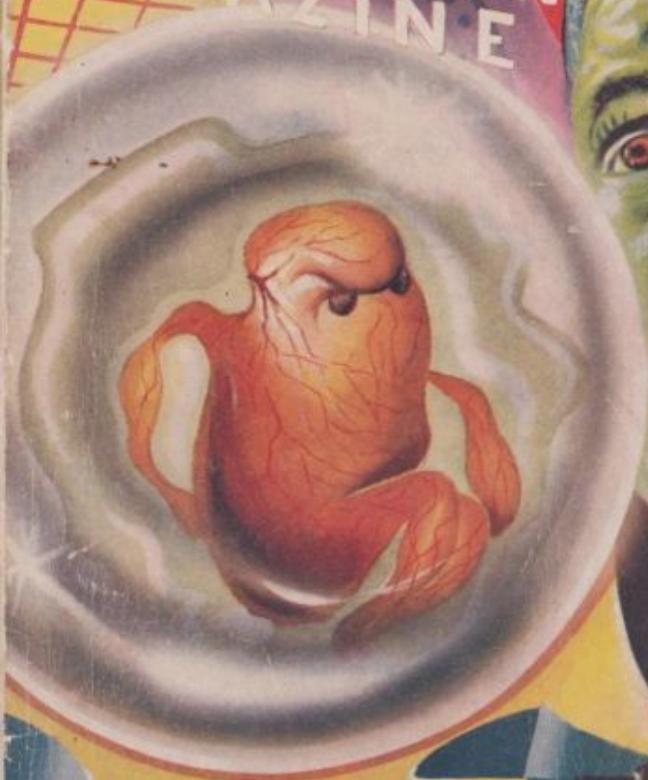


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SCIENCE FICTION
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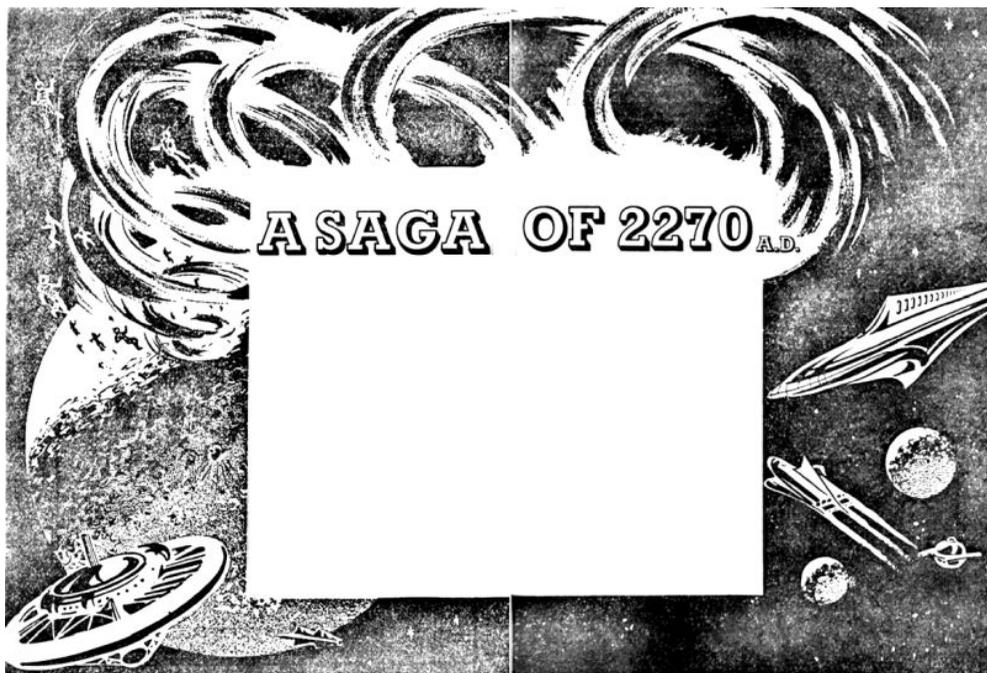
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A SAGA OF 2270 A.D.

A SAGA OF 2270 A.D.

By John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Volsted Gridban.

First published in *Vargo Statten Science Fiction Magazine*, February 1954.

The mass of neutronium which approached the Earth in the year 2270 was never visible through the world's telescopes. It made its presence felt entirely by instruments and when scientists first discovered what was coming they were considerably shocked and of course communicated their findings to their governments.

From the governments the news was passed on to the public and was made as unsensational as possible in order to prevent any possibility of panic. One of television's leading scientists explained it in this way—

“Neutronium, ladies and gentlemen, is a metal of almost incredible density. The density in scientific terms is 2,000 times greater than that of platinum. Take a match-box full of neutronium and it would take an extremely powerful crane to even raise it off the ground! Heading towards this world of ours there is a mass of this substance. Where it has come from we do not know, but the possibilities are that it is a piece that has broken away from a distant world or sun of almost unbelievable density: by a sun one might almost call it a star. For instance, take the Companion of Sirius for example. That, of course, is a white dwarf, and a fragment from that, if placed in a match-box, would take a powerful crane to raise it from the ground.

“How this extreme weight is produced can only be theorised but it is generally assumed that pressures are the main cause. The shell of satellite electrons which can be broken by the attacks of X-rays, or the fierce collisions going on in the interior of a star, can also break by the application of continued pressure. Therefore it is possible that this neutronium may have come from a world upon which these inconceivable pressures exist. This fact would produce an almost bare nucleus with the heavier atoms retaining a few of the closest electrons, forming a structure of perhaps one hundredth of a complete atom.

“The compression produces vast weight by comparison with size. Let us take a simple example in physics: in a monatomic gas like Helium a 32-fold increase in pressure gives an 8-fold increase in density if the heat of compression is retained in the gas. There you have an example of heat pressure, but on a world that is a child of a heavy sun, the Companion of Sirius, for example, the very pressure of that world would produce similar, even greater, results. At a very rough estimate a match-box full of the substance would, as I have said, require a crane to raise it. The proportion of weight is roughly one ton to the cubic inch”

Such was the scientist’s somewhat abstruse but nevertheless scientifically accurate explanation of the substance heading in to the Solar System from the south of the sidereal hemisphere. But in general the public was not interested in the nature of neutronium: they wanted to know what it would *do*.

Here again the scientists explained that the tremendous weight of this substance hurtling past the Earth—for, praise be, it had been calculated that the Earth was not exactly in the path of the substance—would cause colossal tides to be raised because of the neutronium’s superior gravitation and severe earthquakes were also possible.

At the very best, according to the scientists. Earth would survive after an extreme battering such as had never been known in history before—after which the neutronium, so small as to be invisible, and yet so immensely gravitative as to nearly tear the Earth to pieces, would pass on its way in the direction of the sun.

Here the neutronium would be bound to swing inwards under the sun’s colossal gravity, for heavy though the neutronium was, and powerful though its gravitative field might be, the sun was still the monarch of the solar system. So, summed up, it meant that Earth had fourteen days in which to prepare itself for the biggest upheaval that had ever been known. And, having weathered wars and crises throughout his interminable history, man set to work to prepare himself for the fatal day.

The day came, and went. The scientists had not been wrong. Enormous tides were raised on the side of the Earth facing the hurtling neutronium as it moved at thousands of miles an hour some two million miles distant from the Earth itself. Landscapes were flooded, cities partly torn down, mountains levelled, and colossal areas laid waste by fire and earthquake—then the commotion slowly began to subside as the invisible substance travelled sunwards.

And it was upon the sun that the scientists were concentrating all their attention. The world’s greatest telescopes, marvellously accurate and powerful in these advanced days, were trained on the orb of day so that upon the astronomical screens there might be observed the effect of neutronium when it fell into the sun’s photosphere. The actual descent of the neutronium into the sun was not observable for the simple reason that despite the masking screens in front of the telescopes, the intolerable glare of the sun’s photosphere prevented the neutronium being visible even for an instant. It was only known on the instruments that the substance *had* fallen into the sun after which the scientists could do nothing but sit back and wait to see what happened.

Yet even these results were some months before they made themselves visible, then towards the close of 2270, not very far from Christmas time, there came the first signs of the repercussions which the neutronium had caused in the orb of day. Briefly summed up, the sun had suddenly taken upon itself a colossal number of spots. Through the telescopes these titanic caverns of darkness yawning in the sun's face, and spreading far down from the solar equator to the poles, represented a solar state of affairs never before known, for never in astronomical history had it been recorded that spots had appeared so low down as to reach the solar poles. It was something more than sun spot activity: it was the gradual disintegration of the sun's surface itself—and this, with the passage of time, could only mean the collapse of the orb of day into a white dwarf, which in turn could only mean the extinction of the solar system as a whole.

Once again the television scientist reported on the situation, outlining with a commendable lack of scientific fecundity the reason for the sun's orange hue by day. He explained that the sun, being a G-type dwarf, exists very close to the border line of extinction. Raise or lower the temperature on the surface by several thousand degrees and instability must result, causing a complete collapse of the atomic set-up of the sun itself and its failure to give forth the normal energy, light, and heat. The scientist could not explain how long it would be before the dying sun would cause the Earth to become sheathed in a colossal, glacier-like shell, but that such a state of affairs *must* eventually come about he was grimly sure. Everything would be done to save the human race from extinction—and upon this not very cheering note he retired from the situation and left the public to figure out for itself exactly what was likely to happen.

Behind the scenes, however, a great deal was done, or at least was being attempted. Most famous of all astro-physical personalities in this year of 2270 was undoubtedly Captain Mark Senver, one of the most experienced scientists which the college of Space Navigation and Astro-physics had ever produced. If any man had any chance of solving the problem which was now confronting the whole of mankind, and not only mankind but all the solar system, that man was Captain Senver.

On earth he was not to be located and finally it was discovered that he was out in space busy charting a new route for the general space lines from Jupiter to Pluto, so immediately a space-radio communication was sent to him and no one was more surprised than he when he received it. As a matter of fact he did not receive it personally for at the time when the message came through he was indulging in his rest period and had to be awakened by his colleague Martin Dodd, who, besides being his co-pilot, was officially the navigator and scientific recordist.

Captain Senver's first awareness of the message which had been sent to him was when Martin Dodd shook him into wakefulness and told him quickly what had happened. Senver listened in silence, lying on his bunk, a small porthole behind his reclining head looking out onto the unimaginable blackness of space with its eternal back-drop of glittering stars.

"And what," Senver asked, sitting up, "do they expect me to do, I wonder? Just wave my hand and turn the sun back into something normal, or what? It's perfectly obvious what is the matter with it; we have seen that out in space here—as for me being able to put it right—well, the thing's ridiculous!"

Dodd shrugged. "Nevertheless, Mark, back you'll have to go. You can't ignore an order of the Interplanetary Corporation, so the sooner we get on the move the better."

"Have you asked Lucy what she thinks?" Captain Senver enquired slowly, getting up from his bunk and buttoning up his uniform.

Lucy Ainsworth was the special delegate of the Interplanetary Corporation. On every space trip which was made, no matter how famous the pilot might be, there always went a representative of the Interplanetary Corporation—at least upon experimental trips such as this one. The main reason was that all details and information gathered by the pilot and his navigator must also be the property of the Interplanetary Corporation. Since one could not discriminate between the honest and the dishonest pilots it was the only way by which the Corporation could maintain its monopoly of spacial knowledge and lay out the routes of the future along which space machines must travel. Usually the delegates of the Interplanetary Corporation were women, entirely business-like, and as utterly devoid of romantic leanings as were their more earth-bound sisters in this advanced year of 2270.

“No,” Martin Dodd replied. “I haven’t told Lucy yet, but I don’t see it would make much difference if I did. You’ve had your orders from headquarters and they’ve got to be obeyed. Lucy has nothing to do with it.”

“I disagree,” Mark Senver answered. “No decision is ever taken aboard a space machine without all the parties aboard the machine agreeing to it. I’ll come into the control room and you’d better awaken Lucy from the rest period and see what she has to say.”

Dodd nodded and departed from the small cabin, afterwards hurrying along the metal lined corridor to Lucy Ainsworth’s private quarters.

In a matter of perhaps five minutes all three were in the main control room with its banks of instruments and enormous observation windows. Outside there loomed the giant worlds of Jupiter and in the remoter background ringed Saturn, and beyond him again the outer planets of Uranus and Neptune and the far-flung speck of Pluto.

Captain Senver, tall, dark-headed, square chinned, gave Lucy Ainsworth a questioning glance. She was a tall girl, slim figured, attired in the conventional silk blouse and maroon slacks of a space traveller. At Senver’s glance she spread her hands negatively.

“If the Corporation says return, you must return,” she said quietly. “There’s nothing else for it, Mark.”

“Well, I don’t like it,” he growled. “It means that we’ve covered something like two hundred and fifty thousand million miles all to no purpose. To get called back to handle a business which is quite beyond us! We’re not super beings and I think it’s about time the Corporation realised the fact.”

“That being the case,” Martin Dodd said, “why not radio back to the Interplanetary Corporation and tell them of the impossibility of the thing they ask? There is no sense in returning all that distance home to tell them that when we can do it by radio.”

“Particularly,” Lucy Ainsworth pointed out, “as we have discovered that new star.”

Senver nodded and looked at her thoughtfully. Although their reason for being in space was primarily to chart a new route for space machines travelling in the regions of Jupiter and Pluto, they had—by very reason of being so far out in the solar system—discovered a hitherto unknown star much nearer to the solar system than Alpha Centauri, formerly known to be the nearest star to Earth. It meant, in a word, that they had discovered a nearer star than Alpha. Martin Dodd sighed.

“We were just doing very nicely in getting all the details about that star, ZX70 as we have called it, and now we have to break off and return to Earth!”

It was characteristic of Captain Senver that he made up his mind on that moment. He turned to the space radio equipment and switched it on, afterwards sitting down before the instrument and waiting while the radio waves travelled at the speed of light towards Earth.

Despite this velocity of one hundred and eighty-six thousand miles per second it would still take several minutes for the waves to reach the Earth and then return to this distant point beyond Jupiter. Finally, however, contact was made, and not only in sound, for upon the space-television screen immediately below the instrument's speaker there appeared the crabby face of the President of the Interplanetary Corporation. Senver rose and saluted briefly.

"Captain Senver reporting, sir," he announced. "I would be glad if you could give me the full details of your assignment to me without my having to return to Earth. We are in the midst of a most important investigation concerning ZX70, the new star which has appeared, considerably nearer to us than Alpha Centauri."

The President hesitated, then answered:

"The only reason for summoning you all the way back to Earth, Captain, was so that you could have at first hand various opinions of the scientists concerning the present decline of the sun. Obviously the sun's very serious condition must be visible to you out in space—even more clearly indeed than to us on Earth here, who are viewing it through the filter of an atmospheric blanket—but I did feel that the fullest details would help you perhaps in working out some means by which the sun can be restored to normal."

Senver gave a rather grim smile. "From what I have seen of the sun, sir, and the analysis I have made of it, there is no possible way in which it can be restored to normal. It is obviously changing into a white dwarf, and when that happens it will mean the death of the solar system entirely. Heat and light will both fail and every planet will obviously become wrapped in a glacial shell. That is why I consider it necessary to continue the investigations of star ZX70, in the belief that around this star there might exist planets to which we might make an effort to travel. Since ZX70 is comparatively near to our solar system, as compared to Alpha Centauri that is, we should be able to make the journey within a time reasonable enough for the younger members of the community, therefore I . . ."

"Much though I appreciate your scientific endeavours in the scientific investigation of ZX70, Captain Senver, I must inform you that it is the wish of the Corporation in general, and the scientists in particular, that you make every effort to restore our *existing* sun. You are a man of immense scientific experience, and we are convinced that if you bend your peculiar genius to the problem you will find a way to restore our orb of day. For obvious reasons a mass exodus to any planets around this star ZX70 to which you refer would not be practicable. Therefore, since you do not wish to return to Earth for the full details, you will kindly consider yourself assigned to the problem of working out a method of saving the sun. You will report back to me the moment that some scientific procedure has presented itself to you. That is all."

The space radio blanked and the screen became dark. Senver switched off and sat in grim silence for a while, Dodd and Lucy Ainsworth looking at him seriously. Finally Senver raised his head and looked through the great porthole upon the distant reddened orb of the sun. It hung there almost like the winter sun as seen from Earth on a foggy afternoon, except that never before had that disc appeared so pock-marked and so blackened with spots. It looked for all the world like some gigantic red orange upon which spots of ink had fallen.

"Much as I appreciate the old boy's faith in my genius," Mark Senver said drily, as he got to his feet, "I think he's completely off his horse. The decline of the sun is obvious and its death inevitable. I think we should ignore the Space Corporation's orders and instead concentrate all our attention on discovering if ZX70 has any planets, and if so report back to

the President that the assignment is one beyond human solving with ZX70 as our only hope. . . What do you two think?"

"For myself," Dodd replied, "I have nothing to add to your statement, Mark. After all you are the skipper and it's up to you."

"Well, it may seem strange," Lucy Ainsworth said, "but I take the exactly opposite view!" Then as the two men looked at her in wonder, she added, "I believe that the assignment should be carried through if it is humanly possible. And I further believe, Captain Senver, that you have the necessary ability to master the problem if it *can* be mastered. My suggestion is that we take off for the sun, study it at very close quarters and decide then if there is any solution within the bounds of scientific possibility. From this distance we cannot possibly determine how badly the sun is collapsing."

Senver considered for a while then at last he nodded.

"Yes, of course, it is possible that you may have the right idea, Lucy. In any case it can't do any harm to go and look at the sun at close quarters, just in case something *does* occur to us. All right, let's be on our way. Full speed ahead, Martin."

Martin turned to the main control board and switched in the current which gave the necessary power to the jets. Immediately the machine, which had been more or less floating within the gravity field between Jupiter and Saturn, proceeded to get on the move. Thereafter it was chiefly a matter of hurtling through space at the most inconceivable velocity, always with that red orb of the dying sun always ahead of them.

There were the customary spells of duty, and the rest periods during which they either slept or relaxed or indulged in whatever their personal fancy dictated. Till at last there came a time when the orbit of Mercury, nearest planet to the sun, had been crossed and all the red, overpowering majesty of the orb of day lay straight ahead.

It was a pitiful reflection on the decline of the sun that the purple shields usually used across the windows were no longer necessary in order to view the monarch of the day, so low was his light. In fact the nearer the space machine travelled to him the more it became obvious that that normally intolerably bright photosphere was nothing more than a seething red cauldron with all the energies burnt completely out of it. And across this cauldron loomed the fissures and bottomless craters which were actually entrances into the core of the sun itself. It hardly needed the instruments to decide the issue: it was perfectly obvious that the sun was doomed. And such was the information which Captain Senver immediately radioed to the Earth.

"Then in your belief," the President asked anxiously, "there is no possible way of rejuvenating our dying luminary?"

"None whatever," Senver answered, shrugging. "I wish that I . . ." He broke off, his eyes suddenly hard in thought as he looked at the screen.

The President, some ninety million miles away on the Earth, looked at him keenly.

"What is it, Captain Senver? Has something occurred to you?"

"Perhaps," Senver answered slowly, that faraway look still in his eyes. "If you'll give me just a while to consider this matter, sir, it's possible that I may have a practical suggestion to offer. . . ."

Captain Senver did return to earth after all and to the Interplanetary Corporation, for here was a matter that he felt was better given in person than over the space radio. To a specially

convened meeting of the Interplanetary Corporation he gave forth his views, receiving at times corroboratory evidence from Martin Dodd and Lucy Ainsworth.

“Whilst, Gentlemen, rejuvenation of our dying sun is impossible,” Senver said, looking about him at the assembled rows of scientists as they waited anxiously for his pronouncements, “It might be possible to still save the solar system by exchanging our sun for another one!”

There was the silence of complete amazement. The President looked at Senver in wonderment.

“But how is such a thing possible?” he demanded. “I’m aware that we live in an age of supreme cosmic engineering but to endeavour to exchange our sun for another one is—well, frankly, absurd!”

Senver was quite undisturbed. “I have gone into all the necessary mechanics, sir. What it amounts to is this: I spoke to you of a far distant star to which I have given the assignation of ZX70—a star existing between Pluto and Alpha Centauri. I have examined that star very closely and have arrived at the conclusion that it has no attendant planets. It is just a star on its own with no family and of course it is also a mystery why it has never appeared before in astronomical photo-plates. It just seems to have suddenly come into existence, the reason for which is not at all clear. However, that is beside the point. What I am suggesting is that perhaps ZX70 could be forced to take the place of our own sun. ZX70 is plainly a healthy young star of the G-type variety just like our own sun and of a similar mass and size which of course is an enormous advantage.”

“An advantage, maybe,” one of the scientists remarked, “but how do you propose to manoeuvre ZX70 across such an enormous distance of space and be rid of our own sun into the bargain?”

There was no hesitation in Senver’s answer. “For that, sir, we should need a fleet of space ships equipped with de-gravitators, which as you know are projectors emitting beams which neutralise the power of gravity. Thereby, the gravity of the star ZX70 could be rendered void, which shouldn’t be difficult because there are no other planets around it which could afford a counter-gravity.”

“But just de-gravitating it would not be enough,” the President protested.

“True,” Senver admitted. “We should need to enlist the help of the scientists of Mercury who, as you are well aware, gentlemen, have the secrets of magnetic attraction. I have already contacted the chief scientists of Mercury and they are quite willing to lend their very considerable scientific knowledge to the scheme. Chiefly, of course, because Mercury is as much doomed as the rest of the planets when the sun expires. Although the Mercurians live under the surface of the planet, at least on the sunward side, so as to avoid what is normally the torrential outpouring of its furious energy, they know that the death of the sun would also mean the death of their race. Hence they are quite willing. The Mercurian scientists did, however, raise the question of the distance of ZX70, but we are fortunate, gentlemen, in that according to celestial mechanics light is *not* the maximum speed of a space flyer any more than sound is the limit of speed of an aircraft. If necessary, the speed of light can be exceeded many, many times. So that is not a deterrent.”

“Your theory is of course colossal,” the President admitted. “Indeed it is one of those theories which have made you so famous in the Astra-physical World, Captain Senver, but I would still like to know how our existing dying sun is to be got rid of.”

Senver smiled a little. "The idea, sir, is to move the new sun, that is ZX70—by the use of the gravitators and the Mercurian magnetisers—to a position near the orbit of Pluto. When we have got it that far we will de-gravitate our normal sun. The result of that will be to cause the planets of the solar system to move into new orbits round the *new* centre of gravity. Naturally," Senver continued, spreading his hands, "there will be earthquakes and terrific upheavals but at the end of it there will be light and warmth and a young and vigorous sun. The whole thing is nothing more than a gigantic feat of cosmic engineering. All I require from you, gentlemen, is permission to carry out this scheme in my own way and I believe that I can guarantee success."

Certainly there was no hesitation about the permission being given and within twenty-four hours Captain Senver had made all the necessary arrangements, not only for his own fleet of twelve machines fitted with de-gravitators, but also for twelve Mercurian machines fitted with de-magnetisers. The point of rendezvous with the Mercurians had been arranged as the orbit of Venus and with this the first details were complete.

So Senver set off once again with Dodd and Lucy Ainsworth with him. There was no real reason why Lucy Ainsworth should have gone on this particular expedition. She only did so because it was her personal wish, and not as a delegate of the Interplanetary Corporation.

As arranged, the twelve Mercurian machines were contacted at the orbit of Venus and thereafter the vast flight beyond the solar system into the great outer deeps of space commenced.

It was a flight which meant velocity being built upon velocity and necessitated that the inmates of each space machine, be they Mercurian or Earthly, should spend most of their time in a state mostly approaching suspended animation, leaving automatic controls to do the work for them, for there was no flesh and blood structure that could stand up to the frightful acceleration demanded as the vessels hurtled onwards at first one, then two, then three times the speed of light towards that distant mystery star ZX70.

In Captain Senver's machine the alarms were all set to awaken him and Lucy Ainsworth and Martin Dodd the moment their machine came within measurable distance of the mystery star. But for some unknown reason those alarms never operated and it was possible that every vessel might have been plunged into ZX70 but for Lucy Ainsworth. She, despite the fact that she was in a condition very close to a coma, also had a mind extremely sensitive to danger. And it was this that suddenly aroused her from her torpid condition, and despite the crushing pressures that were weighing her down she looked about her in the bright lights towards the automatic controls.

She could not understand why she had been aroused, but she meant to find out. Scrambling off her bunk she half tottered to the window and looked out. Then she gave a gasp of amazement for not more than forty million miles away there loomed the blinding orb of ZX70 and towards it the space machine, and indeed the other twenty-three machines in the background, were hurtling at demoniacal speed.

In those few moments Lucy forgot the physical handicaps weighing her down and quickly awakened Senver and Martin Dodd as they lay upon their bunks. Senver was the first to arouse and in a matter of seconds Lucy had made the situation clear to him. Immediately he struggled from his bunk, and with considerable effort reached the switchboard and released the current for the forward jets of the machine which instantly reacted and began to slow down the headlong falling towards that blazing star.

Martin Dodd for his part snapped on the radio and warned the commanders of the other Earthly and Mercurian vessels of the danger ahead. Evidently his warning was received—it being assumed that the alarm signals had not sounded in the other vessels either—for the remainder of the fleet also began to blaze forth with their forward jets, hereby saving themselves from hurtling straight onwards to destruction.

“Do you think we’ll pull through?” Lucy asked Senver anxiously as Senver stood by the porthole staring with slitted eyes at the blazing mass of ZX70.

“Yes, I think so.” His voice was taut with strain. “What I can’t understand is why the alarm signals didn’t work! It almost seems as though somebody or something wanted us to crash into that star or sun or whatever you prefer to call it. However, we’re not going to do that now; we’re winning the struggle. Of that I’m pretty sure.”

As the minutes passed belief became justified for the tremendous power of the forward rockets proved sufficient to break the tremendous attraction of the nearby luminary and, little by little, the twenty-four machines with Senver’s vessel in the lead swung round in a mighty arc broadside to ZX70, and gradually began to pull away from its influence. It was this turning around in space, however, which brought to the notice of the travellers the gleaming point of a solitary planet, something which they had never seen before when examining this area from the remoter deeps of space. Indeed they had assumed that ZX70 had no family of worlds at all, yet here was one—and only one. The moment it came into view Martin Dodd hurried to the telescopic equipment, adjusted the eyepiece, and peered intently through it. After several moments of scrutiny he looked up in surprise.

“That,” he declared, “is the strangest planet I ever saw! Looks to me to be entirely metallic. Even bolted together! Like a colossal metal globe designed by cosmic engineers. You’d better take a look, Mark, and see what you think.”

Mark and Lucy looked in turn and over the radio the commanders of the other space machines were commanded to do likewise, until finally there was no doubt about the fact that here was a metallic, man-made world, at a distance of some sixty million miles from the luminary.

“Do you think it possible,” Lucy asked thoughtfully, “that there is some kind of life either on or within that metallic-looking planet which tried to destroy us?”

“Highly likely,” Senver muttered, for at the moment he was too absorbed with a second scrutiny of the mystery planet to take up Lucy’s suggestion. After a while, he said:

“That planet seems to be composed of a metal or at least some kind of substance which does not reflect light photons and is therefore normally invisible. That could account for us not being able to observe it when we were a great distance from it. However, whatever may be the case as regards that planet we’re certainly not going to explore it. We came here for a definite purpose and that purpose is to transfer ZX70 to the region of Pluto. The sooner we begin the better.”

With that he turned to the radio instruments, made the position clear to the other Earthly and Mercurian commanders, finally adding in a grim voice:

“There may be life on that distant planet which all of us can see, so it behoves us to get busy right away with the plan we have in mind. If there is intelligent life on that world which tried to hurl us into the sun it may also try to prevent us transferring that sun. So the sooner we get busy, the better. Action stations, every one of you.”

“Communication received, Captain,” came the voice of the spokesman of the following machines, “we only await your signal to operate the de-magnetisers and de-gravitators.”

Senver nodded and turned quickly to the instruments.

As Lucy Ainsworth had assumed, the metallic planet definitely was inhabited. The beings populating it were not unlike Earthlings in appearance, but it was clear from their greater cranial development they were much higher in the scale of intelligence. Chief amongst these master scientists was a being known as Rad, and it was he with his colleagues, in the midst of their governing laboratory, who were fully aware of Captain Mark Senver's intentions to steal the star ZX70, which of course to Rad and his race represented their sun. Rad also it was who had done his utmost by negative energy to try and drive—to them—the alien fleets into the sun before they could make any attempt at invasion, since that had been Rad's original expectation when the fleets had first been sighted. Now, thanks to tapping Captain Senver's radio message to the rest of his fleet, the inhabitants of the metallic world knew exactly what was intended and, perhaps not unnaturally, they had no intention of having their luminary stolen without even permission being asked.

"It would appear," one of Rad's followers remarked, in his own strange language, "that these aliens will act almost at any moment and endeavour to steal our sun. We must act first. The only way that I can suggest is that we use the dissembler upon them."

Rad nodded slowly, thinking. He was a high-domed being with a long thin nose, a taut mouth, and unusually large dark blue eyes. Indeed amongst his own race he would probably have been considered handsome. The dissembler to which his colleague had referred was to the intelligent inhabitants of this planet a very every day invention. It emanated a powerful energy which broke down the atomic structure of any organic or inorganic structure at a distance, transferred it over the necessary distance, and then reassembled it in its original form in Rad's laboratory. It was indeed organic television, if such a process could be graced by such a name.

"It might be worth our while to steal the woman to begin with," Rad decided presently, "since she appears to be a pretty close friend of this Captain Senver who is giving all the orders. She might be able to tell us a good deal, and it might conceivably stop the plans that these aliens have. Yes, we will see what we can do. . . ."

With that Rad turned to the wilderness of instruments with which he was surrounded and after making calculations with a mathematical computator, he threw a master switch.

The result of this aboard Senver's vessel was almost immediate. Lucy standing by Senver's side suddenly began to become transparent and almost as quickly disappeared altogether. Senver and Martin Dodd stared in amazement at the space where she had been. Over the radio came the insistent cry of the following captains in the neighbouring vessels for Senver's final order to begin the feat of cosmic engineering. But Senver ignored it. For the moment he was too utterly astounded by the disappearance of Lucy Ainsworth from his side.

"What the devil . . ." he began in bewilderment, but before he could complete his sentence the anxious calls from the captains of the other vessels were drowned out by a powerful radio wave carrying an entirely alien voice. It spoke English with difficulty, slowly and in a very bass voice. But everything the voice said was clear enough.

"We have no clear knowledge of from where you aliens have come but of this we would warn you: if you carry out your intentions to steal our sun—for a purpose which is not entirely clear to us—the life of the woman whom we have captured will be forfeit. The issue is left with you."

On that the brief communication faded out and Senver found himself staring blankly at Martin Dodd's astounded face. There was a long silence in the control room, and since the pilots in the other machines had also heard the message they too held off communicating until their chief should make a move.

But Senver was in a decided quandary. He had to choose between completing the mission upon which he had come or saving the life of Lucy Ainsworth. It had only just dawned upon him at this moment that Lucy Ainsworth meant a great deal more to him than he had realised. Up to this point he had always looked upon her as a scientific observer working for a scientific organisation, but now she had been abducted it was a very different matter. She meant a great deal more than the solar system, at least to Mark Senver.

"The only thing I can suggest," Martin Dodd said, as Senver looked at him worriedly, "is to find Lucy and follow out our plan afterwards. We're obviously going to be up against it here, something which we had not anticipated."

"Probably you're right," Senver agreed. "But there's no guarantee that if I hold off taking ZX70 as arranged that these beings will return Lucy. No, definitely we've got to find her and get her out of their clutches."

His mind made up Senver switched on the radio and gave the necessary details to the commanders of the accompanying ships. There was a considerable amount of argument but as the Commander, Mark Senver's way had to be followed, so in a long trailing stream the vessels turned away from ZX70 and began to head towards the mysterious metallic world in the depths of space. . . .

With the passage of about six hours they had reached it, to behold it entirely airless—a monstrous globe—held together by a marvellous process of cosmic welding allied to riveting. Here was cosmic engineering *in excelsis*.

It was plain that the inhabitants of the mystery world had the fleet under observation, for as it approached an enormous valve opened in the planet's metallic surface and even had Senver and his followers wished to avoid that valve they could not have done so, for some internal magnetism dragged them irresistibly towards it, and so down into the colossal lighted underworld of this strange planet.

What happened after that neither Senver, Martin Dodd, nor any of the Earthlings and Mercutians involved in the business could afterwards tell. It seemed that some electrical process blanked out their faculties, for the next thing they knew—at least that Captain Senver and Martin Dodd knew—was that they were gradually recovering their senses in a dimly lighted cell. Where their space machine had gone or where their followers were they had no idea. It seemed they were being closely observed, however, for hardly had they recovered consciousness than there appeared in an inset panel upon the wall the face of the scientific ruler of the planet. For a moment or two they stood staring at it more in interest than in consternation, remarking how similar to an Earth being this creature looked. Rad, for his part, from the laboratory was studying his two captives intently and presently he spoke.

"From where have you come and how dare you invade this region? What world have you come from?" These were the three questions which he asked in his imperious bass voice. There was no hesitation about Senver as he gave the answer. He explained the whole intended project of using ZX70 to replace the dying sun of his own solar system.

"And we were not aware that there was a populated planet near this particular star, or rather sun," he concluded. "We do not come as destroyers, merely as cosmic engineers striving to save our own system from destruction."

“I do not believe you,” Rad replied coldly. “I and my followers consider that you are a band of interplanetary marauders and most certainly you shall not have our sun under any pretext whatever.”

“My position,” Captain Senver replied, “is desperate! I have got to save our solar system but naturally I do not desire that you or your fellows should be incommoded in any way because of that necessity. What I do suggest is, that if you will give us your sun we will also de-gravitate your world and take it along with us in tow. Thereby you will still enjoy the benefit of your sun and so will our entire solar system. It is a case of a neighbour world helping a system which is otherwise doomed. In short your planet will be able to assume an orbit near Pluto and thereby be allowed to carry on as it is now—in a different part of space, of course—but quite unmolested.”

“Your plan,” Rad replied, “is still unacceptable. We do not share our benefits with any other race in the universe. We are master scientists from a far part of the universe and we are anxious to live in peace, without being interfered with in any way, to solve the ultimate mysteries of time and space. We deliberately created that sun of ours, which you call ZX70, by scientific means. As for our metallic world here, it is actually a spherical spaceship of colossal size, and it is our scientific processes which accounted for ZX70’s sudden mysterious appearance in the firmament. Of course, the invisibility of our spaceship world is to prevent it being normally seen. As I have said, we desire peace and not for any proposition which you can offer do we intend to trade our peace or mingle with others. Later I shall decide what shall be done with you; for the time being you shall stay here. I have other matters to attend to.”

With that the screen blanked and the communication ceased. Senver gave Martin Dodd an uneasy glance.

“I only hope that the other matters he referred to have nothing to do with Lucy,” he said anxiously.

As a matter of fact Lucy was at that moment in Rad’s laboratory, quite unaware of what had happened to her colleagues and most certainly she had not been told that they had been drawn down to this mystery world and been imprisoned. In silence she sat watching Rad as he appeared from a neighbouring room of the laboratory—from where he had made his radio communication to Senver—and she endeavoured to show no nervousness as the master scientist paused a few feet from her and surveyed her intently. Behind him were grouped his fellow scientists—silent, unemotional beings who seemed to regard this woman of Earth purely as a biological specimen.

“Since you are a woman,” Rad said slowly, reading the English language from her mind with considerable difficulty, “I have decided that you shall become my mate.”

At Lucy’s horrified recoil, Rad only smiled slowly and added:

“There are only men left in this spaceship from my world and though we can live a long time we would naturally prefer to make certain of a descendant. It’s fortunate that we are more or less similar in physique—that is to say we are not insectile or otherwise different in characteristics.”

It was on the tip of Lucy’s tongue to scream forth a refusal and then she stopped herself. She was an intelligent woman, accustomed to dealing with the most exceptional circumstances, and here she well appreciated that any refusal on her part would make not the slightest difference to the ruler’s intentions. The thing to do was to work with him, not against him, and by that means she might conceivably discover what had happened to Senver and the rest of her friends, and if possible effect their release.

“You do me an unusual honour,” she said finally. “Upon my own planet I am only considered an ordinary woman amongst millions—yet you, the obvious ruler of this world, have decided to make me your queen.”

“I have,” Rad assented calmly. “To-night the banquet to announce our union will take place. For the time being you will return to your cell.”

“Am I entitled to ask,” Lucy inquired, “where my friends are and what has happened to them?”

“You are entitled to ask, yes,” Rad nodded his big head briefly. “They are all inside this world of ours in prison, and there they will remain till I have decided what I shall do with them. As to your space fleet it is on the surface of this planet awaiting destruction. Now do not ask any more questions, for I do not propose to answer them.” He made a brief motion to the two guards who were standing by. “Take her away and return her to her cell until you receive further orders from me.”

On the face of it there was nothing more Lucy could do, and certainly Senver, Martin Dodd and the rest of the imprisoned men, both Mercutian and Earth men, could make no move to help themselves. There were guards everywhere and their cells were electrically locked. If there was to be any way out of this difficulty only Lucy could find it, and she, knowing by now that her colleagues were all in prison and in Rad’s clutches, was fully alive to the situation. This was no time to earn Rad’s enmity for she was the only one who had the possible key to full freedom.

Accordingly she apparently accepted passively Rad’s decision that she should become his wife. She made no murmur as a few hours later guards brought her special clothes which looked very much like Grecian-styled garments which she was ordered to wear for the banquet to take place that evening. “Evening” was of course only a misnomer since inside this eternally illuminated underworld there was neither night nor day, time being governed entirely by enormous and queerly designed clocks.

Fully aware of the responsibility resting upon her, Lucy entered the enormous banqueting hall at the appointed time and found Rad was present in his most elaborate robes, whilst upon either side of the long table sat the dignitaries and master scientists of the race. Everywhere men, nowhere a woman, but even so Lucy did not lose her nerve. She moved silently to the chair which had been placed for her beside Rad. After that, under the pretext of being absorbed in the pleasure of her meal, she remained silent whilst she thought out what she must do next. The food, she noticed, was palatable enough even though strange to her unaccustomed palate, but it was curiously flat and tasteless, a fact which she presently brought to the notice of Rad as he sat by her side giving her occasional admiring glances from his penetrating dark blue eyes.

“I, Rad, am of another world,” she said at last, “and for that reason I find your food is unsuitable for me; that is unless it is rendered more savoury. There is one particular condiment which we use a lot on Earth, indeed which is a necessity to our particular physical structure, and I am wondering if you have any of it. If I do not have some I am liable to die.”

Rad looked at her in wonder then a troubled frown crossed his features.

“You have but to name what this strange substance is and I will endeavour to have it obtained for you,” he promised.

“We call it sodium chloride, or more commonly, salt.”

Rad was silent for a long while, his eyes searching her, then presently it seemed to dawn on him what she meant. Evidently he had read the details from her mind. For some reason he

gave a little shiver.

“Is it possible,” he asked deliberately, “that any being can consume sodium chloride, as you call it? We have vast quantities of the substance in our laboratories but we call it by another name; indeed to us it is deadly poison, but if you require some I will have it obtained immediately. I read from your mind that to you it is not poison but a necessary item of nourishment.”

With that Rad made a signal to one of the nearby servants, gave him brief instructions, and presently he returned with a transparent container filled to the brim with salt. Lucy looked at it, smiled faintly to herself, and then sprinkled some of it on her food. In aghast silence the gathered scientists watched her go on eating entirely unmoved, till at last they were assured that to her sodium chloride was indeed quite a normal part of her diet. But in Lucy’s mind one point remained outstanding, and it was something which Rad had said. To him sodium chloride was deadly poison. Therein perhaps lay the one loophole which she sought.

To this end she was successful in confiscating some of the salt in the voluminous garments she was wearing, whilst Rad’s attention was distracted towards the scientist on his left-hand side. None were aware that she had any of the salt in her possession when the banquet was over.

But it was over only as far as the eating was concerned for Rad rose to his feet and at his imperious command the conversation of the assembly ceased and his voice boomed forth.

“I have decided that I and this woman of Earth shall form a union, something which has not happened in our race for many, many cycles past. The union itself will take place with due celebrations some little time hence, at a date which I shall later fix. This is but the preliminary announcement . . .”

Rad could not proceed any further for the cheering and congratulations of his colleagues in general and the assembly in particular. Throughout it all Lucy remained silent, her face averted, thinking how best she was going to extricate herself from the predicament in which she had landed.

Not indeed that she had much opportunity at that time for having made the announcement and brought the banquet to a close Rad stated briefly that scientific matters compelled his attention and that for the time being Lucy must return to her captivity. To this she raised no objections: it would give her time to think. And once back in the room that had been provided for her she *did* think, and very hard.

When at length a solution did occur to her she wondered why she had not thought of it long before. First she made up her lips with the lipstick which she had been allowed to keep and to this she added a coating of the rather sticky, glycerine-like substance which she normally used as an eye lotion—all part of the cosmetics which she, and practically every woman of her time, carried around with her. When she had finished her lips felt so sticky that she could hardly move them, but this was not the finish.

Into the cloying upper surface she rubbed considerable quantities of the salt which she had confiscated. It was impossible to behold it when she surveyed herself in the mirror and any way the lights were dim enough to prevent anything unusual being noticed. Thus made up and prepared she summoned the servant and informed him that she desired to see Rad immediately on private business. If, as she hoped, he would consider her more important than his scientific pursuits the rest might be comparatively easy. That he had a very strange-looking weapon in his belt she knew full well for she had noticed it at the banquet. If she could once get her hands on that there might still be a way of getting out of this underworld.

So with the message dispatched by the servant, she sat on the settee-like bed and waited for something to happen. To her relief Rad was quick to obey her summons. He came into the room swiftly, alone, and looked at her inquiringly. Giving him a smiling glance Lucy said:

“Am I not more important to you as your future wife than your scientific pursuits, Rad? I felt that at least we were entitled to a few moments together. There is something I did not mention at the banquet because really it concerns only us two, and that is that on my own world we seal a bargain of union with a kiss.”

Rad looked puzzled as he came forward.

“And what is this kiss?” He seemed to be trying to read her mind, a performance for which Lucy was quite prepared, and she deliberately confused her thoughts so he could not possibly read what she was intending to do.

“If you will sit here I will show you,” she said quietly.

Not by any means averse to the suggestion Rad seated himself beside her, and though it took every ounce of her courage to perform her actions Lucy deliberately put her arms round his thick, strong neck and kissed him full upon the lips. When she withdrew again he sat considering, as though he were debating a scientific problem. It was not obvious whether he had enjoyed the experience or not. Lucy for her part sat watching him anxiously, wondering if her ruse would succeed, her eyes fixed on the massive, yellow-metalled weapon in his belt.

“For some reason,” Rad said, getting to his feet, “I believe that you, woman of another world, are not to be . . .”

That was as far as he got. Suddenly he swung round, his eyes flaming hatred towards her, but before he could take the necessary steps to reach her as she jumped to her feet he clutched desperately at his mouth, then his throat, and suddenly collapsed upon the floor.

Lucy stood staring at him fixedly, wondering at the peculiar physical structure of the being that sodium chloride could so quickly inflict death, if death it was. She went down on her knees and quickly examined him, satisfying herself within a few seconds that he was indeed dead. She hesitated no longer. Wiping her lips quickly with the back of her hand she then snatched the weapon from his belt and crept to the door of the room. Opening the door she looked outside. The corridor was deserted.

But such luck could hardly hold for long. When she reached the end of the corridor she suddenly ran into one of the servants who had been attending her. Instantly her gun came up level with his stomach and she said briefly:

“If you value your life, my friend, take me to the leader of our expedition, Captain Senver. I am fighting for my own planet now, not for yours, and hurry!”

Evidently the servant placed value on his life for he did not hesitate to obey her instructions, or else it was that he knew the frightful power of the weapon she was holding. Whatever the explanation he finally conducted her to Captain Senver’s cell and at her orders released the electrically controlled lock. In wonder Senver came out into the corridor with Martin Dodd close behind him.

“Lucy,” Senver cried embracing her, but she gestured quickly.

“We have no time to waste, Mark. I’ve taken a long chance to get this far; now the rest is up to you if you can manage it. Here, take this weapon, you’ll be able to handle it better than I can. I don’t know how powerful it is or what it can do.”

Senver did not hesitate, and still using the servant as their guide and keeping other servants and guards at bay with the weapon, which evidently was powerful enough to prevent

any of them trying conclusions with it, they were finally led to the enormous room where the rest of the Earthlings and Mercurians had been imprisoned.

With their release Senver gave a grim smile.

“It begins to look as though the situation is getting in hand,” he said briefly, glancing at Lucy; “thanks to you, my dear. All we need to do now is find a way to the surface. Here, you —” He dug his gun into the waiting servant’s side. “Show us how we escape from here.”

Still without raising any objections the servant did as he was bid, leading the way through an endless series of passages and staircases without ever once encountering any other inhabitants. This was probably accounted for by the fact that it was the sleeping period in the underworld during which time only a few of the scientists engaged on important business were at work. And since they were at work they were obviously not aware of what was happening outside their particular task. It was when the great outlet valve to the surface had been reached that the guide turned and looked at Senver.

“If I open this, Earth Man,” he said briefly, “it will mean that all the air in this world of ours will escape to the surface and we will die. And,” he added significantly, “so will you.”

Senver reflected for a moment.

“Where is our fleet?” he demanded. “What has happened to it?”

“It is about a mile from here, on the surface.”

Senver looked at his assembled colleagues.

“Are you prepared to risk death on the exterior of this world on the chance that we might reach the fleet?” he asked quickly. “It is a fact that the absolute vacuum of space acts as an insulator against heat radiating from the body. It is only a question of whether we shall be able to survive long enough without air to reach our vessels without space suits. But it is the only possible way we are to do it if we are to manage. There is also another point. If this valve is opened the air in here will be ejected outwards with tremendous force and we shall be carried with it. We shall leave behind us a world of dead scientists but on the other hand we may accomplish our mission. Are you willing to risk it?”

There was no hesitation on the grim faces of those assembled round Senver at which he motioned to the servant.

“Open the valve,” he ordered curtly.

It was plain the servant knew what the opening of the valve would mean to his race but evidently he still feared the weapon more than anything else. He pushed the lever up controlling the valve and the great operculum overhead began to slide open swiftly. Instantly, even as Senver had foreseen, the air within the metallic world gushed outwards in a stupendous roar. As though carried on the top of a water spout the entire party was hurled to the outside of the planet and carried some fifty feet upwards before the slight attraction of the metallic world began to drag them down again. Each one of them fighting desperately against the suffocation of interplanetary space, which was an even greater problem than the unimaginable cold. But as Senver had said, the immense cold acted as an insulator, together with the airlessness, and there was a chance that they would survive perhaps for five minutes but certainly not more.

In this direction, however, Providence was on their side for the outward ejection of the atmosphere within the metallic world had flung them nearly half the distance to the silent rows of space machines on the metallic plain which had been placed there for destruction when Rad was to have given the order.

So as each one began to descend from the initial fall he struggled desperately forward step by step, foot by foot, yard by yard, Senver holding tightly on to Lucy Ainsworth and dragging her along with him. Slowly, inevitably, the first of the long line of vessels began to come nearer and below in the metallic world of the scientists there was asphyxiation and death. . . .

Of the two hundred souls who set out for ZX70 only fifteen returned. Amongst them were Mark Senver and Lucy Ainsworth and several Mercurians. Martin Dodd had paid the price of asphyxiation on the far distant world, but there had at least been enough of the engineers of Mercury left to make the project of removing ZX70 from its orbit and transferring it to a point near Pluto's orbit successful. Thus-wise was the assignment of 2270 successfully completed, and there shone down upon the earthly solar system, recovering from the onslaught of being removed from its normal position to an entirely new one round its new sun, all the warmth and light it could ever need. But amongst the highbrow scientific circles of Earth, Mercury, Venus, and all the other worlds of the system, it was never known that a woman's kiss and a little common salt had made the project possible.

THE END

[The end of *A Saga of 2270 A. D.* by John Russell Fearn (as Volsted Gridban)]