defense if it came to that, but he found little ground on which to base his hopes. None, in fact, for the power plant was just sufficient to operate the ship's legitimate auxiliaries without a dozen kilowatts to spare. Nor was there an ounce of any sort of explosive aboard. The ship was truly unarmed. If its disguise failed, all was lost. The only way to break the blockade was to adhere to the plan agreed upon before leaving Luna.

That plan was daring in its simplicity, and two thirds of it had been accomplished. There was left only the last step. Exactly two hundred hours before striking the sphere of swirling enemy cruisers that constituted the blockade, the *Cloud Queen* was to send out a certain signal and keep repeating it until its receipt was acknowledged. Then she was to climb out of the ecliptic so that she could dive onto Earth from the north, through a region that was thinly patrolled. A few hours before her arrival at the barrier a picked squadron of heavy Tellurian battleships would make a vigorous attack upon a nearby segment of the blockade, using what was left of their hoarded fuel to create a diversion so that the blockade runner could slip through. Cruisers rushing to meet the Tellurian feint would not stop to examine a rusty merchantman, even if they detected her, was the theory. It was upon such a slender thread that the hopes of the Earthmen hung.

It was over the asteroids that Kemp sent his signal, set his deflectors for hard rise, and climbed still higher. And it was but a matter of some eight hours later that the keys of the radio began to clatter out the harsh orders of a pursuing cruiser. The fast Callistan *Folliot* was overhauling the *Cloud Queen* and demanding that she blast down and wait. Kemp's face was drawn and the lines in it hard as he listened to the words being tapped out, but there was nothing to do but comply. He gave the

necessary orders.

"As I live and breathe," exclaimed the boarding officer as the inner door of the lock slid open, "if it isn't my old friend, the Venusian! Fancy meeting you here!" It was the identical Callistan who had made the examination on the way out. He oozed sarcasm from every pore. "And—oh, yes, before I forget it—Commodore Horntrimmer instructed me to tell you that Mr. Turnly died three years ago. He was his father-in-law." The Callistan chuckled maliciously. Then he turned to the officer and group of men who had come aboard with him.

"Check these dopes for guns, then set watches. After that you can stow your baggage and settle down. We'll take this bucket in on this course and refuel our own fleet with it." He leered triumphantly at the crestfallen Kemp.

Captain Kemp and his men were not locked up, but forced to carry on their regular duty under the watchful eyes of the prize crew. One or the other of the two officers was always in the control room, sitting in the master's seat at the midst of the main switchboard. Two armed bluejackets stood at the door, ready to carry out any command. The Callistan who had seized the vessel—one Commander Tilsen—produced a fat volume with locked covers and began sending long code messages. The *Folliot*, which had hovered ten or twelve miles on the beam all the while, dashed away, spewing violet fire in her wake. The *Cloud Queen* was left to make the rest of her way alone.

Kemp was forced to stand the same watch as Tilsen took, and had to bear the incessant stream of exultant remarks emanating from him. Although he pretended he had never been fooled in the first place, but had allowed the ship to go on through, knowing full well they could intercept it at will, Kemp knew that he was lying—trying to save face. Tilsen predicted with great relish that as soon as the cargo had been discharged, Kemp would be hustled off to Mars and hanged ignominiously as a spy, together with all his men.

During the first rest period, Kemp lay and tossed and fretted, going over in imagination for the hundredth time every detail of the ship he had come to know well. He must do something, if only warn Earth of the existing state of affairs. But cudgel his brain as he would, he could think of no way to devise a weapon by which he could wrest control from his captors. And then, as he was mentally following the wiring diagram of the vessel for the *n*th time, a thought struck him as abruptly and as clearly as if a gong had been struck. The infrared projector, of course! There was power—of a sort; five million volts, even if the amperage was trifling. Surely something could be done with that.

That time when the rest period was up he marched to the control room gladly. There were a few details of the ship's construction he had never troubled to note. Now they had taken on a new meaning.

Throughout that watch, his eyes sought the overhead every time he felt the gaze of the sentries off of him. He was interested in the exact location of the housing of the search-light perched on the hull above. It was clearly delineated by the double row of rivets, the center being almost directly over the seat whereon

the Callistan Tilsen sat, talking glibly of the tortures the Martian code permitted on certain types of condemned prisoners. Kemp yawned as he pretended to listen, his mind busy with multiplying and adding the estimated distance between groups of rivets. Before the watch was over he knew what he wanted to know, and spent the remainder of the time memorizing the facts he had observed.

That rest period he did not toss and fret. He knew precisely what he wanted to do. Fifteen minutes after the watch below had settled to its rest, Kemp was scudding down the darkened passage, bound for the engineer's storeroom. Except for the guards in the control room, and one in the auxiliary generator room, the ship was unpatrolled. The captors were contemptuous of their victims, serene in the belief that there was nothing they could do.

Kemp shut the door of the storeroom behind him. A moment later he was hard at work with a hacksaw, cutting off a six-foot length of one-inch round copper bar taken from the electrical stock. And when he had done that he seized a file and beveled one end of it to as nearly forty-five degrees as he could make it. It was but a matter of minutes before he was done, for the metal was not hard.

Up to that point he was well satisfied, but when he went to get a heavy-metal disk he found that what he wanted was not in store. He took down a tube hand-hole plug and examined it critically. It was of platinum, four inches in diameter, but much too thick—it would not do. For fifteen minutes he pawed through the bins, but all the disk-shaped pieces were too wide or not wide enough, or of light metals such as steel and bronze.

A high atomic number he *must* have.

Just as a fresh wave of discouragement swept over him, he thought of the handful of 100-uran pieces he had taken in Oberon to adjust the differences of the values of the cargoes he had traded. Those massive three-inch coins were minted of gold, alloyed with a little iridium. For shape, size and composition they were exactly what he needed. Before the watch was over he had brazed one neatly to the beveled end of his long copper rod, and the face of the tilted disk shone like a mirror where he had filed it smooth. He stood it in a corner, along with the tube scrapers, and went back to his bunk, well pleased with his first step.

The seemingly interminable tour of duty came to an end. Kemp counted the seconds, after they had been relieved, so anxious was he to get on with the task he had set himself. At the end of ten minutes all appeared to be quiet, so he stole away to the storeroom. His odd-shaped rod was still there, unmolested. He took a space helmet from the rack and put it on. He slung the brazing kit over his shoulder, picked up a sledge, a pair of wrenches, and the gold-tipped copper rod and made his way to the space lock.

No one heard him go out, for he eased the doors very carefully to, and the hull was so well insulated that once he was outside the slight noise caused by his scuffing shoes could not be heard within. He crawled straight for the headlight and stacked his tools beside it. One by one he backed off the nuts

that held the focusing lens to its frame. Then he lifted it out and went to work on the filters behind it. At the end of the half-hour he had come to the front end of the vacuum tube itself, which he broke with one hard lick of the sledge. It was a trying and dirty job to pry the complicated heating elements out, and he had to watch out for the fragments of the tube, but within another hour he had the tube clean of all it had formerly held. He lay full length in a hollow cylinder, ten feet long by a yard in diameter. Near each end of it were the cable terminals, waiting to be tapped.

Swiftly he erected the rod on the base formed by the inner end, and brazed it into place. Then he hooked it up to the cable end. He had formed the cathode of his contrivance. He backed away to the open end of the housing, and there he rigged an anode. When he was done he replaced the outermost piece he had removed to get in, bolted it fast, then went below. His watch showed he had an hour to spare. He had plenty of time to whisper a few words of instruction to Sparks, under whose desk the foot switch that operated the headlight was located.

When they went on watch again, Sparks kicked the switch shut, and Kemp took up his surreptitious vigil. He knew it would take time, but he did not know how much. He knew there were going to be some extraordinary results, but he did not know quite what. But three hundred milliamperes flung at a golden disk at five million volts' pressure was sure to do something.

The watch wore on, with Tilsen's customary string of jibes. At the end of the first hour the Callistan's flow of words began to jerk to a stop more frequently, and the pauses between bursts became longer. The man began to wear a puzzled, hurt expression, and several times he took off his cap and rubbed his head. He did not seem to notice that hair by the handful showered down upon his shoulders after the last such head caressing.

"What the hell has gone wrong with the air?" he screamed suddenly, springing up from his seat and then settling back into it. "Oh, how my head aches!"

Red Leary checked the indicators and sang out their readings. Everything was normal; the air-conditioning system was functioning perfectly. The big Callistan scowled at him, not acknowledging, but apparently accepting what Red said. He resumed his former position, but would stoop ever so often to snatch at his leg. Presently he called to one of the Callistan sailors who stood on guard at the back of the room. When the sailor came up to him he leaned forward and plucked some imaginary something away from his thigh.

"Take that damn thing out and kill it," he directed, his voice full of venom. "Blasted wild cat!"

After that he slumped a little in the saddle and dropped his chin on his chest, brooding. Kemp measured his posture carefully by eye and wondered whether the tilt of his head had thrown him out of the cone of invisible rays that was playing down from above. But apparently it had not, for at the end of another quarter hour Tilsen sprang suddenly erect, his eyes

almost starting from his head.

"Back! Back! Back 'er full! Glaciers ahead!" He was shrieking wildly and clawing at the board in front of him. A trembling hand came to rest on a glazed clock face, and the smooth crystal seemed to soothe him. He ceased yelling and sat shuddering as he was, with beads of cold sweat rolling off his brow and splashing down onto the board. One of his ears twitched violently, fluttering like a leaf in the breeze. The two bluejackets had come up closer and were watching him in alarm, wide-eyed.

"Shall I call your relief, sir?" asked one of them timidly.

Tilsen was a hard man, even with his own. He swung in the chair, staring coldly and malignantly at the man. "So serpents speak in this valley?" he hissed, sliding out of his chair into a half crouch, as if about to spring at the unfortunate man. His hand went to the butt of his ray gun as the terrified sailor backed away from him. Like lightning, he drew and went into frenzied action. He cut down the first sailor with a blast that seared away half his chest, and before the other could bring himself to fire on his own officer, him, too, he blasted. Then, with a mighty curse, he flung his gun at the bodies and stood swaying drunkenly where he stood.

Kemp looked on with awe, wondering what his handiwork would bring next.

Just as the other officer appeared in the doorway with the remaining sailors crowded behind, Tilsen seemed to lose all interest in his surroundings. He began picking at himself, slowly

at first, as if to rid himself of imaginary ants, and then more wildly, until in another minute he was tearing at his clothes as if they were on fire. Then he gave one ear-splitting scream and fell to the deck in convulsions, rolling, kicking and biting. It was there that his fellow countrymen overpowered him and slipped the irons about his wrists and ankles.

"What did you do to him?" demanded the officer of Kemp furiously.

Kemp shrugged. "He went mad—that is all. How could I help that?"

The officer gazed at the helpless, writhing form at his feet. Not the most casual glance could miss noticing the horrible condition of the head. Not only had the hair been stripped away from top and back, but the skin and the superficial flesh as well. It was as if a mysterious flame had seared it. Yet no known weapon made such a wound—a blaster would have burned the whole skull away.

He examined the room intently, and even went so far as to expose plates set at various angles about the master's chair, but Sparks had kicked his switch open long before—at the moment the crazed Callistan had sprung from the seat. The developed plates showed nothing.

"That's damned funny," muttered the Callistan lieutenant as he studied them. "It *must* have been hard radiation—nothing else could have made those brands."

He frowned and tossed the featureless plates into a corner. Maybe his commander was just a bit crazy, after all, he told

himself. There had been occasions—

"I'll take over," he barked, glowering at the watching Earthmen.

Then he slid into the master's seat himself.

"That's the story," finished Kemp three days later. "We did the same thing to his sidekick. After that the men were easy. We brought in two alive."

He was standing before the desk of the admiral commandant of Luna base. Outside, safely nestled in the vast crater, the battered *Cloud Queen* lay, a huge battleship alongside either side, taking on the vital fuel.

"Thanks to the battle you put on, as per schedule, there was only one enemy cruiser in our way, and we fooled him into letting us pass. We had the Martian code book, you know. We sent him a tripled triple-X, which in their code signifies, 'On urgent confidential mission of highest importance; do not interfere.'"

"Nice work," congratulated the admiral. "I'll see that you get the Celestial Cross and a promotion at the very least. But how —"

"Gamma rays," said Kemp. "I knew they played hell with living organism, so the only problem I had was to rig up a giant X-ray machine where I could bring it to bear on those birds,

knowing that they would not suspect until it was too late. You can't feel the things, you know.

"For that I needed a huge vacuum tube, a cathode of the right material, and scads of voltage. By going outside the hull I had my vacuum ready-made; the cathode I improvised out of stuff on board; the voltage was already there, awaiting the flip of a switch. The fact that the gamma rays had to go through an inch of iridium steel didn't detract much from their poisonous qualities. In fact, I imagine the secondary radiations from the radiated iron did almost as much damage as the hard stuff bouncing off that gold 100-uran piece. Anyhow, it was enough to addle their brains. By the time their reaction was strong enough to tip them off that something was wrong, they were too far gone to be able to add two and two and get anything out of it."

"Sort of homemade Coolidge tube, eh?" observed the admiral commandant.

"Sort of," grinned Kemp, thinking of the unholy mess he had made of a perfectly good Venusian infrared searchlight. "But it worked."

THE END.

[The end of *Blockade Runner* by Malcolm Jameson]