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Venus Mines, Incorporated

By NATHAN SCHACHNER and ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

When radioactive deposits are discovered on Venus, space war is imminent, but a veteran of the outer air lanes is courageous enough to pit himself against alien forces!

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A HALL OF FAME NOVELET

EDITOR'S NOTE



Some stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "Venus Mines, Incorporated," by Nathan Schachner and Arthur Leo Zagat, has stood this test, it has been nominated for SCIENTIFICTION'S HALL OF FAME and is reprinted here.

In each issue we will honor one of the most outstanding fantasy classics of all time as selected by

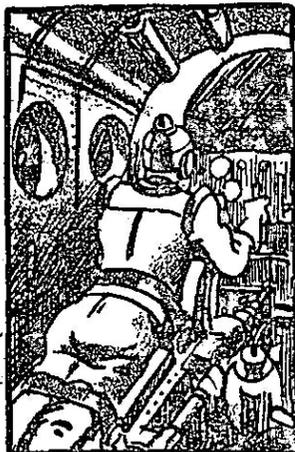
our readers.

We hope in this way to bring a new permanence to the science fiction gems of yesterday and to perform a real service to the science fiction devotees of today and tomorrow.

Nominate your own favorites! Send a letter or postcard to The Editor, STARTLING STORIES, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. All suggestions are more than welcome!

CHAPTER I

Journey Into Chaos



“Hello, hello, hello—Chris, do you hear me?—hello, hello, *hello!*” Arnim Penger slammed down the tele-talker and turned to his companion. “No answer yet.”

“It’s queer, all right, Mr. Penger. But what’s there to worry about? We got Mr. Bell’s message that he was back from his exploratory trip hours ago. And there’s nothing could happen to him at the post, is there? He wasn’t to start trading until tomorrow, so he must have had his Curtain charged, and no Venusians in the enclosure. Besides, they’re a pretty harmless lot, anyway.”

The veteran trader shrugged his broad shoulders. “Nothing much could happen to him, I suppose. But this is the first time communication has failed.” He

fell silent. But there was a brooding light in his steel-gray eyes, and a tense grimness about his fine bronzed features.

He stared unseeingly at the great pile of clotted spider web that filled half the trading room of the little post. A cool half million that accumulated result of half an earth year’s dickering with the natives was worth. And all it had cost Venus Mines, Inc. were some bushels of brightly colored beads and glittering gew-gaws dear to the savage heart.

“There’s a Mitco post about some miles the other side of Bell’s post,” he mused aloud.

Britt Haldane turned from his contemplation of the grey bleached jungle, the dense, light-shot ceiling, the sheeted torrents of the typical Venusian landscape.

“I say, you don’t think there’s any chance of trouble from the Martians?”

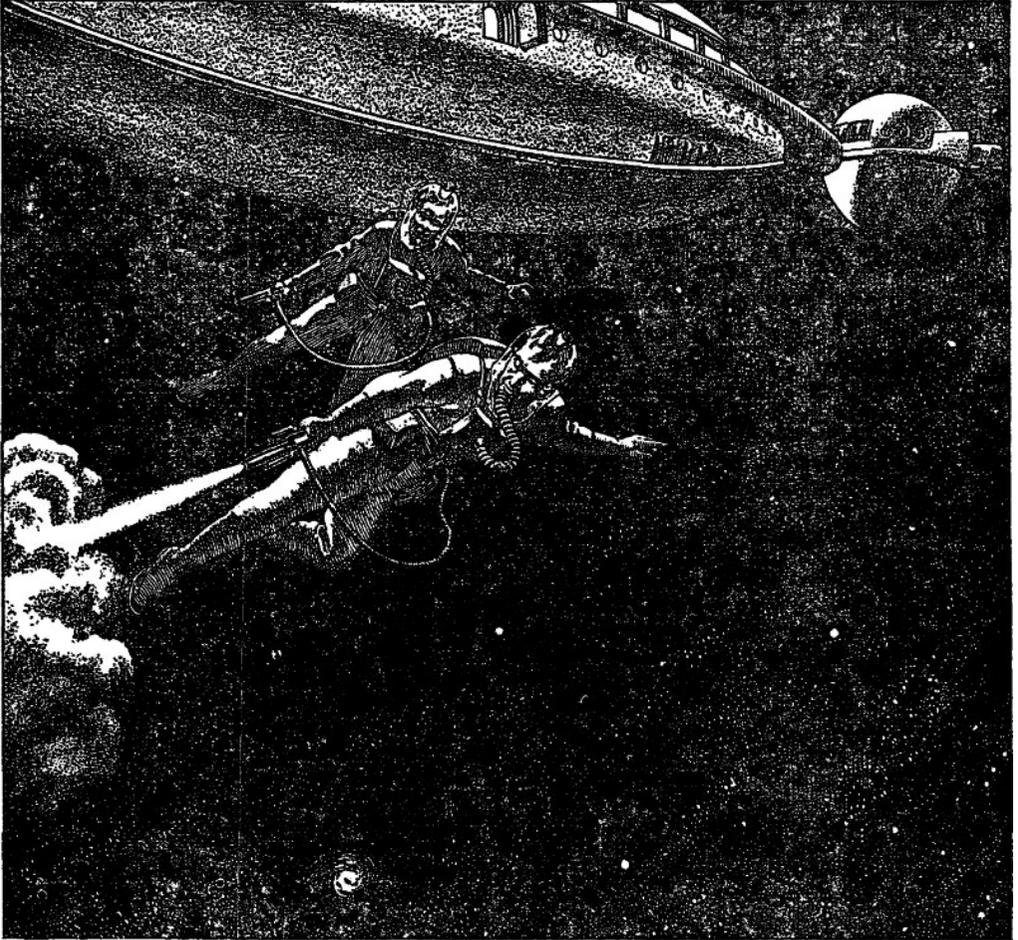
Penger shot a quick glance at the fresh-colored youngster with the starry blue eyes, and the tow hair that persisted in falling over his forehead. This eighteen-year-old lad brought back memories of the time, two decades past, when he himself was taking over his first station, on Jupiter.

Those were unregenerate days, with the Board of Planetary Control yet unborn, and life made zestful by the continuous guerilla warfare with the forces of Mitco, the great Martian Interstellar Trading Company, the Earth

company's only rival.

"No, not much chance," he drawled, in reply to the lad's question. "They'd hardly challenge the B. P. C.'s wrath. And yet, if the stakes were great enough. . . ." He sighed, unaccountably. "I suppose I'm just fed up on these eternal rains. I'll be glad enough to get back to Earth when the relief ship comes, and leave you here."

Britt's face lit up.



Britt and Arnim, curiously light, stepped into outer space through the airlock

"Gosh, I can hardly wait to take over. To be a real Venus trader at last, in charge of my own station." He saw the older man's amused smile and added hastily. "Of course, it isn't that I want to see you go, but—you know how is it."

Arnim nodded.

“Yes, I know how it is. I felt the same way when I took over my first assignment. It sure was a kick. Two days later I was crouched behind a barricade of ice blocks, taking pot shots at a bunch of Martians who were doing their darnedest to exterminate me and a couple of other Earthmen, and grab off the richest jovium mine on Jupiter for Mitco.

“There were no Interplanetary Filing Laws then, no taking a bunch of papers over to the office on Ganymede and thereafter being protected by the Mercurian patrol ships with their zeta-ray projectors.

“You took what you could get and held it by the power of your own guns.”
The youth’s eyes glowed.

“It must have been great! Wish I’d been in the game then!”

“You weren’t born then, young fellow.” Penger’s eyes wandered past the lad to the teeming landscape revealed by the open door.

“Hello, I don’t like that coppery tinge to the clouds down on the horizon. Looks as if we’re going to have a taste of one of the electrical storms old Venus favors us with once in a blue moon.

“Get out in one of those, and you’ll be ready to give up darn quick. Even the natives scurry to their caves when one of the big ones is on a rampage.”

His eyes narrowed as he gazed out. The dripping jungle pressed its greyness close up against the interlacing net of copper filaments that was the Curtain, the apparently frail barrier around the liquid mud clearing of this outpost of Earth’s commerce.

From the low ceiling of dun clouds poured a torrent of warm rain that might dwindle to a drizzle or increase to a devastating downpour, but which never for a moment ceased. Far away, the clouds were suffused with a reddish, ominous glare.

“Come on,” he said at last, as he sealed the door. “Work’s over for another twelve hours. Start the drying machine, and we’ll get comfortable. Then I’ll try to get Chris again. If he hadn’t borrowed the Wanderer for that trip of his I’d be tempted to hop over and find out what’s up.”

Haldane obediently swung over the lever of the artificial atmosphere machine that reproduced Earth condition for the traders during the rest-periods. As the air dried, the two stripped off the sodden working suits. Britt stretched himself luxuriously as the moisture was sucked from the bronzed skin of his body.

“This is a little bit of all right. Let it storm for all I care.”

Penger looked estimatingly at the young fellow. Was he going to stand the gaff, he wondered, alone with the treacherous natives, and the eternal rains, and the horrible loneliness? The loneliness—that was it. Would this fresh-faced, eager youth break under the strain of the long months with no one of his

own kind to talk to, to look at? Well, Chris Bell would be only a few miles away. That reminded him, he still hadn't got through to old Chris. He turned the transmitter.

But as he did so there was a crash, and the neon lights went out. Their cold white light was replaced by a blinding blue glare as the outer world was illumined by a tremendous lightning flash. Then it was pitch dark, as over the muttering rumble of the diminishing growl and the pound of the torrential rain on the roof, came the high whining signal of the field receiver.

Arnim sprang to the instrument. Unerringly his fingers sought and found the switch and thrust it home. Out of the blackness a voice sounded, a precise, clipped English voice, yet strained and urgent, shot through with pain and exhaustion.

"Penger, Arnim Penger, are you there? Penger, Penger, help, Penger!"

Arnim snatched up the transmitter.

"Chris, Chris. I'm listening. It's Arnim Penger. What's the matter? Quick, man! What's happened to you?"

The far-off, disembodied voice seemed to be dying out.

"Arnim. Thank God—you answered at last. It's hours. Help—*help* he-e-*lp!*" It died out to a whisper, then, abruptly, it was gone.

"Chris, what's the matter? What happened?" The trader was shouting into the transmitter, but only the rattle of the raindrops, and a crash of thunder, answered.

The lights came on. Haldane was standing just behind him, white-faced. Penger gazed at him, unseeing, his eyes steely flames, his great fists clenched.

"Britt," he snapped, "take over!" He went out in the anteroom, struggled into a fresh suit of corduroys, pulled on his banta waterproof.

As his face appeared out of the black folds it was set, grim.

"If you don't hear from me by the time the relief ship gets here, have 'em send a force over to Bell's post. No trading. Heaven knows what the Venusians are up to." He was strapping on the high mud-shoes.

Britt came out of his daze in a tumbling rush. He fairly stuttered in his eagerness.

"I say, you can't do that—I mean you can't go alone. I'll go with you—otherwise—good Lord, you know what I mean." He fell into a sudden silence, but his eyes pleaded for him.

Penger shot one glance at him.

"You'll do," he said laconically. "Hop into your clothes."

Haldane blushed with pleasure at the veteran's endorsement even as he dived hastily into his clothing, Arnim stood in the doorway, waiting impatiently. The younger man snapped the elastic of his respirator-mask over his head, settled his hood down over the goggled eyepieces.

“I’m ready, sir.” The mouthpiece of the mask muffled his tones strangely.

They were outside, in a world gone mad. From black clouds that seemed not fifty feet over their heads, forked lightning shot incessantly, shot and stabbed at them as if the elements themselves had risen in wrath to oust these beings from an alien world. To the continuous roll of thunder was added the crash of the nearly solid sheets of water that beat down upon the Earthmen, strangling them despite their masks, striving to drive them into the viscid mud that oozed fluid beneath their wide-spreading mud-shoes.

In the flickering blue light beyond the Curtain, the tall ferns were flattened down over the tangle of writhing vines and lush wire-grass till the thicket seemed a solid mass, compressed by the weight of tons of water, lashed by a wind of hurricane force.

Haldane gasped, and paled. Even Penger, veteran though he was, hesitated for an instant: It was the height of insanity to dare the long journey in this chaos. No one could live through it. But then he remembered that call, coming eerily out of the darkness.

“Help, Penger, help!”

Chris Bell was in trouble, needed him! Chris, who had fought at his side on Jupiter, a score of years ago. He hunched his shoulders, thrust his massive head before him, and bored into the wind that was a solid wall. He’d get to Chris despite all!

Britt was lifted from his feet by the wind, thrown against the heavier form of his companion. Arnim shouted something. The lad could see his lips moving, but could hear nothing above the tornado’s roar. A dripping arm gestured to the door of the little building they had just quitted. Penger wanted him to go back, thought this storm would lick him. It was dry there, dry and safe.

It would be so easy to let the wind blow him back. In all this time they had struggled only fifteen feet. After all, this was his post, the station he would be in charge of as soon as the relief ship picked Penger up. No one could blame him for staying behind—for obeying orders.

But—he was a “Venus, Inc.” man, one of the stalwart company that was conquering the far planets for Earth. And another “Venus, Inc.” man had called for help, off there in the storm-lashed jungle. He shook his head, thrust away the hand that was pushing him back.

Again Penger’s hand sought his shoulder, but only to squeeze it in token of approval. They slogged into the storm again.

At last they were through the Curtain. Arnim turned, took something from the voluminous pocket of his waterproof. A tiny radio-transmitter, low-powered, sending only a long dash that varied completely in wave length for a

half minute. The key to the Curtain—Penger pressed the button. A coruscation of tiny flashes snapped through the wind-tossed filaments. The power was on—that apparently frail barrier hummed now with the Grendon vibration.

Britt could see the driven rain rebound from the invisible wall. Nothing, no human body, no Venusian dart, not even a high-powered electro-bullet could pass through the net. The station was safe, protected against all intrusion until the machines that produced the vibration were stilled by another pressure on the little instrument with its secret combination of frequencies.

Into the jungle they went crawling now, through chance-found gaps in the matted chaos of the cyclone-pounded vegetation. The black quagmire sucked at their feet, clinging lianas twisted around them, clung tenaciously. Thorns ripped at them. A bolt of lightning struck, not a score of feet away, and sent a towering twisted fem into flaring destruction.

The Venusians, fish-scaled and web-footed though they were, dared not prowl abroad. The very beasts—strange amphibious creatures of a steamy, primitive world—cowered in their lairs or dug themselves deep beneath the sheltering mud of the jungle tarns.

But the Earthlings pressed forward, deafened, gasping, half-drowned, wholly exhausted. A yard, a foot, an inch at a time. Crawling, scrambling, twisting, dragging themselves through the terrific storm to answer a comrade's cry for help. Slogging into the hurricane for hour after hour of interminable, inhuman struggle.

Two mud covered figures reeled out from the edge of the jungle, dazed, bewildered, dizzy with exhaustion. Just ahead hung the filaments of Bell's Curtain, intact. They were through! Through the jungle and the storm the daring adventurers had reached their goal. How long it had taken them, by what devious route they had come, they never knew.

Sometime during that endless journey the electrical storm had ended, but they had never noticed it, so stunned had they been with the turmoil of the elements. Behind them the drenched and cowering jungle was straightening. The drab cloud ceiling was shot through with light. The rain had diminished to a tenuous drizzle. Fine weather—on Venus.

Ahead, within the circling Curtain, was a sea of mud. A torpedo-shaped, two-man flier glistened in the filtering light, half-hidden behind a squat, rough hut, whose door hung open. What lay behind that door?

CHAPTER II

Through the Curtain

Penger, his banta waterproof hanging in shreds, moved forward wearily. As he came into the open, a hiss ripped the stillness, a red streak flashed past his hooded and masked head. The trader whirled, threw himself headlong to the ground.

“Down! *Down*, quick!” he shouted to the startled Britt. The youth dropped.

“What the—”

“Shut up.” Arnim’s whisper was urgent. “Lie still.”

The lad twisted his head. His companion’s projector was in his outstretched hand, his keen eyes were darting from point to point of the thicket. Fatigue seemed forgotten. Where his waterproof had been torn away by some thorn, the cords of his neck stretched tensely.

“What’s up?” he breathed.

“See that, out in the mud.”

A tiny dart, scarlet-feathered, lay there—a Venusian poison dart. A little shiver thrilled the youth. He had seen a huge three-horned ratlos, ten feet high at the shoulder, brought down to instant death by one of those, sent with unerring skill from the blow-pipe of a native hunter.

“Came near finishing me. They’re—*wah!*” The angry spat of Penger’s weapon interrupted. An acrid smell of burned flesh stung Haldane’s nostrils. “Got him!”

“Where? Who?”

“To the right. See, behind that S-shaped liana.”

The lad stared. At first he could see nothing, then a tiny patch of silver appeared, just beyond the arm-thick vine Arnim had indicated. The youth started to rise, but Penger’s steely clutch stopped him.

“Down, you fool! There may be others. Stay here, till I call. And don’t move, if you want to see Earth again.”

The motionless youngster watched Penger slide through the mud—so slowly that Britt looked twice to make sure he had moved at all. He disappeared beneath a clump of brown fungi, umbrella-shaped. His black hood appeared above the toadstools, his shoulders glistening black with the dampness. Haldane clenched his fists, nervously. What an awful chance he was taking. Suppose there were other unseen hunters watching for just this chance?

“All right, lad, come along.” Penger’s call seemed to come from the ground, off to one side! Then—who was standing there? Was it Bell? The

novice rose, ran forward, crouching, to where the other had suddenly appeared, without his banta cloak.

As Haldane reached his companion, the mystery of the seeming newcomer was solved. Penger was pulling his waterproof from a withered fern-frond that was supporting it. He smiled grimly at the white-faced youth's ejaculation.

"Thought I was asking for a dart, did you? Just slipped this coat off, stuck it up and squirmed away. If there had been more of the natives around I'd have known it darn quick—maybe got a chance to take another clip at one. Let's see what this bird I brought down looks like."

Britt shuddered as he stared down at the prostrate savage. In spite of the low-browed, primitive face, noseless and with gills where the ears ought to be, in spite of the naked savage's fish-scaled skin and webbed feet, the youth could not help but feel him human.

Only a few hours ago others of his kind, perhaps this very individual, had been chaffering with him at the trading post. And now he lay there, unmoving, a great gaping hole in, his chest, black-charred at the edges. Those electro-bullets did terrible execution when their high-powered radite charge was released on impact.

"Come on, Britt. He's dead to stay. Let's get in to Chris."

Penger had his little combination set in his hand, had pressed the switch button. The hum of the generator from the hut in the center of the compound ceased. The two dived through the dangling filaments, and Arnim flashed on the protecting vibration again—just in time.

At the jungle edge another Venusian had appeared, panting. His dart whirred from the hollow reed he raised to his mouth, fell back impotently from the Curtain.

"Nothing wrong there," gasped Britt.

They had clumped wearily through the viscid mud, were at the hut's entrance.

"Chris!" Arnim called, "Chris! We're here!" Then there was a choking gasp. "Darn them, oh darn them!" It was a sob, and a prayer for vengeance.

There, on the wet, green-slimed floor, lay Chris Bell. His tall thin form was contorted in agony. The sharp features were clammy white, the little black mustache blacker yet by contrast. The transmitter of his tele-talker was clutched tight in his right hand, the sleeve ripped away, showed a livid, red burn on the white arm.

His right foot was bare, the trouser cut away. The leg was swollen to twice, three times its natural size up to where, buried in the blackened flesh, a twisted leather thong cut in—horribly. On the floor a red-feathered dart, its tip bloodstained, told its mute story.

"Chris, old man, wake up. We're here. Chris! He isn't dead. He can't be

gone!” Penger’s hand was within Bell’s shirt. A faint flutter, almost imperceptible, beat against the probing finger tips.

“Whiskey! Britt—there must be some around. Find it quick!”

Haldane shot a quick glance around the little room. On a shelf he saw a familiarly shaped container, the purple B. P. C. seal unbroken. He twisted off the sealing cap. Penger had the bottle-neck between Bell’s teeth. A little rivulet dribbled out at the corners of Chris’ mouth, then he swallowed, convulsively. The eyelids flickered. A grimace of pain distorted his face. A groan, then his eyes opened.

“Arnim!” His voice was a shadow. The words were being forced out by sheer will power. “Never mind me—done for. Papers in flier—must be filed—at once. Letter too—explains. *Go!*”

“Chris, old boy, what happened to you? How did they get you?”

The dying man motioned to the bottle. Penger administered another dose of the stimulant. A little color came into Bell’s cheeks.

“Why don’t we do something for him, Mr. Penger?” burst from Britt.

“Nothing we can do,” was Penger’s hopeless response. “Once that dart-poison gets into you it’s only a question of time before you kick off. Only thing that’s kept him alive so far is the thong he’s tied around his leg. But the poison’s seeping back in spite of it—can’t you see how black his skin is above the tied part? Soon it will reach his heart.”

Chris was talking again, his voice a little stronger, with the false strength lent it by the whiskey. He was answering Arnim’s last question.

“Came through the Curtain.”

“Through the Curtain! How in hades—”

“Yes. Through the Curtain. It was charged, I’m sure of that.” Bell’s voice was blurred with agony, low, but very clear. An inner strength seemed to be supporting him, to be warding off the hovering death.

“It was charged, but just as I was going over to the Wanderer to take off, there was a whine from the jungle, a whine that rose and fell, and a shower of darts. Most struck against the Curtain, and fell, but some got through, and one clipped me, hung in my leg.” A glance of astonishment passed between Penger and Haldane, but they did not interrupt the wounded man’s laboring narrative.

“I dragged myself in here, strapped the leg. Knew it was no use, but I had to get a message through to you. I called and called, while that whine rose and fell, rose and fell out there somewhere, and the savages showed themselves around the Curtain and blew their darts through it. I watched them through the open door while I called you, and waited, dizzy, for the answer that never came.

“Just a little round spot, I noticed, in the Curtain where the darts came

through. I kept shouting for you, till I passed out. Then I came to again, and called again. And that infernal whine still came from the jungle, and the fish-faced natives were dancing. And still you didn't answer.

"Then everything went black again. Don't know whether I dreamed or not, but it seemed I came to, and the noise from the jungle was louder, and through a haze I thought I saw a Venusian creep up to the Curtain, and start through. Coming through the Curtain, though I could hear my generator going full force! Then, when his body was halfway through he seemed to shrivel up and drop, with an awful look of agony on his face.

"Again I passed out. Thunder, thunder and lightning roused me. Thank God, the whining sound had stopped. A last dart hit the very spot the others had come through, but fell back. I called again—hopelessly. I heard your answer. Then—blackness again. . . ."

The last word trailed off into nothingness. The white eyelids drooped, but came open again. Bell struggled into a sitting position.

"Don't, don't let them beat us, Arnim. They—never licked us yet. Do you hear me—old man—it's getting—dark. Where—where are you?"

"Right here, Chris, right here beside you. What is it you want me to do?"

"The Wanderer—the papers are there—and a letter—for you. Oh—oh—the pain," his hand clutched at his heart, his eyes stared unseeingly before him. "Arnim—Britt—get that claim filed. Go! As you love old Earth—leave me and go!"

He fell back.

"Good-bye," he whispered. Then he quivered, and lay still. "Good-bye, pal." There was the suspicion of a sob in Penger's voice. Then he turned to the white-faced, shaken Haldane. The veteran's face was grim, his eyes like chilled steel.

"If you ever make half the man he was. . . ." He choked, left the sentence unfinished, strode across to the still open door, and stood there, staring out.

Britt bent to the motionless body, straightened it, threw over it a blanket from the neatly made bunk. A thick silence reigned in the room, broken only by the eternal swish of the rain.

"Britt—come here!" Penger's voice cut startlingly through the quiet. Haldane leaped to the doorway. "Look!" A red, metallic sphere was rising from the jungle, a scant quarter-mile away, and disappearing in the haze. "That's Rutnom's station ship, or I'm a dog-faced Jovian!"

"Rutnom! That's the Mitco super on Venus, isn't it. What's he doing over here in 'Venus, Inc.' territory?"

"That's what I want to know. I've run up against him before, on Jupiter. A sneaking, dirty fighter. I'm going out there."

"But—the Venusians."

“Damn the Venusians. I want to know if he was at the bottom of this deviltry, why the Curtain failed. God help him if what I suspect is true!”

“Then I’m going with you!”

“You stay here!”

“Mr. Penger, I would never forgive myself if you got into trouble out there and I wasn’t able to help. Please. . . .”

“Oh well, if you will be a fool. Listen—when we’re through the Curtain, let me go ahead. Follow about fifty feet behind. Keep in what shelter you can, and protect my rear.

“For the love of Mike, don’t fall asleep, and don’t take your finger off the button on your projector. If they get me, try to get back. Understand!” Haldane nodded.

Once outside the protecting network, he crouched in the shelter of a gnarled root, and marvelled at the dexterity with which the veteran moved through the thicket, darting from cover to cover like a gliding shadow. When his time to proceed came Britt strove to imitate his leader, but by comparison with the other’s silent passage he seemed to be crashing recklessly through the tangled underbrush.

Suddenly Arnim halted, bent low, was staring at something through the bleached, foliage. Haldane obeyed the covert signal to halt. After long minutes, Penger gestured for him to come up.

“Look at that!” Penger pointed with his projector through the leafy screen. Britt strove to pierce the mist and the rain, could make out nothing in the haze. Then a vagrant breeze cleared away the obscuring fog. He was looking at a clearing, man-made. He could see the hacked stumps of the jungle growth, still raw.

In the center of the opening was a tangled mass of wires, coils, broken glass. The ground was blackened and scarred as if a lightning bolt had just struck. To one side, a depression in the mud, rapidly filling with water, showed where the Martian sphere had rested.

“That’s where the whining noise came from. I half-thought Chris was delirious—but I see it now. That’s why the Curtain failed—why we couldn’t hear Bell. Some ray-projector like a searchlight—that neutralized the Grendon vibration where it impinged and also drowned the communication waves.

“Concentrated, it was powerful enough to open a passage for the darts, but when they diffused it to cover a space big enough for a man to get through it neutralized only partly. That’s what killed the savage.”

“How could the natives have invented anything like this?” ventured Britt.

“Natives, foey! It’s Rutnom, up to his old tricks. Using the savages to cover his own tracks, so that he could put on a bland smile of innocence when

the B. P. C. police investigate. He pulled that before on Jupiter. But why? Why? There's plenty of web here for both of us."

"Mr. Bell said something about filing papers on the Wanderer—and a letter."

"Of course. I see it now. That was a jovium burn on his arm. And I thought he was raving, was dreaming himself back in the old days. Wait. The Satona, the Mitco relief ship, is due here in a week. We have no time to lose. Come on!"

The trader was off at a run, reckless of possible ambush. Britt followed, wondering, back into the compound.

"No time to bury him now. We'll be back," Penger shouted as he sealed shut the door of Bell's tomb. In moments the Earthmen were in the little two-man flier. Penger sprang to the control levers, a roaring blast stirred the mud beneath. Then the Wanderer had leaped free, was shooting through the cloud banks at terrific speed.

Britt was thrust to the floor by the tremendous force of acceleration. Arnim clung to the control levers, gasping. In the visor screen there was nothing but grey drifting wisps of vapor. Then came a sudden glorious burst of light—the *sun!*—the sun the Terrestrials had not seen for half an Earth year!

CHAPTER III

The Chase Through Space

The Wanderer reached the limit of its normal speed, settled down to its steady pace of two hundred Earth miles a second. Released from the pressure of the acceleration, Britt felt a sudden lightness. Already they were far enough from Venus to be losing the effects of her gravity.

Penger switched on the coils that normalized this condition within the ship. He studied the banked gauge faces, with their serried rows of quivering needles, leafed rapidly through the chart book conveniently clamped beside the control levers. Then he made certain adjustments, and locked the levers.

"All set. She's on the automatic control now. Nothing to do about navigation until we get within a quarter-million miles of Ganymede. Now let's take a look at what's happening behind."

He twirled the wheel of the periscope. On the visor screen, against the blackness of space, with its myriad golden twinkling points, the great ball of Venus stood out, a vast sphere of heaving vapors, glowing glorious in the light of the sun. The two men crowded close to the screen, searching for sign of a pursuer.

"The Martian isn't following. Wise boy, his small boat hasn't the speed of the Wanderer; we'd walk away from him."

"Here's the letter, sir, that Mr. Bell spoke about."

A fleeting smile crossed Arnim's face.

"Oh, you want to know what it's all about, do you. Can't blame you. Hand it over."

Penger read aloud:

"Arnim: I'm writing this to drop down into your enclosure from the Wanderer before I make off for Ganymede. I've got great news for you, but I don't dare talk to you over the tele-talker, for fear the Martians will overhear.

"First, I owe you an apology. For the first time, I think, in the nearly twenty years we've fought together as 'Venus, Inc.' men, I've kept a secret from you. And that's because it wasn't my secret. Last time I was on Earth, Stromstein told me, in strictest confidence, that the jovium mines on Jupiter, both ours and Mitco's, were petering out. He didn't think they'd last another two years."

"No wonder!" Arnim exclaimed. Britt looked at him questioningly, but Penger resumed his reading.

"You know what that would mean, of course. So you can imagine how I

felt when, on that mapping trip I took, I stumbled on a mountain of the peculiarly greenish rock that is characteristic of the jovium deposits on Jupiter.

"I immediately staked the claim, then worked back through the jungle to where, about twenty miles away, I had left the Wanderer. I had to get a badinite flash, you see, to take a sample in, according to the rules of the B. P. C. Mineral Claims Commission. The stuff was almost pure. I got a nasty burn on my arm when I brushed against it, too.

"On my way back after I got my sample, I ran into Astna, Rutnom's sidekick. He looked queerly at the flask, and the burn on my arm, but I thought fast and told him I was out collecting insects, and the flask was the only thing I could find to put them into. I think I fooled him, but I'm a little worried."

"Yeah, he fooled him!" Penger interrupted himself. "You can't put much over on those Martians."

"Nothing much more. I've got the Wanderer all set for a long trip, and as soon as I finish this I take off for Ganymede to file the claim. After that we can thumb our noses at Rutnom.

"You'll be back on Earth by the time I return. Lucky fellow. Give my regards to the bright lights. And tell the kid I'll get in touch with him as soon as I get back. Venus won't be such a lonely place when they start working the mine. So long. Chris."

"Just about what I figured," Penger concluded, "when I saw what Rutnom had been up to. Let's take a look at the location papers."

"Here's the dispatch box, sir. But it's sealed."

"Sealed! Well I'll be darned." Penger looked disconsolately at the square box of argento-platinoid that Britt held out to him. "That's a tough note. Suppose we lose that somehow—only Bell knew where that deposit is, and he's gone."

Even captains of interplanetary trading ships are sometimes venal, and Mitco was ever willing to pay well for a glimpse of the reports and other dispatches that shuttle across the skies between the Earth Company's far flung stations and the great Central Headquarters at Denver.

Hence these dispatch boxes were devised. Once sealed, they could not be opened save by the intricate unsealing apparatus that existed only at Denver and, by virtue of the supreme power of the B. P. C., at such control points of the august body as the Mineral Claims Office on Ganymede. Any attempt to get at the contents by force, released a chemical within that utterly destroyed everything enclosed.

"Well, we'll have to take good care we don't lose it," Arnim continued. "I see the badinite flask is here, with the sample. Good. Now what do you say we get some food into us?"

“I think that’s a splendid idea. Mr. Bell certainly stocked the ship up well with food tablets. And the water tanks are all filled. Say, if it wasn’t for thinking of him lying back there, this would be a lark. I never expected to be on my way to Jupiter.”

“It’s no junket, and don’t kid yourself. I’ve never known Rutnom or any other Mitco man to give up without a scrap. They’ll be after us, beyond a doubt. And we’ll have our job cut out to beat them.”

“I’m not worried Mr. Penger,” Britt retorted confidently. “I know you’ll win out.”

“Say, Mr. Penger,” the lad broke out after a silence, during which both had busied themselves with disposing of enormous doses of concentrated food, “why should Rutnom go to such lengths to jump our claim? After all, the governments have a monopoly of jovium. There’s no question of anybody making any money out of it.”

“Plenty of reason. If we don’t get this claim filed, there won’t be any Earthmen worrying about making money after a few years. You heard what Bell wrote about the mines on Jupiter petering out?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well—you know what jovium is used for. It’s the catalyst that made interplanetary voyaging practical. Oh, we had space ships before the deposits were found on Jupiter. But they had to carry such enormous volumes of fuel to get anywhere that there was neither space; nor carrying capacity left for commercially practicable freight nor, what is more important, in the present instance, heavy armament.

“All they were fit for was to carry two or three men on exploration trips. That was the case on Mars as well as on Earth. Their fuel differed somewhat, but the principle was the same.

“Mercury, it is true, had had solar energy motors for ages, but they refuse to divulge the secret.

“Their civilization is so far ahead of ours that they refuse to have anything to do with Terrestrials or Martians, whom they look down upon as we look down upon the savages of Jupiter and Venus. True, they keep the peace, but that is because they feel it an obligation placed on them because of their superiority.

“The discovery of jovium initiated the commercial exploitation of the far planets. It initiated also a race in spatial armament between Mars and Earth, that so far has been a dead heat.”

Britt was listening attentively. He had, naturally, heard all this on the school-broadcasts, but listening to dry history, and hearing it told by a man who had seen the history in the making, had helped to make it, were different matters.

Besides, he thrilled at the thought, he was even now taking part in a new chapter of the stirring story.

“You have seen a little of the ruthless nature of the Martians. What do you think would happen to Earth if our jovium mines were exhausted and they still had a plentiful supply, such as Bell credits to this new deposit?”

“They’d drive Earth out of space.”

“Yes, and probably attack us at home. So you see how vitally important it is for us to get that box and what it contains safely to Ganymede.”

“Why were you in such a rush to get off? Once we were away from Venus, Rutnom couldn’t give us any more trouble. You said yourself that his flier hasn’t nearly the speed of the Wanderer.”

“His ship hasn’t, but the Satona is due in a week. It will take us twenty days to make the trip at our best rate. She can do it in ten. With her armament, we wouldn’t stand the chance of a snowball on the Sun against her should she catch up with us. And she’ll try, my boy, she’ll try.”

“We ought to make it with about forty-eight hours to spare, but those Mitco boats don’t adhere to schedule very closely, and she might well reach Venus a day ahead of time. If she does, you’ll see some fun.”

Day after day the Wanderer drove across the immensity of space. Day after day the Terrestrials watched the visor screens, took turns scanning the wide velvety blackness of the heavens through the electro-telescope. Only the glory of the widespread firmament met their weary glance. A week passed by, and still there was no sign of a pursuer. The Earthmen began to breathe more freely. A little more, and they would be beyond reach of the Martians.

Then, on the eighth day, Britt, at the telescope, suddenly exclaimed.

“Mr. Penger, what’s this? A new star, or. . . .”

Penger sprang to the telescope. Glowing redly in the oblique rays of the sun was a new body, a star where no star should be. Even as he gazed it grew, took form of a tiny half-disk.

“It’s the Satona all right. And just as I was beginning to think we’d get away with it. Look at her come! Here Britt, watch her while I try to get some more speed out of this scow.”

Haldane clung, fascinated, to the eyepiece while Penger thought desperately of how he might avoid them. With his given energy his speed was sadly limited and the pointer of the speed indicator would not move above the 250 mark on its dials. It would be suicidal to use up energy in getting any more out of the Wanderer.

“Gosh, Mr. Penger, she’s overhauling us hand over fist. She must be doing five hundred a second.”

“She’s Mitco’s fastest. I’ve heard she made six-fifty on her test trip. Well,

we'll dodge her as long as we can."

The Satona was clearly defined now on the large visor screen, a hemisphere glinting in the oblique rays of the sun. On and on sped the little Wanderer without rest across the void, its occupants thinking and thinking as if seeking to increase the speed of their craft by the very intensity of their wills. And on and on came the pursuer, bulking ever larger on the screen.

"Isn't there anything we can do to keep those papers from them?" Britt grated out once between clenched teeth.

"If worse comes to worst, I'll smash the box. That will destroy them, but it won't do much good—only delay matters. They'll search Venus till they find Bell's mine and make sure no Earthmen has a chance to run across it."

"But we can send out expeditions too."

"Yeah? Earth will never know, till it's too late. You don't think they'll leave us alive to tell the story. No. Our only chance is to get the box through to Ganymede. And I'm darned if—hold on, I've got a hunch. It might work."

Penger's eye had drifted mechanically to the ground glass chart across which a red dot was moving to indicate the Wanderer's position in the reaches of interstellar space. Blue disks showed the direction of Earth, the Sun, Venus, Jupiter, the other planets. But an inch ahead a band of tiny blue dots wandered across the map. They represented the Asteroids—small fragments of a blasted planet following their own orbit around the central Sun.

The veteran changed the field of the visor screen. The following Satona, Venus, the Sun swept out of sight. Directly ahead the periscope pointed. Golden in the tremendous distance, Jupiter beckoned. But here—not forty thousand miles ahead, was a light fleck, something catching the sunlight. Penger grunted.

"Get bearings on the Satona, Britt. How far behind is she?"

"Only a hundred and ten thousand miles. Relative speed about four hundred per second. She'll have us in five minutes."

"Here!" the other snapped. "Take the controls. Hold her on the mark I've set."

Britt sprang to obey. A question trembled on his lips, but Penger's peremptory tone, the grim set of his jaw, forbade. The Wanderer had veered from her course, was driving for the asteroid, revealed now as a blurred ball, ten miles, in diameter, revolving at incredible speed. Arnim had snatched up the precious box, was in the nose of the ship, his hand on the handle of the bow porthole. The flier would miss the asteroid by scant miles. They were passing it.

"Turn her, man, turn her left! *Quick!*" Even as Britt twisted the dial to obey Arnim had the port open, was throwing the box out in the direction of the Wanderer's curving flight, was struggling to close the thick glass against the

outrush of air. The flier curved in a great semicircle around the whirling midget planet, headed back toward the Satona, now right at hand. Penger was at the telescope.

CHAPTER IV

Caught!

A voice sounded in the chamber, a grating, metallic voice.

“Halt, Wanderer!”

Arnim’s eye was glued to the telescope eyepiece. To Haldane’s wonder he paid not the slightest attention to the challenge. The youth hesitated, then with a flush of anger reddening his face he sprang to the controls.

Some wild scheme of escape must have inspired him as he swung lever after lever, sending the little flier darting about in mad, erratic zig-zags. And still no sound came from Penger, save a muttered, “I think it’s working!”

Again the voice sounded, coldly contemptuous, from the Wanderer’s space-radio receiver.

“Do not resist, Earthman, it is useless. Rutnom speaking.”

Britt’s face was livid with fury. He shook his fist at the image that filled the visor screen, the great bulking image of the Martian spaceship a rusty red egg of metal with the intertwining symbols that spelled M. I. T. Co. in the Martian graphs.

Suddenly the Wanderer lurched, her darting rushes checked in midspace. A tremendous force had seized her, was drawing her irresistibly toward her enemy. The Earthship shook with the thunder of her rocket tubes, the void about, seethed with flaring gases.

But the power that could send her careening through space at twice a hundred miles a second was puny against the pull of the Martian’s magnetic fields. Inexorably the little flier was drawn back, back, back, until at last she drifted against the metallic side of the Satona and clung there.

Now at last Penger was torn from the telescope that so queerly absorbed him.

“Cut it out, you fool!” he whispered urgently to Britt. “Let me handle this.” Then, aloud, as the tube-exhausts dwindled and died, “Penger speaking. What do you want of us, Rutnom?”

“Ah, it’s Penger I have to deal with!” There was satisfaction in the metallic tone. “You know what I want. The location map of the jovium mine Bell found. Deliver that, together with the sample flask, pledge me your word not to report this occurrence and you shall be permitted to return to Venus, unharmed.”

Penger’s response was cold and very calm.

“Sorry, I haven’t the chart.”

“Don’t trifle with me. You would not be making this hurried voyage toward Antka^[1] had your comrade not delivered it to you. Come now, you must realize that you are helpless. And, you of all Earthmen should know it is dangerous to play with me.”

“You know my reputation. I do not lie. I had the chart, it is true. But when I saw that I could not escape you, I threw the dispatch box that contained it from the bow port of my ship. It is beyond your reach.”

“Beyond my reach! Why, Penger, you grow senile. I noted and wondered at your erratic maneuver. I noted what you did in our televisor. You threw the box into the gravitational field of the asteroid. Your box lies on it by now. The rock is very small, you planned to rid yourself of me and return for it. So you’ve rendered my task easy. We descend. After I have recovered the map, I shall deal further with you.”

“He’s outguessed me, Britt!” There was exasperation, despair in Penger’s tone. But the staring youngster noted, and wondered at the smile that played around his tight-lipped mouth. A warning gesture stayed the question foreshadowed in the lad’s eager eyes.

The Satona, with the Wanderer held tight against her sphere, had hung motionless in space during this interchange. Now the captured Terrestrials could see the blue flare from the tube-exhausts of the Martian spacesphere and feel the vibration of their blast.

Slowly at first, then faster and faster, the coupled ships began to circle the whirling asteroid. Rapidly the speed of the artificial satellite increased till, to an observer far off in space, the course of the coupled fliers must have been a gray blurred circle, whose centre was the planetoid, itself a blur because of the tremendous rate at which it turned.

To Arnim and Britt, watching their visoscreen, the effect of the circling was otherwise. Across the black sky was drawn a dazzling white arc that was the sun. The stars were darting golden lines. But the little planet became distinct as their speed neared that of its rotation.

Now they could see it as a jagged mass of bare rock. It was not ball-shaped, for this was not a world that had been formed while molten, but a bit torn from some ancient planet in an unimaginable cataclysm. It was a great jagged boulder, roughly oblate, ten earthmiles through at its widest diameter, perhaps six miles at its narrowest.

Rutnom spiralled lower as the speed increased. The asteroid covered the screen, a bare, rocky shelf split and rent by its birth throes.

“Hello, we’re drifting backward!” Britt broke the silence.

Penger laughed shortly.

“Looks like it. But it’s simply that we haven’t quite reached the speed at

which the Asteroid is turning.”

At last the landing was made.

“Whoever is handling that boat is a pilot!” was Arnim’s tribute to the jarless halt. Then his face grew suddenly grim. “Some rocket tubes are still on. Quick, lad, how are they inclined?”

“Straight up, sir!”

Penger nodded.

“Then he hasn’t thought of it,” he muttered, in tones scarcely audible to Britt. “Keep quiet and follow my lead. We’ll lick these birds yet, with a bit of luck.” He slid open the beryllium-steel shield that covered the glass sideports.

An airlock door in the side of the Satona had opened. Grotesque in their goggled, billowing spacesuits three Martians were coming down a swinging ladder. The weight of the Wanderer, still clamped against her shell, was holding the larger craft askew. Not great, this weight, it is true, for the gravity of the miniature world was exceedingly minute, but the Martian captain had evidently thought it not worth while to correct the canting by use of his power-exhausts.

Arnim and Britt watched the ten-foot-tall aliens stride across the short stretch of deck to the entrance back of their own vessel. Around the waist of each a studded belt was clamped, its excrescences showing where the individual gravity coils were inserted. Were it not for these the Martians would have been rising a hundred feet with each step, so small was the asteroid’s attraction.

As their captors reached the Wanderer, Rutnom’s voice sounded again.

“Open your airlock for my men, Earthlings, and admit them.”

“And suppose I refuse?”

“Then we shall burn our way through, and it will be the worse for you. I warn you again, Penger, I am in no mood to be trifled with.”

The veteran shrugged his shoulders, and swung over the switch that actuated the outer door of the lock. To Britt’s astonishment, his left eye closed in an unmistakable wink as he did so. The veteran had some plan, some strategy. Haldane racked his brain in an effort to guess it, but could evolve nothing.

The giant invaders were within the ship. The Terrestrials’ hands shot upward as they noted the squat infra-red heat guns clutched ready in their hands. From one of the Martians, apparently the leader, came a guttural sentence in his own language. The others advanced warily. In a trice Penger and Haldane had been seized, searched none too gently, their weapons extracted and their wrists bound with tough cords.

“Here, not so rough!” Britt had protested as his arms were twisted down behind his back. But his exclamation brought no response save a particularly

vicious tightening of his bonds. Arnim was silent, though his eyes were glowing like live coals.

The two prisoners were thrust unceremoniously against the wall of their vessel. The apparent leader remained at guard over them, the wicked snout of his weapon never moving from its threatening posture, while the two others commenced a hurried but thorough search of the cabin.

Every nook or cranny was invaded, the door of the food closet was ripped from its hinges, the plates of the flooring torn up as a heat gun melted its rivets. Even the metal walls of the vessel were scrutinized inch by inch for evidences of a concealed hiding place.

Suddenly there was a grunt from one of the Martians, signaling his finding of the badinite sample flask.

At last, apparently satisfied that the location map was not on board, the chief of the Mitco men spoke aloud, in the curious concatenation of consonantal sounds that was the Martian language. From the speaker came a crisp rejoinder, then, in his precise English, Rutnom's admonition to the Earthlings.

"You will be brought to this ship, you two. Set your gravity pads at full Earth setting. The attraction of this world is negligible."

Silently the "Venus, Inc." men permitted themselves to be invested in their space suits after having made the indicator adjustment on the padded attraction plates. Once again, Britt started to protest at the unnecessary harshness with which he was being handled.

However, he again caught a warning, look on Penger's face.

As the little group crossed to the Satona, the empty sleeves of the Terrestrial's space suits stuck out queerly, straight before them, as if a high wind were blowing. Britt noted this and wondered. There could be no wind, for the asteroid was utterly devoid of atmosphere.

Then he forgot the matter and gave himself up utterly to the black mood of despair that flooded him.

Divested once more of their encumbering garments within the shelter of the Martian spacesphere's hull, Penger and Haldane stood at bay, facing the gigantic figure of Mitco's Venusian representative, and the bulking forms, of a dozen others, ranged behind him. The Martians were counterparts of the Earthmen, save for their size and the curious greenish tint of their skins.

Even as he bravely met Rutnom's sneering stare, Britt was conscious of a strange lightness, a feeling of power that comported oddly with his situation. Then he realized that the gravity coils of the Satona were adjusted to Mars' conditions; that the weight, the internal pressure of every part of his body was one-third what it would be on Earth or Venus.

Rutnom was speaking, a threat in every syllable he uttered.

“Penger, I am growing tired of this. Tell me where that deposit lies.”

Arnim returned the Martian’s stare.

“If I knew, I wouldn’t tell you, but luckily I know as much about it as you.”

The green tinge of Rutnom’s face deepened.

His tiny red eyes shot fire.

“You lie, Penger.”

The veteran made no reply.

“I said you lie.” Rutnom raised his gun, ominously. “I’ll burn every bit of skin from your body, inch by inch, till you tell me what I want to know.”

Penger’s gaze was level.

“Bell had no time to tell me before he died. And he had already sealed the chart in the dispatch box.”

The eyes of the two ancient enemies met and clung. Veins stood out on Rutnom’s forehead as he strove to read the Earthman’s thought. But his gaze was the first to waver and fall.

“Very well. Since you are so stubborn, and I am in haste, I shall search for the box. It should not be hard to find on this bare terrain. But, mark you, if I fail I’ll wring that location from you if I have to smash you into a quivering pulp.”

In staccato sentences the Martian issued swift orders to his men.

Fresh thongs were strapped about the Earthlings’ ankles, and those about their wrists tightened.

All but one of the Martians slid into space suits.

Then the great hull emptied, and Britt and Arnim were left alone, with one huge guard watching their prone bodies. One guard, but his eyes never wavered from them, as they lay sprawled on the floor where they had been thrown, and the terrible heat gun of Mars was ready in his hand.

Britt twisted till he could look out through a porthole. Outside, on the tumbled, rocky plain, he could see the Martians clustered about their leader. Then they scattered, and Rutnom’s plan was quickly evident. Back and forth, back and forth the hunters quartered, each with his own small portion of the asteroid’s surface to search.

Not a square inch of the territory would be left uncovered by this scheme. He groaned aloud. There was no hope that the precious box would escape scrutiny. What could Penger have been thinking of? Better to have pulled at the lid and thus destroyed the map.

[1] The Martian name for Jupiter. Though Rutnom was speaking in English he failed to translate this in his anger.

CHAPTER V

Strategy

Perhaps he hoped that a patrol ship would rescue them in time. But the whirling asteroid and all its surface was a blur to a space wanderer. They were as effectually concealed as though they were a hundred feet below the surface. He became aware that the trader was talking.

But what was he saying? Despair clutched the lad's heart. Coldly, dispassionately, he was reviling the personal appearance, the ancestry, the habits of the guard.

"Britt, did you ever see anything like him? He's got the face of one of those little pigs that have just had a ring pushed through their snouts. And his body—if I were shaped like that I would have drowned myself long ago. Look at those eyes. Why, you can see the fear staring out of them. He's a coward, boy, that's why Rutnom left him behind. He's afraid of us, tied up as we are."

Now Haldane understood Penger's peculiar behavior, the strange air of amusement that had hovered about him through all this catastrophe, his inexplicable action. His mind had given away. The long years of loneliness, the death of his best friend, the capture by Rutnom, had smashed a brain that long had been famed as the keenest of all "Venus, Inc.'s" force.

"That ugly-looking Martian must be the misbegotten offspring of the foulest scum of his putrid planet." The quiet voice went on with its taunting. The Martian was standing it well, his watchful expression unchanged, but sooner or later Penger would get under his skin—and then—Britt hoped that the heat gun killed quickly.

"No, Britt, I'm not crazy." The youth was startled by his remark. "Just wanted to find out if the brute understood English. He doesn't. I've been using some of the worse insults you can apply to a Martian. Even if he had self-control enough not to do anything, his expression would have shown that he understood.

"If I had started whispering to you he would have been suspicious. But he thinks I'm simply cussing out our capture. Now listen."

In the same calm dispassionate tones Penger continued. And as he talked, Britt's despair was forgotten, and hope came to him again.

"You're near enough to the wall to get your feet against it," Arnim concluded. "So I guess the most dangerous part of the job will be yours. You know what to do. I'll follow your lead, but don't take too long to get set. Rutnom may tumble at any moment, and then we'll be through."

He fell silent, and both men closed their eyes and seemed to sleep. After a bit, Britt moved, restlessly, swung himself so that the soles of his feet were flat against the wall, and he was lying curled on his side.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, the merest slit. The Martian guard was still seated, ten feet away, still watchful. Then, with an explosion of energy, Britt drove his feet hard against the wall. His lithe body rose, catapulted across the ten-foot space, driven by muscles attuned to Earth's gravity.

Before the startled Martian realized what was happening, Britt's head struck his soft stomach with terrific force. Over he went with a grunt, as his weapon flew out of his hand and he instinctively threw his arms wide, clutching for support.

Meantime Arnim was whirling, over and over, across the floor. As he heard the crash of the Martian's collapse, behind he brought up with a thump against the legs of the control desk. Above he saw the lever that controlled the ship. Straining upward, his teeth closed over the handle.

The corded muscles of his neck stood out as he wrenched backward with all the strength that was in him. For a moment the lever remained motionless. Then, as he drove his knees into the floor and jerked backward once again, the lever gave. Searing flames flared across his face, burned and blinded him, at the sudden cutting off of the current.

Britt, tumbling in unequal combat with the Martian giant, heard the roar of the rocket tubes stop. Then he felt the floor drop away beneath him, felt himself lifted, smashed against something. Blackness enveloped him. But even as he lost consciousness he heard a great shout of triumph from his leader.

A dash of icy water in his face brought Haldane to. His head throbbed with pain, needle pricks stung his arms and legs. He raised a hand to his aching brow. Why, he was free! Arnim was bending over him.

"All right, lad? Are you all right?" he was asking anxiously.

"Yes. I guess so. A little dizzy, but that's all." He forced himself to a sitting position. "But you're burned!" Across Penger's face were three livid burns. One eye was closed by a white blister, half his scalp was a blackened patch of singed hair.

"A little." Penger grinned. "They had plenty of juice going through that control. Might have been worse. I got off lucky. So did you. Take a look at your late antagonist." Crumpled against the wall was the body of the guard. The queer angle at which his head lolled told the story of a broken neck.

"He was on top, luckily, when the smash came. You both flew through the air, but he hit the wall first, and made a cushion for you. I held onto the lever with my teeth, so I didn't get any of it. I'd like to see Rutnom's face now, down there, stuck on that asteroid with no way to get off." He gestured to the

visoscreen.

The blackness of interstellar space was mirrored there, the far-off, glowing worlds, the nearer sun. And, tiny in the distance, a whirling, blurred ball that Britt recognized.

“Gosh; Mr. Penger, you’ve tricked him nicely. I never thought of the fact that the gravity of that little planet would not be sufficient to counteract the centrifugal force set up by its rapid rotation.”

“No, and what is more important, neither did Rutnom. I was sure of that when you told me that he only had his top-rockets on when he landed, though I was almost certain when he talked about the box being down there. All he thought of was the lack of attraction, that’s why he kept his tubes pressing the Satona down, since otherwise, he figured, an unguarded shove would send her careening off. He forgot that the asteroid itself was pushing away at her with a far stronger power.”

“The box,” a sudden thought struck Britt, “we’ve lost that. We’ll have to go back to Venus and hunt for Mr. Bell’s mine again.”

Penger grinned.

“Nope. We’ll get that back too.”

“What do you mean? It must be hundreds of thousands of miles away by now, shooting through space. We can never find it.”

“Wrong again, my lad. I know just where she is. And that was the most ticklish part of the whole scheme. Why do you think I kept my eye glued to that telescope while you were swearing at Rutnom?”

The youngster looked at him blankly. The other went on, happily.

“I didn’t swing around the asteroid the way I did in order to hide what I was doing from the Martians. In fact, I hoped that he would see. What I did was to throw the dispatch box out at just the moment and speed that would bring it sufficiently within the attraction of the little planet to make it a satellite, to keep it swinging around through space in an orbit of its own. Naturally, I didn’t have time to calculate the exact conditions, but I took the chance and it worked.”

“Great! Then all we have to do is to swing back there, spot it in the telescope, and scoop it up.”

“Well,” the other drawled in reply, “it’s not going to be as easy as all that. You see, I pretty much burned out the works here on the Satona. About the only thing that’s still in order is the artificial gravity device. I managed to get that hooked up again, but the rest is gone.”

“Then we’ll have to get across to the Wanderer, and use that.”

“Right. Get into your space suit and we’ll make a go for it.”

They worked rapidly. Arnim felt for their flashes. They were intact in the outer pockets.

“Switch off your gravity control,” he advised Britt. “We’ll be able to maneuver better.”

They were ready now. Penger led the way, threw open the outer lock. They stepped, curiously light, into outer space. The vacuum suits ballooned immediately.

For awhile they floated, while Arnim got his bearings. Directly ahead, not over fifty yards away, lay the glittering ball of the Wanderer. Below spun a jagged fragment of rock, the tiny asteroid they had just quitted.

Arnim chuckled grimly. He thought of Rutnom and the Martians marooned on that tiny desolation, helplessly watching the space ships drifting not more than five miles overhead.

Then he pulled out a little propulsion gun and, pointing it away from the Wanderer, pulled the trigger. He transformed himself into a very inefficient rocket-like projectile. Britt saw and wondered and did likewise.

But finally Penger flashed his beam over the smooth shining skin of the Wanderer. They were home.

His gloved hand found the airlock switch.

They were standing within the old familiar ship, denuded of their space suits. Britt was grinning happily. Arnim was at the electro-telescope, his eyes glued to the instrument, giving swift orders that Britt translated into instant action. The little flier swerved and accelerated; shot off on sudden swift angles. At last Penger motioned.

“Hold her there. We’re right alongside.”

He squirmed into his suit again, dived into the air lock. Britt waited intently. It was only five minutes before he returned, but to the anxious youngster it seemed hours. The precious argento-platenoid box with its even more precious contents was under his arm.

Ganymede was growing momentarily on their screen. Arnim was sprawling luxuriously in his hammock, head resting on thrown-back arms. He wore the sleepy contentment of a cat who had licked up all the cream.

Britt, however, was pacing restlessly to and fro, a worried frown, on his clear boyish face. He would cast a sidelong glance at his older comrade, open his mouth, close it abruptly.

“What’s on your mind, Britt, out with it.” Penger spoke casually, without shifting his position.

The youngster stopped short, surprised.

“Well, if you must know, Mr. Penger,” he burst out. “I hate to think of those Martians slowly dying on that horrible little world. I know they’re murderers and all that, but I just can’t help it.”

Arnim looked at him not unkindly.

“Rest your mind, Britt. As soon as we started for Ganymede I radioed the Mercurian Patrol Ship. She’s on her way right now to pick them off.”

“Oh.”

Arnim stretched himself contentedly.

“Will I be glad to get back to old Earth, where it’s peaceful and quiet!”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Venus Mines, Incorporated* by Arthur Leo Zagat & Nathan Schachner]