

# SCIENCE FICTION

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JUNE

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ENDS

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by EANDO BINDER  
also

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WELLMAN

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*He vaulted with all his strength.*

# MOON HEAVEN

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Dom Passante.

First published *Science Fiction*, June 1939.

*A meteor disables a small ship of the void, and Brig Dean is forced to land his party on a wild, unexplored satellite! But their safety seems assured—until the primeval inhabitants begin to resent the presence of Earthmen!*

## CHAPTER I

Two pairs of worried eyes stared apprehensively at the fuel gage; it was nearly down to zero. The giant rocket exhausts gasped and choked noisily over a fast-diminishing supply of explosive.

"It's that meteor bumping we got coming through the asteroid belt," panted Brig Dean, crack American space pilot, as he swung around from the control board. "I felt her jolt, but I never figured she'd had a crack on the jets. The power's leaking. . . ."

"Well, don't stand there talking like a textbook!" wailed Cynthia Fowlie, flapping helplessly up and down in a sheath of green silk. "We're going to crash! Oh, why did I ever become engaged to an American spaceman? Why didn't I stop in London? Look—look! What's that?"

Her bejeweled white hand pointed through the window and her vivid blue eyes opened wide in alarmed surprise. She was a beautiful woman, and knew it; what she didn't know was that she was vain and exceedingly selfish. . . .

Brig swung around with tight lips. His gray eyes were bright and hard.

"That's Jupiter," he growled; "and it makes it plenty bad, too. We can't escape his gravitational field with this leak. Our only course is to land on one of his moons—if we're lucky!"

"One of the moons!" Cynthia cried in horror. "But—but, Brig, what about my visiting father at the Uranian settlement? That's what we came on this journey for, wasn't it? To go to Uranus and get married?"

"Have to wait," Brig said briefly. He clamped strong hands down on the rocket controls. His eyes studied the whirling moons of Jupiter—Ganymede, Io, Europa, and Callisto. The other five didn't count; they were only derelict rocks, anyway.

"I guess Io's about the nearest," he muttered presently, and giving a lateral blast to the vessel, he swung it rather laboringly away from Jove's titanic field.

"It's our only chance," he went on. "We'll have to ditch for the time being and wait until a regular line vessel passes this way. Won't be more than a fortnight. . . ."

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Cynthia stared at the back of his black head for a moment, pushed aside an aluminum-colored lock of hair from her white forehead. Awkwardly, due to the ship's lurching, she went over to the figure lounging in the swinging armchair.

"Monty, what do we do?" she entreated, spreading her arms. "What do we do? We just can't land on this nasty old Jovian moon. Think of the wreck I'll look if we have to stay very long. . . . ! Me, the best-dressed woman in England."

The lounging figure, potential best man at the Uranian wedding, disentangled himself. Immaculately clad limbs took their right positions. Lemon-haired Lord Montgomery Stinson, chinless blue-eyed cousin of Cynthia, stood up—then promptly sat down again as Brig hurtled the spluttering vessel around in a curving arc.

"After all, Cyn, there isn't so deuced much I can do," he complained, wincing visibly at the sinking sensation in his stomach. "I mean to say, I don't dashed well understand how to run these confounded space things, anyhow. Come to think of it, it serves you right. If you'd taken an ordinary vessel—"

“And engaged to Brig Dean, crack space pilot!” Cynthia exclaimed, ashy pale with space-strain. “I couldn’t do that, Monty. Besides, on an ordinary liner, I’d have to mix with the common rabble. Naturally, that’s impossible!”

Monty stared around the control cabin uneasily; finally he looked at Brig’s broad, hunched shoulders.

“I say, old fellow, did you say Io?”

“Yeah.” Brig twisted momentarily. “Better swing onto something. We’ll land in a minute—and pretty forcibly, I’m afraid. Our forward jets are dead. . . .” He broke off and yelled, “Betts! Betts! Come here!”

A momentary silence as the ship hurtled towards the brilliantly gleaming Jovian moon—then a portly figure of medium height, attired rather incongruously in a morning suit, silently entered from the kitchen region of the vessel.

“Yes, sir?”

“Betts, we’re going to land. In case of any mishaps, I want you to stand by and help me get all the valuables off the ship.”

“Very good, sir. Io, I believe?”

“Right! Know anything about it?”

Betts’ three chins quivered momentarily in pent-up pleasure. His pale blue eyes became earnest.

“Quite a deal, Mr. Dean, if I may be permitted. I understand it is an outpost planet, useless as a trading center, therein differing from Ganymede, Callisto and Europa, which are, of course, both trading and refueling centers. Io, I understand, turns one face to the primary, Jupiter, with the result that Io has been drawn into valley form on the side opposite Jupiter. In this valley, according to the tests of Murchinson and Snedley, sir—expedition in 2112, I believe—is a breathable atmosphere, ceasing at a height of five hundred feet and there becoming pure vacuo. . . .”

“Nice going, Betts,” Brig murmured, tense eyes fixed on the flying moon.

“Thank you, sir. There are other things. Io’s gravity is a third of Earth’s, and her solar revolution is forty-two hours or thereabouts. . . . Forgive me, sir. My interest in the moons of Jove rather carries me away at times.”

“That’s beastly clever of you, Betts,” observed Monty, in wonderment. “Funny! To think my manservant knows all that!”

Betts turned deferentially. “The other details are none too clear, my lord. I understand that one Captain Rutter and his wife crashed here some twenty years ago and were never found. Subsequent explorers have found little on Io to commend it. It is a desert island of space, if I have your lordship’s permission to use the phrase—”

“Get ready!” Brig interrupted curtly; and simultaneously the ship darted into what little atmosphere the non-Jovian side of the satellite possessed.

Brig stared below. The ship was leveling over a deep, fertile, jungle-infested valley, bathed in the triple lights of Europa, Ganymede, and the distant disk-like Sun. The valley—drawn thus by the terrific pull of the primary—occupied an approximate half of Io, bounded on all sides by black, cruel mountains which skirted a vast rocky plateau bathed in the sullen green light of Jupiter himself.

There was no time to observe more. Brig held his breath as the vessel plunged into the midst of the valley, landed with a crash that tore down trees, creepers and plants in the

rush. . . . There was a violent jolt and a long soggy thud—then the ship began to tremble and started sinking gradually.

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Brig glanced out of the window.

“A swamp! We’re sinking! Outside—quick!”

He picked the fallen, gasping Cynthia from the floor with consummate ease; she weighed very little in the third-normal gravity. Betts, his cumbersome body comfortable for once, was spinning the airlock screws. Monty rose up and uneasily adjusted rimless glasses.

“Sinking?” he repeated helplessly. “Oh, dear!”

Brig, all action, ignored him. He began snatching at all the light valuables he needed, crammed them into his pockets, his shirt, everywhere he could.

“Step on it, will you!” he yelled, as Monty and the girl looked dubiously outside on a steamy expanse of jungle. “Betts, give them a hand.”

“With pleasure, sir.”

He stepped outside and tested the ground and jumped back immediately. It was pure bog—nearly ordinary water. Dubiously, he studied the ground beyond; there it seemed to have solidity.

“Here, I’ll try it,” Brig said, looking with him. “Don’t come until I tell you.”

He stepped back a little, hugged his various valuables, then vaulted with all his strength. He cleared the bog with ease in the slight attraction, landed in lushy but quite supportable loam.

“O. K.!” he yelled. “Come on!”

There was a stir in the lopsided airlock. Cynthia flew towards him like five-foot-six of green ribbon. He caught her, set her down. . . . His Lordship dropped short and fell knee deep, floundered out with ruined trousers and revolted face. Betts was last, bearing in his arms the portable electrical equipment.

“It occurred to me, sir, we might need it—for signaling,” he explained ambiguously, as he landed.

“Huh?” Brig puzzled; then he shrugged. “Mebbe. You’d better come back with me. We’ve got to grab portable tents, space-suits, and several things before the ship sinks. Let’s go.”

“Delighted, sir.”

Time and again they vaulted back and forth over the morass, accomplishing leaps that would have been farcical on Earth. . . . Little by little they brought everything portable they could find; the slight attraction made heavy objects simple to carry—but at last it was no longer safe to venture. The vessel gave a heavy lurch, settled down, vanished in a slowly closing eddy of ocher bubbles.

“It would appear to have sunk, sir,” Betts commented sadly, flattening back his thinning hair. “Most deplorable, if I may say so . . .”

Brig shrugged helplessly. “Eighty thousand dollars at the bottom of a morass. Thank Heaven it was a service machine and not backed by my own money.”

“Have you got that much?” asked Monty affably. “Dash it, I thought you were marrying Cyn because you were broke—”

“Monty—you idiot!” she flamed, turning on him. “You know perfectly well it’s love at first sight. . . . And in front of your servant, too!”

“I assure you, my lord, that your confidence will be respected,” Betts murmured calmly.

“Considering we’re the only people on this hell-fired moon, that’s no news,” Brig grunted. “As for my financial status, I am broke. So what? The market crash two years back saw to that. . . . I’ll start over again somehow— But come on, let’s get moving. We’ve got these tents to fix. Betts, you fix the props.”

Betts moved with his new-found celerity. Cynthia flapped her white arms helplessly.

“But work, Brig, in this heat!” she protested, fanning herself. “After all, there are certain things a woman of position must remember, even here. Poise, deportment, and dignity. Suppose—suppose my makeup were to become smeared?” she wound up in horror.

“It probably will,” Brig assured her laconically, pegging down the tent poles as Betts held them. “Temperature here is far over a hundred degrees; makes Central Africa feel like an ice-box. It’s solar heat and Io’s internal warmth that’s responsible. The rest of Io will be void-cold. Jupiter’s no use for heat. . . .”

Monty tore off his coat impatiently, laid it reverently with the rest of the equipment.

“May as well help, I suppose,” he grumbled; “but I regard it as a damned insult. A slur on the traditions of the Stinsons. Ducal halls—and things.”

“Forget your ducal halls and grab this rope,” Brig grunted. “Cyn, hold this canvas— That’s it. Now we’re going places.”



## CHAPTER II

In two hours a makeshift camp had been erected, split up into sleeping quarters, cooking tent, general and dining tent. Betts came to the rescue with a meal from tins warmed over the electric heater.

During this period, the lights shifted somewhat. Ganymede had set, but Callisto had risen. The Sun had not changed position very much. Since Io takes 42 hours to revolve, its solar day is roughly twice as long as an Earthly one.

After the meal, Brig went to the tent door and looked around him. The jungle seemed peculiarly silent—a jungle made up of trees and plants totally foreign to his spatial knowledge. It had about it a certain odd, attractive beauty. Its principal trees were feathery, palmlike creations, bolstered around their boles with thick, vividly-hued verdure.

Struck with a sudden thought, he turned back into the tent, regarded Betts as he removed the remains of the meal.

“Betts, I believe you said something about a signal? What were you driving at?”

“Well, sir, it occurred to me that on the Jovian side of this moon there will probably be carbon. If we could obtain two sticks or pencils of the substance, fix them in our electric equipment, and break the electric current at the points of the carbon, we would have an extremely brilliant signal—in truth a carbon arc. No ship could fail to observe it.”

Brig nodded slowly. “You’ve got something there, Betts. . . . Seems to me you’re something of a scientist.”

Betts smiled humbly. “Forgive my saying so, sir, but the well trained servant is the master of many vocations. . . . I would like to add, I would be willing to accompany you to the plateau in search of carbon.”

“So you shall, when we’ve had a night’s rest. In the meantime I don’t think it would be a bad idea to see what sort of a jungle we’re in. How about an expedition?”

“Too hot,” groaned Monty. “The work with the tents has left me a mess of bally nerves.”

“I’ll come,” Cynthia volunteered, rising languidly. “I may be able to find something to use for makeup. My compact went down with the ship.”

Brig shrugged, turned to Betts. “You’d better come too. We don’t know what we may find and the more there are of us—”

“Exactly, sir. Ray guns, of course?”

“Yes, right away.”

“I might as well come,” Monty broke in, rising hurriedly. “I wish you didn’t have to be so energetic, though. . . .”

Brig didn’t answer him. Betts reappeared in the tent with four ray guns and the party moved out into the clearing, entered the jungle’s steamy, lacy folds.

Monty grumbled perpetually; Cynthia floundered on high heels and bewailed the rents that were being torn in her silken gown.

“You ought to wear shorts,” Brig remarked dryly. “There are some in the clothing equipment back at the tent. And flat shoes.”

“Shorts!” she echoed, horrified. “Me? Good Lord, do you think I’m a common woman pilot, or something?”

“No, but this is 2130 and it’s time you behaved with sense,” Brig growled. “I can’t make you out, Cyn; our landing here has shown me lots of things I’d never have thought were possible in your make-up—”

“Because you’re a penniless space pilot, a space trotter who’s always looking for a perfect place to live, doesn’t give you the right to insult me!” she said hotly. “Sometimes I wonder what I ever saw in you to—”

“Oh, skip it,” Brig sighed wearily. “Come on.”

He turned to advance, but Cynthia stopped suddenly and looked up in surprise. “What’s that?” she whispered.

The others looked above. Brig stared in wonderment at something quivering in the tree branch just over their heads—then suddenly Betts hurtled forward, clutched the girl around the waist in a flying tackle, and bore her to the ground.

Instantly the others fell back, stared in frozen horror at a snake-like object that had abruptly hurtled forward with bullet swiftness and imbedded itself in the tree beside them. It quivered spasmodically, died from the sheer impact of collision.

Brig stared at it in horror. It was a pure ropy organism, bounded with incredibly powerful muscles.

Betts floundered to his feet and dragged the gasping Cynthia up beside him.

“Pardon my roughness, miss,” he apologized. “That object is an Ionian impaler, or more technically, *impalia diaboli*. It usually kills its prey by behaving like a living javelin—buries its head inside its prey and kills it, absorbing nourishment at the same time. A flesh eater, obviously. If it misses. . . .” He glanced significantly at the dead organism.

“Thank God you recognized it in time,” Brig whispered. “How’d you ever come to know about it?”

“Quite simple, sir. I have read the copious notes of Murchinson and Snedley, wherein it is mentioned. There are other things. . . . Really, sir, Io interests me immensely. Shall we proceed?”

“I’m not too sure,” muttered Monty. “Suppose another of these things attacks us?”

“If we keep alert, my lord, we can always dodge them.”

“Let’s go,” Brig said, taking Cynthia’s arm.

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They resumed their progress, hardly realizing how subtly their positions had reversed. Betts, though still a servant in essence, had in truth become the leader of the party. His unexpected knowledge of things Ionian had elevated him considerably.

The fantastic wonder of the place held the party silent, for the most part. They were accustomed by now to the intense, cloying heat and lighter gravity—but what they were not used to was the constant shift of lights as the moons went across the sky, outstripping the slower-moving Sun. Everything had three shadows, the constant changing of which formed sinister patterns at times.

“I say, just a minute!” Monty exclaimed, stopping. “What’s this?”

He came forward from the rear, holding up a corroded object with an inlaid pearl handle. Most of the pearl had fallen away; the whole thing was near to collapsing in rust—but what was left of it was plainly distinguishable as a hunting knife.

“Where’d you find it?” Brig demanded, studying it.

“Back on the trail there; I kicked against it. Somebody’s been here, what?”

“Yeah, but a mighty long time ago.”

Betts hovered up, took it courteously—studied it.

“I believe it must have belonged to Captain and Mrs. Rutter,” he said slowly. “You notice, my lord, it is the early type knife, in use twenty years ago. The later explorers did not use knives of this type—Murchinson and Snedley for instance. This trail, then, must once have been traversed by the long-dead Rutters.”

He tossed the relic to the ground, dusted his plump fingers.

“So be it, then. I often wondered what happened to the Rutters. They—”

He broke off and turned at a sudden crackling of branches nearby. Immediately he and Brig whipped out their ray guns, then lowered them at the odd, fantastic little creature that hopped into the clearing.

It was perhaps eighteen inches tall, moving with the gait of a baby ape, its face astonishingly like that of a pathetic human child. As it advanced, it chattered and whimpered, began to clutch Brig’s leg imploringly.

“Well, old man, what’s the matter?” He heaved it up and studied it, stroking it gently. It was clearly frightened.

Betts cleared his throat “A baby manape, sir—a curious kind of hybrid, cross between man and ape with an almost human intellect. Rather treacherous when full grown, I believe.”

“Let me have him!” Cynthia begged, cuddling the soft, hairy body in her arms. “He’s just too sweet! I’m going to make him my pet; I’ve so missed poor Pogo since we left Earth.”

“Pogo?” Brig hazarded; then he remembered. “Oh, that Pekingese of yours!”

“Don’t you think we’d better stagger back?” suggested Monty nervously. “I mean to say, apes and snakes and things. We might meet a dinosaur or something. . . .”

Brig nodded. “O. K., we’ll go back. We’ve seen enough. . . .”

Turning, they began to retrace their steps. As they went, they could hear the strange sounds of the champagne flitters—or, in modern American, the “pop and bubble” birds—odd, fast moving specimens resembling storks, with a chirping note like the pulling of the cork and subsequent pouring of champagne.

In temperament they were akin to moths singeing their wings—but instead of seeking flame, the flitters chose to rise to the airless heights fringing the valley, there to commit suicide in the ghastly cold sweeping in from the little world’s Jovian side.

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Once they regained camp, the party retired, exhausted with the heat and their activities. Cynthia took her new-found pet to her tent with her, doting over it with almost sickly intensity. By the time she had finished fussing with it, the camp was quiet.

She turned and switched off the portable lamp; the lights of the moons and sinking sun moved slowly across the roughly canvased floor. Abruptly, she turned as the tent flap opened. Monty came in slowly, fully dressed in his mud-stained suit, cigarette smoking lazily between his lips.

“Y’know, Cyn, it’s all very idiotic,” he complained, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“What is?” She stared at him surprisedly in the twilight.

“Your marrying Brig—when we get to Uranus. What do you want to do it for? Hang it all, he’s admitted he’s no money—and I’m darn sure you don’t love him. So, why do it? I’d marry you tomorrow if you’d have me.”

“I know, Monty—but if I did that, I wouldn’t have nearly so much money as I shall get if I marry Brig. You know, of course, that father’s fortune is far larger than yours?”

“Of course, but—”

“Well, when father dies, I shall get the lot, providing I marry Brig, together with a handsome yearly allowance while he lives. Simple, isn’t it? Dad dotes on Brig because he’s the ace pilot of the spaceways, and since father is himself chief of that organization, I just can’t help myself. . . . You do understand, Monty, don’t you?”

“I suppose so. You don’t love him, do you?”

“Who could? He’s all brawn. . . . Not like you—”

Cynthia paused in mid-sentence and stared through the gauzy wall of the tent. Something was moving in the shifting lights. Monty stared with her, gulped audibly.

Then something came into fuller view, followed by others—stooping, shagging forms moving forward slowly, muttering and chanting strangely among themselves.

“Apes!” Cynthia screamed suddenly, clapping a hand to her mouth. “Monty! They’re apes!”

He blinked stupidly, uncertain as to what to do—then, as the shambling figures came nearer, he jumped to his feet, intending to head for the interconnecting tent flap joining the other. The lesser gravity tripped him up. By the time he was on his feet, Brig and Betts had appeared, drawn by the girl’s cry.

“What’s the matter, Cyn?” Brig strode over to her after a mere passing glance at Monty. Betts blocked the inter-flap.

“Apes!” she faltered. “L-look!”

“Manapes, miss,” Betts corrected, gazing at them. “Unless I am very much mistaken, they are looking for this little lost one on the bed here. It may mean trouble if we don’t give it back.”

Brig studied the growing circle of creatures with worried eyes. They were surrounding the entire camp, evidently not only intent on rescuing their lost baby, but on exacting vengeance for his theft also.

Reaching backwards, Brig grabbed the little creature from the bed, flung the tent flap to one side and dropped the baby, whimpering, outside. There was a concerted rush towards it. He watched tensely.

“I ought not to have let you bring it,” he muttered. “I might have known the parents and tribe would come after it—just like lions or tigers do. . . . Trouble is, these things are more brainy than lions and tigers. They might do anything.”

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Betts disappeared through the inter-door. He returned with four ray guns and handed them around.

“I—I don’t know how to use these things,” Cynthia wailed, fingering it gingerly. “I didn’t know how when we were in the jungle, either. Oh, Brig, I—”

“Shut up!” he hissed. “They’ll hear you!”

He was right. With menacing care, the manapes, reinforced now by others from the jungle, closed their circle towards the tents. Every detail of their subhuman faces and hairy bodies became distinctly visible in the changing lights.

“Get ready for a fight,” Brig muttered, dropping to one knee to steady his intended aim. “Betts—Monty, down beside me. Cyn, stay on the bed. You may be safer. . . .”

She was crying now, frightened out of her wits. Monty fidgeted with his gun, swore limpidly.

Brig and Betts both tensed, their eyes bright and hard, guns ready as the packed creatures reached the gauzy tent wall; the sound of their labored breathing became distinctly audible—

Then something inexplicable happened. There was a brief sound, almost like the merry laugh of a woman, and it was followed almost immediately by a whirring, buzz-saw note like a horde of bees pouring from a hive. The pale light of the setting sun and the scurrying moons was dimmed by a sudden swirling bit of cloud. The buzzing grew louder. . . . The twilight dimmed to almost pitch darkness.

“Look, sir!” Betts whispered. “Millions of insects!”

Brig nodded helplessly and got to his feet. He stared out on the disorganized mob of manapes. They were writhing and twisting as though in the grip of something devastatingly ticklish. They were laughing! Actually laughing with uncannily human tones and the more they were smothered in the whirling cloud of zipping, darting insects, the more they laughed!

They doubled up in insane mirth. The clearing became a mass of hysterical pandemonium, male and female manapes alike rolling over and over on the ground, bellowing until it seemed their lungs would burst.

“What in Heavens’ name happened?” Brig gasped, astounded. “Betts, do you know?”

He slid swiftly to the outer flap and gently drew it aside. Instantly, he jerked back as a cloud of the insects came whizzing in like a multitude of wasps.

“Most careless of me, sir!” he panted. “I—I just wanted to make sure. They’re laughing bugs, sir. . . .” He brushed them off frantically as they stung his face and hands. “Keep clear of them if you can—”

That was impossible. The things were everywhere. They smothered the screaming Cynthia in one solid cloud, left her gasping and gurgling with revolted horror; then they swept across to Monty and enveloped him—and quickly moved on to Brig.

He felt an extraordinary sensation surge through him; it felt like a dentist’s laughing gas. . . . But this was no nitrous oxide; it was a sudden change in brain sensations. He was prompted by an ungovernable desire to laugh—laugh insanely, for no reason!

Betts’ face merged up in the half-light like a kid’s balloon, grinning from ear to ear.

“Hysteria termite, sir,” he gasped out, fighting for control. “Harmless, but its sting poisons the blood stream—produces a spurious energy and needless merriment. I remember. . . . Murchinson and Snedley were bitten. Page six, sir, if I remember, of volume one. . . . Ha-ha! Pardon me! Io and Insects, sir. . . . Safe enough from manapes, sir, though I don’t know how they came so conveniently. . . . Bugs, I mean. Ha-ha! Ha— Pardon me!”

With a gulp, Betts floundered outside into the clearing, unable to control himself any longer. He mingled with the manapes, but like him, they were too convulsed with laughter to attack him. He was laughing, peal upon peal. He blundered out of Brig’s sight.

Brig swung round, still holding onto the threads of control. He went across to the hysterically giggling Cynthia and caught her slim shoulders tightly.

“Cyn, shut up!” he shouted hoarsely. “Control yourself; you’ve been bitten by— Cyn, please!”

She only yelled the louder, tears streaming down her cheeks. He shook her until the hair tumbled in front of her face; he struck her sharply across both cheeks, but it made no difference. Finally he left her coiled up in paroxysms of merriment.

It was the same with Monty. He lay on the floor, rolling over and over, breathless with hysteria. . . . Brig breathed hard, felt himself slipping. The next thing he knew, he too had burst into peal upon peal of gusty laughter. He felt as though nothing in the world mattered.

Shakily, quaking with mirth, he clawed his way into the adjoining living tent and sat down, trying vainly to recover control. He laughed so much that it hurt; and as the queer

poison of the zipping laughing bugs worked deeper into his system, he began to lose all consciousness of his surroundings.

### CHAPTER III

Brig became suddenly aware that his head ached, that he was shaking like a leaf. He opened his eyes and peered around the tent. Monty and Cynthia were there, slumped into portable chairs, breathing hard, utterly disheveled and overcome with reaction.

Outside the tent there was stillness. Sunlight had disappeared, but Europa, Ganymede and Callisto compensated for the loss.

Brig stirred stiffly. "Whew! What a hangover!"

Wincing, he got to his feet. He was damp with sweat. Vainly he tried to piece together the intervening hours—or minutes, but with no success. The hysteria had gone now, but the reaction was terrific. . . . Moving across to the kit, he jerked out a bottle of restorative, forced it down his throat. Then he revived Monty and the girl. Groaning, they sat up.

Cynthia, pale and perspiring, looked up with lack-luster eyes.

"Brig, what happened?" she asked dully; and briefly he told her.

"Betts!" called Monty wearily. "Betts, where are you? Come here. . . ."

"He went out into the jungle," Brig told him. "So far, he hasn't come back. I guess I'd better go out and find him."

He turned towards the tent door, mastering his shaking limbs, but at the same instant, Betts came slowly through it. His thin hair was draped over his forehead, his clothes were torn and filthy. Under one arm he carried something like a pink melon.

Unsteadily, he made his way to the center of the tent, the eyes of the others following him in amazement. Reverently he laid the melon down. Only then did it become evident that it was alive!—a living organism with a vast distended mouth gaping weirdly.

"Ohhh!" Cynthia yelled in horror, leaping up; then she sat down again as her head spun like a top. "B-Betts, take—take that horrible thing away at once!"

"Never knew anything like it," Betts muttered uncertainly, passing a hand over his brow. "Woman. . . . Laughter. . . . Now this!" He raised a plump finger significantly to his lips, and whispered, "Sssh! Listen to this!" Then, swinging around to the melon, he barked, "What is two and two?"

"Four!" the melon answered promptly, in a husky voice.

Brig's eyes popped. Cynthia and Monty stared at each other like a couple of drunks.

"Then, Heaven be praised, I am not intoxicated!" Betts breathed in relief. "It does talk! I'm plain, cold sober!" Standing erect, he tried to regain his dignity, but like the others he was still quaking from the hysteria's reaction.

Brig strode across. "Look here, what is this?" he demanded, staring at the thing that was devoid of eyes, ears and nose—that was all mouth and nothing more. "Where'd you get this? Did it actually say 'Four' just now, or do you include ventriloquism among your accomplishments?"

"This, sir, is a true native of Io," Betts observed stiffly. "It is made up of carbohydrates, and consumes carbohydrates for nourishment. Normally we are wont to call carbohydrates sugar, starch, and so forth—but you must admit they can exist in minute quantities in the air—especially here. The invisible mites which are constantly swarming into its mouth are of carbohydrate basis."

"But this thing's a fruit!" Brig yelled.

“No, sir—forgive me. It is carbon, developed along human lines. You notice the absence of chlorophyll, the green substance by which plants break down inorganic matter and so build up organic matter from the simplest constituents. If this were a true plant, it would be green. It is protoplasmic, cellular—carbon, sir! I am given to understand that it is only part of a parent tree, but can live quite comfortably by itself.”

“Yeah?” Brig was still gaping.

“It is intelligent. It reasons. It talks by impressing sound waves on the air from its interior bladder; those sound waves resemble human words. Is that so strange, sir? A good musician can make his violin closely imitate a human voice by producing the right sound waves. . . . Most bizarre, sir—most bizarre!”

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Brig came to himself suddenly. “But where the devil did you get the thing?” he demanded. “She gave it to me, sir. I met her in the jungle. . . . A most delightful young lady. Quite educated, too.”

“Young lady! Jungle!” Brig gulped. “What the devil are you talking about?”

Cynthia and Monty got out of their chairs and came closer, staring at Betts wonderingly. He didn’t seem very certain of himself.

“When I was laughing, sir—for which I shall never forgive myself—I blundered into the jungle. I came face to face with a young woman, very . . . ahem! . . . lightly clad. She gave me a weed of some kind that stopped my laughing. She was carrying this—er—organism under her arm and, after a while, gave it to me. Then she told me all about its origin and life. Finally she suggested we listen very carefully to what it had to say. . . .”

Betts stopped and cast his eyes roofwards. “I wonder, sir, if I dreamed it?”

“You bet you did!” Brig snapped. “The organism is real enough, but the girl—! Hang it all, Betts! And her talking in English, too! The thing’s impossible.

“Maybe, sir; I’m still not too sure.”

Brig shrugged. “Well, anyway, we’ve no time now to bother about your dreams. You’d better scramble some breakfast together—if it is breakfast, that is. We’ve got to head for the Jove side and collect those carbon pencils. The sooner we get out of this nutty place, the better I’ll like it.”

“Very good, sir.” Shaking his head doubtfully, Betts went outside to the cooking tent.

In silence, Brig studied the mouthy object, and the more closely he studied it, the more it became apparent that it was palpitating slowly with life energy. Its mouth, too, was a mass of fine hairs, evidently flawlessly designed for catching invisible aerial mites and retaining them.

“Two and two?” he questioned suddenly.

“Four,” came the prompt answer, but the mouth didn’t move. The sound came from inside.

“It’s a trick,” muttered Monty disgustedly. “Betts must have been drunk and fashioned this thing. Break it open and see what makes it tick—”

“It’s no trick,” Brig interrupted, shaking his head. “The thing is quite intelligent. I’m not overly surprised. After all, there’s some plant on Titan that’s a natural singer. This isn’t so queer. . . . What’s your name?” he finished suddenly.

“Jack Horner. Sit in the corner, eating curds and whey.”

“But—but he didn’t!” Cynthia said, thinking. “It was Bo-Peep, or somebody. . . .”

“It was Miss Muffet, darling,” Monty said patiently.

Brig raised his eyebrows. “Darling, huh? Nice going for a best man. . . .” His lips tightened a little as he turned back to the thing.



“Jack Horner, eh? Anything else?”

“A stands for Atmosphere, not very much here; but if you stop in the valley you’ve nothing to fear. B stands for—”

“All right, all right,” Brig interrupted hastily; and he turned aside, pondering. “Where the devil did this thing pick up such nursery rhymes?” he asked blankly. “Somebody’s taught it them, and with a modern flavor, too.”

“Perhaps there was a woman,” Cynthia suggested, languidly.

“But, Cyn, it is so absurd! What woman could there be here, in a crackpot place like this, who’d teach a melon nursery rhymes? The thing’s idiotic. Besides—”

“C is for Carbon in so many forms, Io is full of it, life simply spawns,” Jack Horner observed. “D is for diamond, which is carbon quite true, money and fortune for me and for you.”

“What’s that?” Cynthia asked abruptly, gazing alertly.

“He’s right,” Brig murmured. “Diamonds are pure carbon. It never occurred to me that—”

“There may be something in it, sir,” Betts remarked, as he came in with a loaded tray. “I heard Mr. Horner’s last words. Possibly there are diamonds in plenty on the Jove side of this globe. It would seem the young lady’s request that we listen to Mr. Horner’s observations was quite significant.”

“You still believe you saw her, don’t you?” Brig smiled.

“I do lean to the view, sir, yes. My father suffered from delusions through excess of alcohol, but acquired traits are not inheritable. Therefore I did not suffer from delusions.”

“Sound reasoning,” Brig grinned; then he became serious. “Guess I could do with a handful of diamonds at that. Might repair my shattered fortunes.”

“Come to think of it, so could I,” murmured Cynthia, giving her brain unaccustomed hard work. “I mean to say one can be quite independent of parental wishes if one has a private fortune, can’t one?”

Monty’s eyes brightened at the hidden cunning in her voice.

“By gad, rather! Deuced good, Cyn—deuced good.”

Brig regarded them in puzzlement for a moment, then turned back to Betts.

“The minute we’re through with this meal, we’ll head for the Jove side—all of us. We’ve enough space-suits.”

“Very good, sir.”

Cynthia snickered, “Suits me! I’ve always wanted to see a diamond naked, so to speak. . . .”

---

An hour later, encased in clumsy, heavy-booted space-suits, the four headed away from the clearing towards the valley side two miles distant. Save for occasional encounters with swamp region, and less frequently with the savage impalers, they made the trip without mishap. Then began the long, arduous climb to the five hundred foot summit of the valley side.

Never before had they quite realized the oddity of this world. This valley, drawn by the terrific pull of Jupiter, contained all the air the satellite possessed. At a 250-foot height, it thinned out perceptibly—nothing could live long in it, save perhaps the suicidal champagne flitters.

At 300 feet the air was dehydrated; at 500 feet it was almost a vacuum. . . .

Here, at the summit of the valley, the hot, steamy blue-black sky had become replaced by the virgin, soulless black of space, in which the neighboring moons and newly-risen sun hung

with savage brilliance. The further the party moved beyond the valley summit, the lower the sun sank and the higher vast Jupiter poked himself over the opposite horizon.

At last they gained the broad, black-dusted plateau itself. Here, Jupiter was pouring forth his complete complement of yellow light, but according to the thermopile, hardly a trace of heat.

“Pressure almost zero, sir,” Betts remarked, consulting the portable instruments he was carrying. “There is a faint trace of warmth, of nearly non-existent atmosphere. The former obviously comes from Jupiter’s cold disk, and the latter is a surplus from the valley. . . .”

“Rather scary, isn’t it?” muttered Cynthia, switching on her electric audiophone. “I almost wish we hadn’t come.”

“You can return if you want,” Brig answered briefly, and he smiled a little at her expression behind the glass helmet. Incongruously enough, he suddenly wondered why the devil Monty had been with her in her tent the previous night. Silly thought!

Betts came up, unslung electrical equipment from his bloated shoulders.

“I’ve just been looking around, sir. Things are pretty much as Mr. Horner intimated, and also as I suspected. This side of the satellite is mainly carbon—in various modifications. There are also traces of carbon dioxide gas collected here and there, probably left behind from the time when Jupiter was at its hottest and thereby produced a considerable amount of carbon combustion. Here, sir, is the residue. . . .”

His massive boot stirred dusty black crystals that faintly caught the light of Jove. Brig watched keenly.

“Guess it might explain Io’s relatively high albedo,” he remarked. “These things do reflect quite a deal of light.”

“Undoubtedly, sir. May I call your attention to that?”

His arm pointed to a small black cliff nearby, riddled with cave entrances, fronted again by massive coal-black boulders.

“Natural carbon cliff!” Brig whistled. “Come on. . . .”

He started the advance with Betts beside him. Once they gained the cave, Betts stepped forward and snapped off two of the thousands of carbon stalactites depending from the cave entrance. With considerable difficulty, he fixed them into the roughly designed clamps of the small electric motor he carried.

“I would advise looking away, sir,” he warned, fixing the battery terminals. “Now . . . let us see.”

He moved the small switch that operated the storage battery; almost instantly the separated carbon pencils flared into blinding life at their tips, created entirely by the resistance between them to the passage of current.

Betts fumbled for the switch; snapped it off. He stared at the dying red glow of the carbon points.

“That’s terrific!” Brig cried, clutching him eagerly. “Nice going, Betts! No ship can possibly miss a signal of that brilliance. . . . Of course, it will mean somebody having to stay here to give the signal when a ship is sighted.”

“No, sir; forgive me. I have a time-table of the Earth-Pluto space service, and I have also kept a careful check of Earth hours since we arrived here. The next liner is due to pass near here in about four earth days. Therefore, a little in advance of that time, one of us will come here and give the signal.”

“Four more days in this ghastly place,” groaned Cynthia. “I wish to Heaven space travel had never been invented. . . . Incidentally,” she went on, with sudden keenness, “what about those diamonds? I don’t see any.”

“I fancy those rocks, miss . . .” Betts murmured, and turning about, he headed towards the massive boulders fronting the cave entrance. For a while, he studied them in silence in the Jove light, then, removing his ax began to hack steadily. Three heavy chunks fell off into his glove.

“Wealth, beyond imagination,” he murmured, his face beatific behind the glass. “These rocks are pure diamonds. . . . Pure carbon without a trace of impurity.”

“You—you mean these entire rocks are diamonds?” babbled Monty hysterically.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Then why the devil hasn’t somebody collected them before this?” demanded Brig. “Untold wealth lying here. . . . It just isn’t possible.”

“Possibly there are two reasons, sir. For one thing, the dark side of Io has never been explored—not even by Murchinson and Snedley. For another, it is doubtful if anybody untrained in the various forms of carbon would recognize this stuff as pure diamond in the unfinished state. Again, visitors are very few and far between here. The pull of Jove is—”

“O. K., never mind that,” Brig interrupted. “We’ve found them and I guess that’s all that matters. Come on; let’s get the bags filled.”

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The two capacious bags were opened up, Cynthia taking on the job of holding them open whilst the rock chippings were dropped into them. Her blue eyes went wider behind the glass every time she saw one fall. Her brain was no longer made up of cells but of surging dollar signs. . . .

When at last both bags were filled, Betts put his ax away with a sigh of content.

“The value is, of course, incalculable,” he breathed; “and since we are joint discoverers, the claim will be filed both in the United States and Britain—”

He broke off in surprise as Cynthia suddenly gave a violent jerk, a vigorous movement, and waved her arms wildly. She began to kick desperately.

“Call them off!” she screamed frantically. “Call them off!”

It was immediately apparent what was the matter. . . . So absorbed had they all been in their collecting efforts, they had failed to notice a small army of curious, dull gray objects, not unlike fast moving tortoises, gathered around them. Now, governed by sheer curiosity, they were crawling over the boots of the party. It needed no imagination to realize they had come from the depths of the carbon cave.

“Life, here! In a vacuum!” cried Brig, threshing his boots wildly. “How the devil—”

“Carbon life, sir,” Betts said, struggling hard to keep the things from puncturing his space-suit. “Not—not so improbable. . . . Carbon is the element on which all life is built. . . . Remember, sir, that the carbon atom forms the basis of an unlimited number of compounds. Its atoms can form long chains, but these are the skeletons to which other life, of infinite complication, attaches itself. . . . Here, apparently, carbon has taken a form rare to our knowledge, but by no means outside probability. Maybe a formation of pure carbon, unconnected with any higher form. Carbon life, eating pure carbon, naturally— Damn! Pardon me, sir. I thought my space-suit was nearly through.”

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Brig panted, swinging around. Then he gave a cry. Cynthia and Monty were already well away from the things, were rushing towards the edge of the

plateau leading down to the valley.

“Hey!” Brig yelled frantically. “Come back here! Give us a hand!”

“I’ll get them, sir.”

Betts dashed off after them, and Brig made to follow his leaping, floating form. . . . But in that he was too energetic; the toe of his heavy boot stubbed against one of the things, and he went sprawling. Before he could rise, they were swarming over him actively, tiny little scissor-like mouths working industriously on the fine metal of his space-suit.

Carbon, of course! It suddenly dawned on him. The metal of his suit had a carbon basis, mixed with innumerable other compounds. Probably the stuff was appetizing to them, something they had never known before. Whatever it was, they refused to be shaken free. As fast as he dusted them off, they came back again. His horrified eyes stared at growing dents and pockmarks.

He whirled round, determined to make a frantic effort to reach the plateau edge—but at that identical moment, the thing he most feared happened. Viciously sharp teeth plowed clean through the mesh, punctured his only protection against the airless void.

Instantly the pressure inside his suit ripped the tooth-hole open wide; air gushed mistily out and evaporated. He fell blindly on his knees, ready for instant death. He gasped chokingly as the air left his lungs. Blood oozed from his nostrils, hammered in his ears and smarting eyes.

He fell flat, aware of a terrific sense of inner pressures, of sudden violent near-apoplexy. He fought and struggled for the air that wasn’t there, lay with his suit now flattened to his figure, trying to understand why he still felt warm in this utter emptiness.

Where the devil was Betts? Silly thought now, as he was dying.

He stared through tortured eyes, felt his senses swimming with the absence of life-giving oxygen. Then he saw something that for a split second summoned a vague stir of life back to his brain.

A woman! A woman almost unclothed, save for a fabric of some kind around breast and hips. She was speeding towards him in long, lithe movements, her black hair flat to her head through the absence of air.

Delusion, of course! He was dying. . . . He shut his eyes again, felt himself trailing off. Then yet again he opened them as a knife flashed before him in the Jove light. The woman was real. Her nose was bleeding freely; her eyes were starting in sheer torture from her head; yet she still had mastery over her movements.

With what appeared prodigious strength, she ripped off the remains of his space-suit, tore off his helmet. For some reason, Brig felt momentarily eased for that. Then he was aware of being lifted in strong arms. . . . Beyond that was a complete and utter dark. . . .

## CHAPTER IV

Brig stirred slowly, conscious of only one glorious fact—he was not dead. He was breathing steadily, drawing in deep breaths of glorious air. For a while, he did nothing else; then very gradually the memory of events began to trace back into his mind.

The half-clad girl in the zero cold, her strength, the knife, his unconsciousness. . . . He opened his eyes suddenly, and for a moment the sun and Europa light dazzled him a little—

There she was!—standing against a tree, watching him, smiling a little. Now that he could see her clearly, he realized he had never seen anybody quite so like a goddess. She was tall, with a snow-white skin, obviously caused by lack of ultraviolet at Io's great distance from the sun.

Her eyes seemed to be violet-colored, her hair black. Her clothing consisted merely of a light garment resembling a modern Earth swim-suit, but made of pulped vegetable matter.

Brig found his voice with difficulty as he sat up.

"S-say, am I nuts?" he whispered.

As her smile widened, he saw that her teeth were very regular and white. "Are you?" she asked, almost mischievously.

"Then you talk?—talk English?" He got to his feet and went across to her. He judged she was about five foot seven tall, and muscled like a lioness.

"Yes, English," she assented, nodding her raven black head. "That is, English with American expression. I am an American, even though I've been here for the last twenty years. I'm Elsa Rutter, only child of the late Captain and Mrs. Rutter."

Brig stared at her, fingered the smudge of congealed blood under his nose.

"Of course, you're Brig Dean?" she said decisively.

"Yeah, that's right. You—you must be the girl Betts met up with when we were attacked by the manapes."

"Right!" she laughed. "I gave him Jack Horner. . . ."

Brig shrugged. "Of course, this is all screwy," he sighed. "Here I meet up with you and don't think much of it—just like I might meet a beautiful girl on the sidewalk back at home. I don't have to tell you I don't begin to get it, do I? How'd you come to be here, anyway?"

"Oh, it's pretty simple, really. Father and mother died here without being rescued. I was three when that happened. But I didn't die. Oh, no! You see, the Ionians took care of me—the bladder Ionians, like the one I gave to your friend Betts."

"And?"

"Well, the Ionians are actually trees with the power of locomotion on their roots. The bladder-mouths which talk are really only their fruit, their offsprings, as it were. You may have noticed from Jack Horner that they're not true plants; they have no chlorophyllic properties. They absorb oxygen and hydrogen just as you or I, and therefore are made up of the main carbohydrate order—sugar, glucose, fats, and so forth. Therefore, by feeding me on their own substance, which they did, I had food comparable, if not better, than any normal child. See?"

"Yeah; I get it. And you live here, you say?"

She moved from her lounging position. Her satiny skin rippled with the action. "Yes, and I never want to leave. Suppose you come with me and see my home?"

“Nothing I’d like better, but I’ve my own party to think of.”

“You’re nearer my home than your own camp,” she murmured. “Besides, surely you want to know more?”

“Plenty!” he agreed with vehemence, and at that she set the example by striding into the midst of the jungle, following a well worn trail with unerring accuracy. Brig began to wonder, as he stumbled along beside her, whether he was still unconscious; if this was a fantastic dream.

“You are lucky that I’ve kept my eye on you ever since your ship crashed here on Io,” she murmured, glancing at him with her deeply blue eyes. “But for my calling the hysteria termites to a muster, you would have caught it pretty badly from the manapes.”

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Brig snapped his fingers. “Then it was you! And I’ll swear I heard your laugh about the same time, too!”

“Like this?” she suggested, and demonstrated with a peal of silvery notes.

“Like that,” Brig agreed gravely; then after a pause, “I still don’t figure how you came to be up there on the plateau, in pure void. You saved my life.”

“That’s why I say it’s lucky I’ve kept my eye on you. I watched where you went. I guessed that, having Jack Horner with you, you would hear him remark sooner or later about diamonds. . . . But that space walk of mine wasn’t so very amazing. I’ve lived here all my life, and like a swimmer who can accustom himself to long periods under water, so have I, by occasional jaunts to the plateau, accustomed myself to void conditions.”

“But the cold!” Brig protested.

“Did you feel cold when your space-suit ripped?”

“Come to think of it, I didn’t.”

She smiled. “Of course not. Empty space is a perfect insulator of heat; you radiated heat faster than it could escape. The cold made no impression on you. What did tax you, and me, too, was the lack of air. Lung control in swimming and void experiments helped me to save you. I just managed it—and only just. I cut off your space-suit to relieve the tremendous strain on the tissues of your body. A body can stay in void without bursting, but not for long. Depends on the strength of the body. I’m far stronger than you, of course. . . .”

“So I noticed,” Brig murmured.

“Why not?” she asked quickly. “Io is only a third Earth normal. I have the body of an ordinary Earth woman, all the same muscles, but all my life I’ve been accustomed to a third the pull. The result has tripled my strength. Then there’s open-air life, certain health-giving radiations from the moons which make up for those the sun is too far distant to give, feeding on carbohydrates. . . . Well, I’m pretty strong!” she finished with a laugh.

They plunged on for a while in silence. Brig noticed the flawless ease with which she mastered the satellite’s slight pull.

“Just how did you learn English?” he asked suddenly.

“Radio.”

“Good Heavens, you don’t mean—”

“Why not?” she smiled. “Although the ship was wrecked, a good deal of the equipment was in order. When I grew old enough to understand life a little, I started to make myself comfortable. I read the ship’s books and learned the rudiments of language, learned all about radio, electricity, the space I live in, and so forth. There was no electricity, so I soon fixed that. I took the ship’s electric engines and attached them to a home-made water-wheel. It works as

good as a turbine and keeps a generator going. I run it from a stream near my place. . . . That started the radio. I tuned in Earth, Mars, Venus, Uranus—all the principal planets, and so little by little learned how to talk. Come to think of it, I've heard your name mentioned many a time as an ace spaceman. That right?"

Brig nodded slowly. "I guess so; yes. But I'm rather sick of it. It doesn't bring much happiness. I've made money, and lost it, chained myself up to a girl with a feather-weight brain and— Well, I guess that doesn't interest you, anyhow. There's one thing. Why exactly did you give Betts that Jack Horner thing?"

"Well, I usually carry a Jack Horner around with me for company and, when I had cured Betts of his laughing, I thought it might be a good idea if he took Jack with him. You see, I knew Jack would come out with that line about diamonds, and I thought the information would be useful to you and your party. Diamonds are valuable on Earth, of course. . . ."

"That was decent of you, Elsa," Brig said quietly. "Just the same, I don't think I got as big a kick out of finding those diamonds as the others did. Cynthia in particular."

"She's rather good looking, isn't she?"

Brig shrugged. "I guess so. . . . Tell me, why the blazes did you teach Jack Horner those nursery rhymes?"

"Not only him, all the Ionians," she laughed. "I used things around them that they'd understand, like 'A is for Atmosphere,' and so on. . . . Well, here we are!" she finished suddenly.

Brig looked up to find that they had entered a clearing—a clearing almost filled with a large ranch-like house fashioned from trees, ship's metal, numberless metal crates and boxes, leaves and vines. Stilts raised it a trifle from the soft ground.

Around it on all sides depended the tree Ionians, slow-moving protoplasm-yellow objects not dissimilar from Earthly beeches, smothered in yellow foliage from the midst of which poked the ridiculous mouthing faces of dozens of Jack Horners. . . .

As Brig and the girl approached them, they set up a chorus of welcome—the oddest chorus, mixed with American slang, obviously learned from radio, the girl's teaching, and their own subtle, peculiar imagination. Feathery branches reached down and caressed the girl affectionately as she passed by. Her slender white hand reached up and stroked the soft, golden foliage.

"Grand people," she said seriously, and led the way into her shack.

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Inside the shack, Brig gazed around in approval. The vast length of the single room was perfectly, though crudely furnished, some of it recognizable as ship's material; the rest was home-made. A badly scratched radio of ancient design, skilfully patched up, stood by the glassless window. Tables, chairs, a sofa—even electric light generated from the simple turbine standing over the stream outside—they were all present.

"I shouldn't have thought you'd need light here," Brig remarked.

"Oh, but I do. Now and again there are periods when Io is without light for several hours—when all the moons and the sun are below the horizon simultaneously. Then there are occasional eclipses. . . ."

He nodded slowly, watched her graceful, queenly figure moving swiftly back and forth. She hummed softly to herself as she moved; outside, a group of Jack Horners began with "A is for Atmosphere. . . ." Silly, absurd place, of course! And yet, not altogether. The girl was real enough—very beautiful, very happy, a goddess in a little backwater of peace.

She paused in the business of setting forth a meal of heavy fruits and tree-sap wine and looked across at Brig seriously.

“That was a good idea with the carbon arcs, Brig. When—when do you leave?”

“About four days,” he answered slowly. “Then it’s back to the old regime. Marriage to Cynthia, fortune from diamonds, enlistment in the coming war with Mars over the Canal Control question. Damned silly, isn’t it?” he asked abruptly.

“It sounds it,” she admitted. “I’m shut off here from that sort of thing. . . .”

She went on preparing the meal, finally signaled him to the table. With an unexpected feeling of drowsy content, he munched the soft fruits, drank the smooth wine. He’d half expected the girl would eat like a young savage, but she didn’t. Instead, she used old but serviceable cutlery from the ship.

“Even here, a lady must preserve her dignity,” she smiled across at him. “I know just what is civilized from the radio. Incidentally, if you need tobacco, you’ll find some tins of it in the corner there. Been sealed for twenty years, and still perfectly fresh.”

“Thanks, I don’t smoke. . . .” he said absently, then went on reflectively. “Even here a lady must preserve her dignity. I’ve heard that put in a different way by Cynthia—the girl I’m going to marry.”

“Love her?” Elsa asked casually.

“Funny, but I’m not sure. I think she got herself engaged to me, more than me to her. Frankly, I don’t think I do love her—now. . . .”

The girl looked back at her food, said nothing. Brig found his thoughts wandering. The long slumbering idealism in his make-up was beginning to come to life, and with it a certain bewilderment. For some reason, everything outside of this little peaceful place was unimportant.

Diamonds, wealth, Earth, Cynthia. . . . Meaningless parade. He had already tasted life in most of its phases and found it pretty much the same—drab. Colorless.

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Brig stopped through the long Ionian night, made himself comfortable on the sofa. The girl, for her part, took up what she proclaimed was her normal position—a restful pose deep in the gathering arms of a tree Ionian outside, raised high above whatever insectile life there might be crawling on the wet ground.

Brig slept well, happily. The next morning, the girl showed him the pool made by the turbine stream, demonstrated her magnificent swimming abilities. For an hour, they sported together in the cool depths—and all the time at the back of Brig’s mind were troubled thoughts, separated from the immediate delight of this paradise of soft water, friendly childlike organism trees, and shifting, eternal lights—thoughts removed from the soft, alluring beauty of the girl. . . .

“Thinking?” Elsa asked gently, and Brig turned sharply on the warm rock slab on which they were lying. In silence, he studied her beautiful face and still-damp, black, gleaming hair.

“Yes—of things I shouldn’t,” he admitted bitterly.

“Such as?” she murmured.

“You, mostly.”

She lay on her back and clasped white arms behind her head. In silence she watched Europa moving across the sky.

“And why should you not think of me? We’re friends, aren’t we?”



“Friends!” Brig echoed hollowly. “It’s a mighty poor word from my point of view, Elsa. For one thing, you saved my life up there on the plateau. For another, you’ve shown me something I’ve looked for all my life. That something is peace and happiness. Here on Io there is so much that could be done—”

“That would mean bringing others, unwanted people,” she interrupted quietly. “Here there is peace; others would wreck it.”

“Are you never lonely?”

She rose up at that, looked at him steadily with her deep, glorious eyes. “Not often, Brig; but sometimes I think I would like the company of just one other human. . . . I am still Earthly in being, of course, though Io has molded me. I could never live on Earth—never anywhere except here.”

Brig fell moodily silent through an interval, then slid off the rock. Holding out his arms, he helped the girl down, held her for a moment with her face very close to his. With a sigh, he released her.

“I have to go, Elsa,” he muttered. “I have my duty to do to the others—to Cynthia, Monty, and good old Betts. . . . Perhaps some day I might come back.”

“Perhaps,” she agreed simply. “You’re in love with me, Brig, aren’t you?”

“Yes. But I still have my duty to do. That’s the worst of hide bound convention.”

She studied him for a full half minute, then turned suddenly aside. “I have a small compass you may find useful. Your camp is due north from here. Io’s north magnetic pole is strong enough for needle deflection. . . .”

She went quietly into the shack, returned with the compass and a small vegetable bag of fruit. Silently Brig took them.

“This isn’t goodbye, Elsa,” he said quietly. “I really will come back one day—when Cynthia tires of me. I—”

“Goodbye, Brig,” she interrupted quietly, and held out her white hand. He took it gently, regarded her delicate, inviting mouth, then turned abruptly away without another word.

Cursing himself with every step he took, he headed towards the clearing’s northerly exit, but upon the very point of plunging into the jungle he stopped dead, listening in amazement to a familiar voice.

“H is for Hut which lies to the south; believe in Jack Horner though he’s mostly all mouth. . . .”

“South. . . . South by the stars, of course,” remarked an accompanying voice. “H is for Hut. . . . Young lady? A dream? I begin to doubt. Most certainly I begin to—”

The talking stopped. A portly figure, dishevelled and stained, emerged from the jungle’s depths, the gaping-mouthed Jack Horner under one arm.

“Betts!” Brig yelled wildly, swinging around. “Betts, you old son of a space bull! Where the devil did you come from?”

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Betts’ voice trembled a little. “Thank God you’re safe, Mr. Dean—thank God! This is indeed a wonderful surprise. . . . You see, on leaving the plateau, Miss Cynthia fainted from the shock of being attacked by those carbon eaters. By the time his Lordship and I had revived her, some ten minutes had gone. I went back to look for you, but you’d disappeared. I was convinced of the horrible thought you had blown asunder. . . . You see, sir, I found your ripped space-suit.”

“One can’t blow apart in empty space,” Brig grinned.

“Dear me, sir! Murchinson and Snedley distinctly stated—”

“Be damned with Murchinson and Snedley. Here—meet Miss Elsa Rutter, daughter of the late Captain and Mrs. Rutter. . . .”

Betts bowed as the girl came slowly up. “Delighted, miss—though I have already had the pleasure. At last I know what happened to the Rutters. They had a daughter.”

“That is hardly historical news,” the girl laughed; then seriously, “But what brings you here to this place of mine?”

“Well, one reason was that I knew I hadn’t dreamt about seeing a young woman in the forest, and another was that Mr. Horner here started talking about a hut to the south. I realized it might lead to your possible abode. . . . So I came. Then again, though I told his Lordship and Miss Cynthia that you had apparently been killed, I could not rid myself of the idea that you might be alive somewhere. I fancied this young lady might know something about it. . . . So I came. Forgive me, sir, for monopolizing so much time in explanation.”

“That’s all right, Betts,” Brig smiled, then he shrugged his shoulders heavily. “Well, I guess we’d better be heading back, hadn’t we?”

“If you wish, sir—but I feel bound to point out that you will not be exactly—ah—welcome.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“Much as I regret it, both Cynthia and his Lordship were delighted when they knew you had been killed. Some trifling matter of diamonds, sir. I understand their possession releases Miss Cynthia from the obligation of marrying you.”

Brig stared blankly, past events shuttling through his mind. Little incidents—Monty in Cynthia’s tent, her eagerness to achieve independence, their interest in each other. . . .

“I get it,” he nodded slowly. “So she was marrying me to grab her old man’s money when he dies and an allowance for life in the meantime. Nice going.”

“Yes, sir. When I disapproved of their satisfaction at your decease they—or rather his Lordship, discharged me. My last act was to give them the exact time when a space liner is due, and to extract the assurance that they know how to operate the carbon arc signal. . . . Then I left, always with the assurance, sir, that I could signal the next liner if my searchings in the jungle proved futile.”

“I am afraid there is much I do not understand,” Betts admitted.

“But you will!” Brig cried joyfully. “All in good time. You’ll be able to learn about Io and be the perfect servant and scientist at the same time. Then—” Brig stopped suddenly. “Oh, gosh! Elsa and I want to be married but there’s nobody present to make it legal.”

A beautiful smile spread over Betts’ round face. “Forgive me for my temerity, but I was, in my—ahem—younger days, intended for Holy Orders. By the Convention of 2119, once a clergyman always a clergyman, even though I took to service afterwards. I, sir, can perform that ceremony.”

Brig drew the girl towards him. “Betts all over, sweetheart,” he murmured. “Servant, scientist, and now clergyman. O. K., Betts, let’s go. . . .”

“Very good, sir.” He tugged fiercely at his hip pocket and wrenched forth a battered version of the 2100 Bible. . . .

“As I have frequently said, sir, the well trained servant is the master of many vocations,” he murmured. “Now, if you will please join hands. . . .”

[The end of *Moon Heaven* by John Russell Fearn (as Dom Passante)]