

Thia of the Drylands

Harl Vincent

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Thia of the Drylands

By Harl Vincent

Author of "Venus Liberated," "Power," etc.

It seems to us more and more logical to believe that any achievement which the mind can conceive of can eventually be attained, and perhaps for that reason, if for no other, interplanetary travel moves ever closer to the realm of possibilities. Even if such a seeming miracle should be performed within the lifetime of some of us, we should probably gasp at the risk the first experimenters take and immediately assume a casual acceptance of the wonder. Still, there will undoubtedly be a world of possibilities of adventure for many, many years after interplanetary travel becomes an established fact.

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CHAPTER I

A Long Chance

"Is that final, Mr. Sykes?"

"It is, Barron. Sorry, but I can say no more—we've done all we can. You're just out of luck, I'm afraid." The president of Interplanetary Lines, Incorporated, could not meet the gaze of the tall young man who faced him across his polished mahogany desk.

Cliff Barron's white lips set in a tight, grim line, and fire flashed from his shadowed eyes. He was sick, very sick, and disabled besides. Broke. Let down by the employers he had served honestly and faithfully for more than ten years. Hopeless of the future.

"It's rotten, Mr. Sykes," he husked, "I wouldn't have believed it of Interplan—I—I——"

Scathing words of denunciation died in his throat. Leonard Sykes had turned to his papers and his pudgy finger was on the pearl button that would summon his secretary. The interview was ended.

Curbing his wrath and disappointment, Cliff rushed from the office and through the long main aisle of the repair shop where the slender shapes of several etherships rested in their cradles. Out into the open air and stumbling across the landing field, his paralyzed arms dangling woodenly at his side and the clawed fingers, that once had been so sure and strong, resisting stiffly and without sensation the effort of his will that should have clenched them into hard fists.

Dazedly he wandered over the field to the small pavilion where visitors gathered on exhibition days. The place was deserted and he sank to a seat on one of the stone benches.

After a hideous pain-fraught moment he raised his eyes to where one of the small passenger-carrying etherships was taxiing to position for a takeoff. It was the J-18! His own ship—the one he had last piloted. The one in which he had been stricken with this terrible thing that had made of him a useless, pitiful wreck.

There was the raucous shriek of a siren and the J-18 took to the air like a frightened bird. Climbing steadily under the tremendous lift of her helicopter screws, the little vessel was quickly lost in the low-flung clouds over the Long Island field. For a time Cliff could hear the pulsing throb of the motors used in atmospheric flying. Growing ever fainter, it

was. And then even that sound had trailed off into the gloomy silence.

The gray of the skies flashed brightly crimson; dulled again, and there was a second flash, less brilliant than the first. And now the heavens were rent by the hoarse scream of the vessel's rocket tubes. Ear-splitting that first blast, giving rise to thunderous protestations of the riven air more than a mile above. The second discharge came as a faintly derisive echo of the first, and following long after. Many miles up there in the stratosphere by this time, the J-18 was plunging into space with the ever increasing speed of full acceleration. If only Cliff were able to be in that pilot's seat!

He groaned aloud and, swinging his useless arms like pendulums, beat the knotted hands frantically against the stone bench. A voice laughed crazily in the stillness of the deepening twilight; his own voice, cracked and unreal. Realizing then, that he was on the verge of complete breakdown, Cliff Barron fought desperately back to sanity.

But returning calmness of mind brought increased bitterness and intensifying hatred of Leonard Sykes. True, the corporation had paid most of Cliff's hospital expenses and had provided for him the best medical attention available. But they had left him in this condition to shift for himself, disabled for life—miserably. And the one chance he had for complete recovery had been denied him by Leonard Sykes, the hard-boiled financier, whose coffers Cliff had helped to fill. Denied for no good reason at all that Cliff could see—Sykes had refused to discuss it almost; had offered no explanation....

A crunching footstep roused Cliff from his wrathful thoughts and he looked up to see a stranger approaching him. Not entirely a stranger, he saw on closer inspection, but a man he had met or seen somewhere. A man big in stature and of confident bearing.

"Your name is Barron, isn't it?" he asked, addressing Cliff.

"That's right."

"Mine's Vetter—Carl Vetter. You may remember me as one of the passengers of the J-18 on the last trip you made as her pilot."

"Oh, yes." Cliff did remember; the man had been there, when the strange Martian fever laid him low.

"I've been interested in your case," Vetter went on as Cliff rose from his hard seat, "and perhaps I can help you. You'll not take offense if I ask you to talk it over with me?"

Wild hope surged through the young pilot's being. "Why—why no, Mr. Vetter. I don't know how to tell you—I——"

"Good," brusquely, "That's fine. Come along with me to New York. My autogiro is over here and we can be in my apartment in no time at all. Talking will be easier there."

The big man turned swiftly from Cliff's stammered protestations of gratitude and strode across the field toward the private hangars. The young pilot stumbled after him, torn by doubts and hopes. It was too much to believe—but at least it was a chance to talk with some one who was willing to listen. Someone whose every action betokened sympathetic understanding.

A little later they sat in Vetter's luxurious Park Avenue apartment, having covered the ninety miles to New York in less than a half hour of the man's skilful piloting. Vetter, though bearing the air of a man of means and influence, was an adept at handling the little ship of the lower air levels.

"No doubt you are surprised at my approaching you this way," Cliff's host began. "But you'll understand when I've finished. Really, I have selfish reasons—several of them—and I'm going to offer you a job you may not accept."

Cliff hadn't expected this. "A—a job!" he stammered. "What sort of a job can I hold—now?" Awkwardly but significantly, he swung one of his dangling arms, and a slow flush crept into his hollow cheeks. Was Vetter making sport of him?

"I mean it, Barron. This is a job you can take and can do well, if you'll accept it. Anxious to visit Mars, aren't you? Risapar, to be exact?"

"Yes, yes. How did you know?" Cliff half rose from his chair.

"I told you I had been interested in your case—I've been doing a bit of inquiring. Will you talk freely of what happened today in Leonard Sykes' office?"

Cliff's anger flamed. "Are you his friend?" he demanded.

"An acquaintance only—formerly a business associate. You need have no fear of speaking out——"

"I haven't. Listen, Mr. Vetter, I'm not quite thirty years old, but I've piloted etherships for Sykes more than ten years. Piloted with the best of them, and helped earn him a huge fortune. I contracted this Martian disease on one of his ships, as you know, and I claim he owes it to me to see me out of the—the results—if it is at all possible. Doesn't he owe it to me?"

Cliff's voice rose on the last and he stared hard at his host.

Vetter nodded slowly. There was pity in his friendly gaze and something of Cliff's own rising anger. "I certainly think so," he agreed feelingly. "Do you mean to say he refused you passage to Risapar—that he refused to do anything further in your behalf?"

"He did just that, the swine! When I was discharged from the hospital they told me I had only one hope—to see the great surgeon Lintarg of Risapar. He, they said, might restore my strength. My arms—my hands that are ... as you see them...." Cliff swung the useless members hopelessly.

"And you told this to Sykes?" Vetter urged gently.

"Sure I told him—told him everything. Begged him; asked him for passage to Risapar, for a loan to pay Lintarg's fee. Told him I'd work it out when I recovered. And I know I would recover—I know it! But what did Sykes care? I've salvaged more than a million for him in one trip, Mr. Vetter, and he had the nerve to turn me down. Can you beat it?"

"No, I can't." Vetter was obviously much moved by the recital. "Didn't he explain his refusal in any way, Barron?"

"No. Just sat there tight-mouthed, looking out of the window. Said he was sorry. Sorry—good God!" Cliff looked down at the talons that were his hands, shuddering.

His host arose and stood over him, resting a hand on his shoulder. "It's a shame, Barron," he said feelingly, "and I can't say I blame you for feeling this way. It's difficult to excuse him——"

"Excuse him! I'd like to see him in my place—done for—maimed as I am maimed. I wish——" Cliff choked, and his wasted face was contorted with hatred as he raised it to Vetter.

"Just so, Barron—I can appreciate your bitterness. And really, what you have told me makes things a little easier—about this job I want you to take, I mean."

Cliff recovered his poise. "What's that got to do with the job?" he inquired blankly.

"I'll explain." Vetter drew his own chair close and resumed his seat. He then launched forth in rapid speech.

"This action of Sykes and your feeling toward him does make a difference," he said. "At least I feel it will make a difference with you. Because, Barron, my project is one that is in direct competition with Interplanetary; it will undoubtedly bring about the financial ruin of Leonard Sykes if it is successful. And if you accept this job you will be working against Sykes. See what I mean?"

"See! I'll say I do!" hissed the young pilot. "Nothing would suit me better."

"I have obtained control," his host continued, "of a new means of traversing space that will render obsolete the present rocket-ships. The vast investment in Interplanetary Lines and Sykes' control of it will become worthless. His ships will be so much scrap—that is a foregone conclusion. But more important to you, I know, is that you will have the chance you long for—you will go to Lintarg for this treatment which can cure you. And your name will go down in history, besides, as the——"

"How? Tell me?" Cliff's cheeks burned; he was fevered with excitement.

"——as the first man to cross space by the new method. Instead of taking a journey of days to reach Mars, you will make the trip in less than an hour. Think of it! You will travel at a speed of twenty thousand miles a second. Safely. All mankind thereafter will traverse space at such speeds. Do

you agree with me that it will mean the end of rocket-ship travel?"

"Lord yes, but how——"

"We will *shoot* you across space in a projectile-like car. Like being shot from a gun, excepting in this case the gun is a magnetic one and its barrel extends throughout the entire distance of the journey. It is a vast tube spanning the ether between two planets."

"What-a-at!" Cliff began to doubt his own ears.

"Just that. It's an invisible tube, of course, and is projected in much the same way as radio impulses are projected in a concentrated beam. A hollow cylinder of etheric vibrations is what it really is. The cylinder may be likened to the carrier beam used in radio, only the superimposed frequency serves an entirely different purpose. Instead of carrying voice or television impulses, the heterodyning frequency produces nodes of energy at regular intervals throughout the enormous length of the tube—magnetic fields of unbelievable power which draw the projectile-like car along within the tube with ever-increasing velocity. All controlled, of course, from transmitting and receiving stations located on the planets between which the car travels. Don't you see?—the regularly-spaced fields of magnetic force are energized in swift succession and the car, which is of magnetic material, is speeded through each in turn. Gathering momentum with each pull until—pfff!—it is beyond comprehension."

"I'll say it is!" The flush had left Cliff's cheeks. He was beginning to appreciate the seriousness of the matter. "And you want me to take the first trip in this—this bullet?" he asked.

"Exactly." Vetter rubbed the palms of his hands one over the other in nervous anxiety as to his guest's reception of the proposal. "And don't think I'm asking you to commit suicide, Barron. We have sent living creatures across to Mars—guinea pigs first; then a dog, and most recently a small pony. All arrived safely—quite unharmed. I swear it; I have proof. But to obtain adequate financial backing for the entire project I must have a man. Only by sending a human being across safely can I overcome the scepticism of the big men who are interested in the financing. And there must be secrecy until the project is well under way. Don't you see?—that is one of the reasons I chose you—Barron——"

"Yes, I see." Cliff rose jerkily and moved to the table where he stood with face averted, his dangling arms leaden at his sides.

Vetter maintained a discreet silence as his guest thought it out.

There would be a certain satisfaction to Cliff in obtaining some measure of revenge on Sykes in this manner. Certainly he had nothing but bitterness in him toward his former employer, nor would he feel any sympathy or regret if Vetter's scheme actually came to bring about the man's downfall. But this was relatively unimportant; his own idea of squaring the account was of something more personal.

Once his vigor and the use of his arms and hands were restored he'd find a satisfactory way—more satisfactory than mere financial ruin for Sykes. He'd make him suffer physically—cruelly.

And he'd gloat as he did so.

Most important, though, was that he get to Lintarg. He *must* get to Lintarg. And Vetter's proposal was a possible means of attaining that end. A long chance, maybe, much longer than Vetter would have him believe. Perhaps they had sent dumb animals across the gulf of space in this crazy bullet-thing. But would the reaction of such tremendous acceleration be the same on humans? That was what Vetter had to prove to his backers, of course, and he hadn't been able to find a man willing to risk the trip.

For that reason he had taken advantage of Cliff's, disability and despair to...

Well, suppose he had? Vetter was sincere in his belief in this amazing contraption, and had been frank in divulging the details. If he was wrong, that trial trip meant death to the man who took it. Death. Cliff contemplated It in a new light. Rather have death than a life of this. Permanently disabled ... he'd be a ward of the government; a derelict. Life? That meant activity to Cliff, the sort of activity he had always glorified in. Without the zest of that activity which had been his, he'd rather have the other—death ... Oblivion ... release....

"I'll do it, Mr. Vetter," he blurted, wheeling suddenly and facing Vetter.

"Good—good boy!" The big man thrust forth his hand, but let it fall swiftly when he saw the look of pain that flashed across the young pilot's drawn features.

"Sorry, Barron," he mumbled apologetically, "I didn't think." Then brightening with excitement: "But you won't be sorry, boy.

"You'll have it all back; be shaking hands with me in a month.

"Come on, we'll arrange the details."

CHAPTER II

Shot Across Space

Twelve hours later they stepped from Vetter's plane to the flat top of a mesa in the Painted Desert of Arizona. A spot far off the regular air lanes—safe from prying eyes.

"You'll understand the need of secrecy," Vetter said when they entered a small building which topped a lift shaft that was bored into the solid rock of the mesa, "If Sykes learned of this he'd put his vast resources at work to head it off. His

own vast investments at stake, he'd spare none of his influence or political power to squash the thing. Scientific progress and the benefit to mankind would mean nothing—you know that."

"Sure." Cliff Barron's thoughts were upon the journey he was about to make; nothing else seemed important. A sick feeling came over him as the lift dropped into the darkness of the shaft.

In the hollowed-out heart of the mesa was massed a most amazing array of machinery. Cliff could only liken it to a huge power plant he had visited in 1997 when he was a fresh recruit of Interplanetary Lines. There were mighty generators here in the bowels of the mesa, generators driven by atomic engines whose fuel was common shale. Vetter told him that the atoms comprising this ordinary stone were disrupted in the retorts feeding the engines, and the enormous nuclear energy was thus liberated for use. Cheap and unlimited power. Huge coils of copper tubing surrounded the shiny projectile that was the space car, and great bus-bars connected these with the generators. This was the projector of the great invisible tube of space through which Cliff was to be hurled.

The blast of a whistle rose suddenly, shrilly. Men were running here and there, manipulating switches that started the main generators, operating controls that swung the giant coils and the space car itself around to a new angle. An observer was at the eyepiece of a great radio telescope signalling instructions.

"Just in time, Barron," said Vetter, "They are preparing for the trial. We are now facing toward Mars at the proper angle."

"I'm ready." Cliff's reply was in steady voice, but he was as a man in a trance, moving listlessly and dazedly toward the car.

On a platform beside the entrance manhole of the steel projectile stood a small group of men, whom Cliff took to be the financiers or their agents, who were there to witness the start. The workmen in the great hidden laboratory, Cliff saw with surprise, were all blinded artisans or deaf mutes. But, of course, Vetter would employ such men in order to preserve secrecy the better.

They were inside the space car then, he and Vetter, and the older man was speaking rapidly of the appointments of the strange vehicle of the heavens. It was hollowly quiet in the heavily padded interior. Then Cliff heard the pumps of the oxygen-generating and carbon dioxide absorption apparatus. No propelling machinery was in the car; he well understood that he was to depend utterly on the ray-operators outside. If they made a mistake....

There were two compartments, one for freight and another for passengers. In the latter were about twenty deep-cushioned, spring-supported hammock berths. Vetter explained that these were to ease the pressure of acceleration and he assisted Cliff in disposing his body to best advantage in one of the comfortable berths. These swings were arranged so as to be reversible—at approximately mid-point

of the journey they would swing around to take care of deceleration as well....

Vetter's voice droned on, but Cliff was listening to the pumps. He wanted to be off. The sooner the better.

A buzzer shrilled its wasplike note.

"Three minutes now, old man," exclaimed Vetter. "I'll be leaving you soon. Here's your Martian letter of credit and a note to Lintarg. My men at the other end will take care of you. Good luck, now, and *au revoir*. See you in a few hours."

"Sure you will?" Cliff smiled; he was perfectly composed now that the time was at hand.

"Positive." Vetter grinned encouragingly and then was gone.

Cliff heard only the pumps and the jangling of the bolts as the circular cover of the outer hatch was bolted to its hermetically sealed seat. He was alone in this man-made contraption that was to bring him his chance of life ... *real* life once more ... or of death.

Time passed at a snail's pace as he waited. Funny, if Vetter was so positive, that he hadn't made the initial trip himself. Cliff set his lips in a bleak smile. They never took any chances with their own precious lives, these promoters. Nor did they find it easy to get others to do so for them. Only in Cliff's case it was different.

He thought of the things Vetter had told him. With Mars and Earth in their present relative positions, the distance between the two bodies was fifty-five million miles. And the trip was to require forty-five minutes!

The buzzer shrilled again. Sixty seconds to go, Vetter had told him, after that repeated signal. Cliff's heart was pounding so loudly he could hear its thuds. Unconsciously he was holding his breath and was counting off the seconds. And he had stiffened his body in anticipation of the shock that was to come.

This would not do. Vetter had warned him to relax completely so his body might better withstand the pressure. He relaxed.

Sudden terrific vibration gripped the car, causing the springs of the hammocks to resound noisily. Cliff was pressed into the cushions with tremendous force. The journey had begun.

It was incredible, impossible, that pressure which smashed him down. His body suddenly had acquired enormous weight, the weight of a behemoth. It was as if the paralysis of his arms and hands had taken hold of his entire being. He couldn't move a muscle of his lower body or even turn his head.

And, second by second, the pressure increased until it seemed his bodily frame must give way under the strain. Breathing had become difficult, for the muscles of his lungs were overtaxed in expanding the unwonted weight of flesh

and bone that covered them. His eyes burned in their sockets; his vision distorted. The weight of cornea and aqueous humour was depressing each lens so it no longer focussed. And then, without warning, came oblivion. For Cliff Barron there was no further knowledge of the journey.

Faster and faster still the tiny space car drove on into the void, into the mysterious depths of the heavens towards Mars, where anxious observers awaited its coming.

Low voiced mumblings impressed themselves on Cliff's returning consciousness. Sharp questions in a querulous rasping tone, answers in whispered syllables of the dryland tongue of Mars. Cliff opened an eye experimentally and saw a squat bearded Martian conversing with a second one of greater stature and forbidding countenance. They stood but a few feet from the cot on which he lay in a dim-lit and unfamiliar room. Cliff closed the one eye as his own name was mentioned in the uncouth speech of the parched plains of the red planet.

"It is he—Cleaf Barron—of the paralyzed arms. Even as the ethergram advised us. But Vetter must be mad; we can not let this one go to Lintarg. He knows too much—our plans would be ruined."

"Hush!" The other was speaking. "He is about to awaken. It is wonderful, Maranu—a complete vindication of Vetter's claims. If this man Barron had perfect health and strength, he

would have come through conscious and entirely unharmed. Even as it is, he is little the worse for the experience. Think what it means."

"Surely I think. I know. But we must make away with him, I say; we must not heed Vetter's message. He is a sentimental fool. It is too dangerous that this one be permitted to live."

"Hush, I tell you—he awakens."

Cliff groaned and tossed, feigning a painful awakening. He had remembered the journey's start and Vetter's promises and was suddenly very much awake. If this was to be an argument as to his own life or death he wanted to take it standing. He dropped his legs over the edge of the cot and sat swaying weakly, though his head was now as clear as if he had just come out of a refreshing sleep.

"Where—where am I?" he stammered.

The one called Maranu grunted disgustedly as the other, the squat bearded one, thrust out his hand to help Cliff to his feet.

"You haff arrive safe in Risapar," the bearded one said in atrocious English. "No harm whateffer haff come to you. It iss——"

The big Martian Maranu shoved him roughly aside. "Enough!" he rasped in his own tongue. "It must be as I said, Durvil." His hand moved to the flame pistol at his belt.

"No!" The one called Durvil reddened angrily and pushed himself in front of Cliff. "No killing now. I tell you we——"

Maranu choked him off with a huge hand closing on his throat and Cliff looked blankly from one to the other as if in complete ignorance of the speech of the drylands.

A clamor rose outside the door; someone was shouting excitedly in the corridor. Maranu let loose his grip of Durvil's throat.

"They want to see him!" gasped the bearded one, "Maranu, you fool, they must see this man who has come across the void, else they will not believe. Are you mad?"

"True, we must show them," the big fellow agreed. "I shall wait."

Cliff would have welcomed any interruption at the moment. This byplay of the two Martians was puzzling; he could think of no reason why Maranu should want him out of the way. But he had no doubts as to the seriousness of the drylander's intent, nor would he have gambled any great amount on the value or permanence of Durvil's apparent friendliness to himself.

Maranu unlatched the door, grumbling, and there stood revealed in the hall an armed guard, a giant drylander who thrust his grimacing face into the room and jabbered unintelligently in the lowest dialect of his race. Durvil, the squat one, lunged toward the guard.

"Outside!" he bellowed as the fellow tried to shove his way into the room. "We will bring the traveler to the dome room. Report this to your captain—understand, scum?"

The big guard, a foot taller than the bearded one, cringed and withdrew. Cliff followed him in response to Durvil's imperious gesture of command, and the two he had first seen in this place brought up the rear, Durvil was berating Maranu in husky whispers as they passed along the corridor.

It was a queer reversal of the first order of things. Now it was apparent that Durvil was the higher in authority, though before the guard's coming Maranu had been the one to give orders. Cliff Barron, knowing something of the strange temperament of the various races of Mars, was none the less puzzled.

They came out in a huge vaulted chamber that was quite like the one in the mesa of the Arizona desert. There were similar generators and the great copper coils of a projector of the hollow beam of ether vibrations. The space car itself rested on the receiving platform of the apparatus. It was from this place they had taken Cliff to the room where he returned to consciousness.

At the far end of the chamber was a group of Martians. Wondering, as he was led before them, Cliff saw that one was a woman. A strikingly beautiful woman, more like one from his own country, than like any he had ever seen in the drylands or canal cities of Mars. A woman of queenly bearing who sat on a cushioned and canopied couch surrounded by uniformed drylanders, and who stared at Cliff

with the most remarkable of eyes. Wide-set eyes of lustrous jet in which a feral light glinted. Hypnotic eyes; compelling.

"It is the passenger, oh Thia," said Durvil, making obeisance.

"He is quite well and uninjured after the voyage?" The black eyes of this Thia showed no change of expression.

"Not well, of course—on account of his disability. But I can assure you, oh Thia, he has suffered no ill effect whatsoever due to the trip itself."

Durvil's voice was respectful but intimately confident. Evidently he was a personage of some account before this woman of dryland royalty, whoever she might be.

Thia's eyes were on Cliff and he thought he detected a softening of the hard glitter. "Oh, yes," she murmured, "the disability. He is to see Lintarg as Vetter requested?"

Maranu broke out in voluble objection, but was silenced by a fierce look from Thia.

"What say you, oh, Durvil?" she purred, bending her gaze on the bearded one.

"I say there shall be no killing. Maranu was ever violent. But I say he should imprison the passenger until the thing is done, that he may do us no harm."

"He must die!" rasped Maranu, "This one is a spy. Can you not see, oh, Thia, by his attention to our speech that he

understands? He is not ignorant of our tongue, as he has protested."

"Is this true, Earthling?" Thia's voice was cold and hard as were her eyes.

Cliff looked full into those blazing orbs and saw there could be no dissembling with this woman. "True, yes, that I comprehend your speech," he admitted, "but that I am a spy, no. I know nothing of your plans and care less about them. I know only what Vetter told me; what he promised. I came here for one thing and one thing only—to visit Lintarg. To try his skill in this——"

He hesitated, looking down at his paralyzed members. Little he cared what devilment these drylanders might be cooking up. All that mattered was what he had come after; he wanted to be out of this place and on his way to the famous surgeon.

Again there was the softening of Thia's gaze, this time more noticeable. Again the grating expostulations of Maranu, silenced once more by the amazing woman who sat before them all.

"You see," Cliff ventured hopefully, "I have only one desire—I care nothing for your——"

"He must be imprisoned, oh, Thia," Durvil broke in firmly. "There is no other way, regardless of Vetter, regardless of——"

Something snapped then in Cliff Barron's brain. Perhaps it was the nightmare of the journey; perhaps the thin atmosphere and the low gravity of the red planet. Whatever it was, it sent him into a wild rage and he threw himself at Durvil. Though his leg muscles had been greatly weakened by his illness, they were of ample power here, being accustomed to carry much more weight of body on Earth. And he soared high in his mad leap, landing on the squat Martian with both knees and smashing him to the pavement.

"Now go ahead!" he yelled. "Let Maranu shoot, damn him! Damn you all—go on with your dirty work!"

The guards were upon him in an instant. With his useless arms in the way and encumbering him, he could only kick and butt. This was of little avail when they closed in from all sides. But he had the satisfaction of seeing Maranu go down when he brought a knee up into the big fellow's midsection; saw that Durvil lay still where he had fallen.

And then Cliff was helpless in the hands of the guards. Though he struggled mightily, they carried him away. He looked back.

Thia was standing alone, and her scarlet lips quirked in an enigmatic smile.

CHAPTER III

Word of Honor

Cliff was taken to the room where he had first opened his eyes after the swift passage from Earth. More accurately, he was dumped unceremoniously on the stone floor by the guards and left to meditate on his rashness. A key grated in the lock.

"Of all the triple-plated damfools!" he muttered, crawling painfully to his feet, "I am the brightest." He sat heavily on the edge of the cot.

For some time he addressed audible and uncomplimentary remarks to himself by way of such jumbled echoes as might rebound from the blank walls. And then he had calmed in mind sufficiently to take stock of the situation and to speculate on the causes behind it all.

Either Vetter was in league with a gang of dryland cutthroats in some shady undertaking, or he was being duped by those in charge of operations at the Martian end of his space tube. Cliff was inclined to the latter view.

Certainly Vetter had been frank enough and fair enough in his arrangements for the dangerous trial trip. And generous. Cliff had seen the letter of credit that was safely buttoned in his inside vest pocket. He could feel the wadded lump against his ribs now. Fifty thousand zaks of Risapar exchange—enough to cover Lintarg's fee and still leave the young pilot independent. And a personal letter to the great

surgeon addressed in Vetter's bold flowing hand. There had been no hitch at the other end; everything was open and aboveboard. But here—something was badly out of gear.

It was mighty queer that all those he had seen at this end were drylanders. Tough ones, too, most of them—like Maranu. And led by a woman like Thia! But Cliff recalled tales of desert pirates who preyed upon rich cities of the canals and mining settlements of the parched interior as well. Bands of ruthless murderers, these were, and well organized—the greatest problem of the militias and the red police of the scattered Martian communities. No reason a woman might not be leader of such a band—especially one with eyes like Thia's. No reason, either, that they might not be reaching out for new worlds to prey upon. And with this thing of Vetter's in their hands....

Cliff raised his head and stared directly into those magnetic orbs of the girl Thia. She had entered noiselessly, and as noiselessly closed the door. But he had sensed her presence somehow. His head had come up without conscious volition.

Automatically he rose to his feet. Involuntarily he caught his breath. Her beauty, in this soft light, was dazzling. The curves of her youthful body were revealed rather than hidden by the draperies of a black gown that shimmered as she moved. She had bared her head of the tiara Cliff had seen there before, and a glorious crown of golden bronze hair tumbled in soft profusion about the creamy oval of her face. The scarlet lips were parted in a half smile. And her eyes,

magically, had softened from the glinting jet to a liquid brown. Friendly eyes, and understanding now.

Cliff, getting a grip on his emotions, husked: "Well?"

"Well!" Thia smiled, and, smiling, she was radiant.

His suspicions rising afresh, the disabled pilot hardened himself against the spell of her. "What do you want of me?" he growled.

The long lashes dropped, masking Thia's eyes momentarily. "I want to help you," she murmured. And the harsh syllables of the dryland tongue were silvery and musical on her lips.

But unreasoning resentment had come to Cliff with the dropping of her eyes. He looked down at his dangling arms. "So that's it!" he rasped, "Pity! You're sorry for a poor crippled Earthling, and you want to help him, do you? Well, listen to me young woman—I don't like the looks of things here and I don't believe in your pretended friendliness. You're the leader of this gang of thieves and killers and you are planning——"

"Stop it!" Thia's voice cut in coldly furious. Black rage had replaced the softness of her level gaze. She threw back her proud head and drew herself stiffly erect. Then, as suddenly as the fury had come, it had passed. "It's untrue," she said calmly. "All of it is untrue. I have some control over my people, yes, but we are no buccaneers as you imply, nor are our plans of such nature as to merit your censure."

"What then?" Cliff's tone was gentler, though he stood his ground. And his own gray eyes looked steadily into those flashing ones of jet.

"I refuse to answer; it is my prerogative. And now that you have taken this attitude I am telling you—nay, commanding you to leave this place at once and go to Lintarg."

Miraculously, the stern gaze had softened as she talked, and Cliff felt the angry color drain from his cheeks "You—you mean," he stammered, "that I am free to go."

"You *must* go—and quickly." Thia was suddenly ill at ease; nervously apprehensive, it seemed. "But first," she said in liquid, throaty tones, "I must exact from you a promise."

"A promise!" Cliff stared foolishly. This woman was offering him his freedom; his chance to be made whole once more. And he had berated her! "Anything," he agreed huskily.

"First of all you will ask me no more questions concerning myself or my people. Secondly, and of utmost importance, you will reveal not one detail as to our whereabouts here, or Vetter's in Terra, or of the means by which you traversed the distance between the two bodies. For so long as you may remain on the planet Mars, you will not reveal these things. Is it agreed?"

Cliff regarded his disabled members through eyes that suddenly misted, smarting unbearably. "Good God, yes!" he

husked.

"You swear it by the purple Deity of Henes," tensely,

"Yes, and more solemnly than that." He looked up earnestly now into the soft brown eyes that were so anxiously upon him. "I give you my word of honor as a man—as an American."

"It is more than sufficient. Quickly now, oh Cleef Barron." Turning swiftly then, she opened the door a trifle, peered through the crack, and slipped through into the corridor.

They hurried then through endless passages, some smoothly walled and artificially lighted, others rough-hewn in the solid rock, dankly odorous and in Stygian darkness. Where there was light, Cliff was scarcely able to keep up with the scurrying footsteps of his guide; where darkness closed in about them he felt the gentle pressure of her hand on his shoulder, leading him more slowly but just as surely toward their destination. Thia knew every twist and turn of the maze of underground workings.

The way led steadily upward and they had progressed a distance of perhaps three Earth miles when Thia called a halt. A metal-studded door closed the passage ahead of them.

"We have arrived," panted the girl, "just inside the city wall at the bank of Canal Pyramus. The public way above

will take you to the central square, where is located the establishment of Lintarg. Henes speed you on your way, oh Cleef."

"Wait!" Cliff experienced a sudden anxiety for her safety and an interest in her he would not have believed possible. "I must see you, Thia, once more; must learn when and how I may see you again. Please tell me."

"You forget, there are to be no questions," firmly.

"True, I promised."

There was the click of a withdrawn bolt and the creak of rusty hinges. The great door swung open and the first lurid light of a Martian false dawn filtered in. Above them the city of Risapar was oddly still; the day had not yet begun.

Thia came out with him to the open air and inhaled deeply of its rare though invigorating substance.

"It is good to be alive," she breathed. "Good to be outside."

Cliff had seen that they were almost at the level of the black waters of the canal and that its steep bank led up from where they stood. But these things made no impression on him at the moment for Thia's gaze was starry in the swiftly improving light of dawn.

"Farewell," she whispered with face upturned, "and Henes be with you always. Think of Thia sometimes——"

"Think of you—Lord! I'll always think of you—and be wishing to see you. If these arms——"

Amazingly then her face drew near. Unbelievably, her lips brushed his. And then, as swiftly as it had happened, she was gone. The door of the hidden entrance clanged shut.

Madly, Cliff dashed his body against the thick moss which covered its outer surface and made it safe from prying eyes. But to no avail. Hardly knowing what he did, he clambered up the nearest stairs to the nickel-cobalt roadway that stretched along the canal. Dazedly he stood there gazing out over the minarets and spires toward the east. Somewhere in the drylands out there beyond the city wall, he knew, was the screened opening through which the space car passed, and beneath it the dome room where Thia soon would sit calmly awaiting whatever adventure it was her people were planning. Dire forebodings came to intensify the new ache which had been so suddenly and unexpectedly implanted in his breast.

A little later, one of the early morning ronsals drifted to a stop before him. The operator yelled sarcastically as he stood staring vacantly into space. Shamefacedly he entered the passenger compartment of the wheelless vehicle. Swiftly rising from the metal surface, propelled and supported a few feet above by the repulsion energies it contained, the ronsal sped toward the great central square of Risapar.

Cliff gave no heed to the kaleidoscopic beauty of shifting colors that played over the multitudinous spires of the city as they whizzed past in the shifting morning light. His thoughts

were of Thia and of her association with the drylanders she called her people. He had spent time in the communities of the parched plains between the canals which gave him some knowledge of the inhabitants. Somehow, Thia did not fit in with the pictures he carried in his mind. She was too delicately formed for a woman of the drylands; her creamy skin not at all like the bleached complexion of the drylanders. She was more like the women of the canal cities in every respect—even her speech held something of a slurring accent that was different from those whom she considered as her own.

And yet those in the cavern of the space car appeared to be her loyal subjects. She was a veritable princess among them. A woman who commanded their respect and obedience; one whom they loved. Still she was marked as apart from them. Aloof, superior, different.

Cliff's throat constricted unaccountably as he visioned her in his mind. The memory of her impulsive farewell would remain with him until the end of time. Even now it haunted him ... and the thought that she was gone from his life....

"Pada-nar!" bawled the operator of the ronsal, glowering back through the glass partition.

Roused from his reverie, Cliff saw they had reached the central square of the city. The ronsal had stopped and other passengers were waiting impatiently. Risapar had come to life; the activity of the new day was in evidence all about

him. Hastily the embarrassed terrestrial quitted his seat and flung from the compartment.

Before him towered the slender obelisk-like building that was known throughout all Mars as Tib-Lintarg. A worthy monument to the skill of the great physician whose name it bore. Cliff's heart missed a beat as he viewed it—his hard-earned and much-desired goal.

And then he was sprinting toward the institution like a man possessed. A new urge was upon him; he'd go back to help Thia. Thia, once these crippled arms of his were good as new! He'd return to the secret entrance by the canal and batter down the door. He'd——

"You're Cliff Barron, aren't you?" A stocky terrestrial stood before him, blocking the entrance of the building, a man Cliff had never seen.

"Why—why, yes," he stammered, halting his mad dash, "Why?"

"Just wanted to ask you a few questions, that's all," the fellow drawled.

"By what right?" Something warned the young pilot and he was on his guard instantly.

"I'm an operative, League of Terra Secret Service," in low tones.

"You can't question me here."

"I know—not without extradition and all the mess of Martian courts. But don't get sore. I think you'll answer, for patriotic reasons. How did you get here from Earth?" There was a veiled warning in the stocky one's words.

"That's my business." Cliff tried to shove past him.

"Just a minute, young fellow." A heavy hand was on his shoulder. "Ever hear of Carl Vetter?"

"That's my business, too." The young pilot jerked free and went into the building, knowing full well the other dared not go further. And yet he was distinctly alarmed by the occurrence. Someone, somehow, was on the track. And Thia was in danger. The words of his promise flashed across his mind as he entered the cage of the lift. He gritted his teeth. A dozen ronsals couldn't drag that secret out of him.

But Cliff Barron was a sick man, sicker than he knew. The strain of the past few hours had been terrific for a man in his weakened condition and was telling on him now. He reeled as he left the cage at the floor of Lintarg's private consulting room.

A man was there in the reception hall, sitting on one of the lounges, a terrestrial. He sprang to Cliff's side, offering him assistance. Swaying a bit, the disabled pilot regarded with owlsh suspicion the man through eyes that saw only a blurred image.

"You another League of Terra man?" Cliff demanded thickly.

"I am," in hushed voice.

This one was leading him to a seat, or trying to. "Well, I'm Cliff Barron all right," he jabbered loudly, "and if you want——"

"Hush," the other warned him.

But Cliff, in his present state, was not to be gainsaid. "——if you want to cross-examine me you're crazy," he babbled on. "I'm here to consult Lintarg and I'm telling nothing to you or to anyone else. Do you get me? Nothing—how I came here, or any other thing about me you may want to know ... get me? ... not a word...."

And then Cliff Barron was falling forward. He had a confused picture of white-clad figures moving toward him ... of an alarmed face peering into his own ... kindly bearded Martian with white coat.... Falling, Cliff was, down through the building ... hundred and six floors ... peace and rest at bottom...

Utter darkness swooped down upon him. Nothingness.

CHAPTER IV

Betrayal

A long-drawn musical note, vibrant and mellow. Grateful warmth that penetrated deep into the tissues, stimulating muscular activity, setting the pulses athrob, revitalizing bodily functions long dormant. The tang of ozone, like sweet mountain air filling the lungs. Light-images, hazy and unstable at first, resolving into clear-cut forms of things animate and inanimate ... substantial and real....

Abruptly, Cliff Barron knew he was in the land of the living.

The musical note slithered down the scale and trailed off into silence. Cliff drew in his breath sharply; looked down at his nude body. He was standing on a metal plate that glowed with pale rosy light. His flesh was firm, his skin healthy. His hands—he moved a finger; spread all ten fingers wide. His arms, no longer withered and rigidly twisted—he flung them wide with sudden vigor.

A choked sob rose in his throat.

He looked up slowly and reverently into a smiling, gray-bearded face. Lintarg. Other white-coated Martians were in the room—a room of crystal walls and weird apparatus. All the white-coated ones were looking at Cliff, watching him intently as one watches the subject of a laboratory experiment—for untoward reactions. All excepting Lintarg. The great surgeon's gaze was confident, friendly and sympathetic. Cliff tried to speak and couldn't.

It was no less than a miracle, this thing that had been done by the famed healer of Risapar. A man made over. A

healthy, normal human being made from a physical derelict.
A wreck salvaged.

Cliff extended his hands and turned them palm upwards. Wiggled his fingers as an infant, when first cognizant of the strange appendages, wiggles its toes. Impulsively, he stretched those muscular new hands of his to Lintarg. Gripped him mightily. Said not a word.

A little later, when Cliff had mastered his emotions, a flood of questions clamored for utterance. The staff physicians and attendants had quitted the laboratory. He was alone with the great Lintarg.

"Tell me, doctor," he demanded, "Am I entirely fit and well?"

Lintarg's round eyes twinkled behind his spectacles. "You feel fit, don't you?" he countered.

"Never better. But I don't understand; my lost weight has been returned; my senses seem more acute—everything. I am a new man——"

"You are precisely that, Barron. And wondering about it all, I am sure. We will discuss it in your room. Here—cover yourself and come with me." Lintarg tossed him a light robe.

In the small bare room with the high white bed, Cliff hugged himself and grinned like a boy. Rising to his toes and with legs rigid, he bent double and touched the tips of his fingers to the floor.

"Here, here," Lintarg, behind him, reproved. "None of that, young man. You are to take to your bed at once."

"Bed"—blankly. "Why, I feel——"

"Precisely; you feel like dancing and singing and being many fools combined in one. Nevertheless, you are going to bed—a night of real sleep is necessary after your experience. Normal sleep."

To Cliff it seemed he was in condition to tackle a dozen wildcats then and there. But he yielded to the great physician; stretched flat under the covers with arms outside where he could see and gloat over their easy movement, their muscular——

"You are a fortunate young man," Lintarg pronounced, interrupting his thoughts. "Extremely fortunate."

"I'll say I am." Cliff looked up into the grave round eyes and a wave of deep gratitude swept his being. Gratitude he could not hope to express properly. "I can't tell you, sir, how much——"

"Forget all that." Lintarg's voice was gruff, but understanding was in the round Martian eyes. "The thing is done, and you will be discharged in the morning. Meanwhile, as I am a very busy man, I must bid you farewell. It will be impossible for me to see you tomorrow. So good luck to you, my boy."

"Wait sir; tell me how—what——"

"Yes." Lintarg glanced swiftly at the huge Martian chronometer he drew from his pocket. "Yes, of course, you will not remember it. You fainted in the hall, Barron, and we brought you at once to the operating room. It was none too soon. Of the operation itself I shall speak little, as the details are highly technical—the repair and rejuvenation of certain motor and sensory nerve centers—you may hardly expect to comprehend. Then followed five days of intensive treatment, healing scars, building up tissues, and strengthening the weakened organs by means of curative rays. Electrical, you understand. Systematic exercise, proper dieting—it is, after all, quite simple."

"Five days!" Cliff stared. "And I know nothing of it—this was all done while I remained unconscious!"

"Precisely; it is the Lintarg system. We keep the patient's mental processes entirely dormant during treatment, in order that there be no possibility of conscious or subconscious resistance of the mind. Ninety days of convalescence are thereby accomplished in five days of time. Is this all clear to you?"

"Y-yes." It wasn't clear, but Cliff had a vague understanding of what they must have done to him.

"Then—truly—I must be leaving you." Lintarg moved to go.

"Your fee, sir——"

"All taken care of by your benefactor, and your letter of credit is intact as well. I repeat, you are a fortunate young man." The surgeon was fidgeting; anxious to be gone.

"Oh—I'll not keep you sir. Thanks—it's all I can say—I——" Cliff swallowed hard; extended his hand—the firm strong right hand Lintarg had given to him.

The Martian gripped it, smiling. "Henes be with you my boy." And then the great Lintarg was gone.

Cliff lay for a long time thinking. Moving his fingers one by one, trying each in turn. Flexing the muscles of his arms. Peering at the remade members as if they belonged to another man. Marvelling.

He thought of what Lintarg had told him. That sealed letter of Vetter's had taken care of the great surgeon's fees—large fees, too, they must be. Vetter had done more than he agreed. Good old Vetter, whatever his connections with those drylanders....

Abruptly Cliff Baron sat up in his bed. Memory of Thia smote him like a blow. Five days! He had been out of the picture five whole days while she was in danger of unknown nature. But serious danger. He remembered the League of Terra men. They were on Thia's trail—or Vetter's. After the whole gang probably.

He jumped from his bed. Stay here over night?—not if he could help it. He rushed to the small closet in a corner of the room; saw his clothing hanging there, neatly arranged. In a panic of apprehension, he dressed more swiftly than he had done in his lifetime.

Flinging open the door, he came face to face with a nurse. A round-eyed Martian girl, stolid of features and severely prim in the starched white uniform of her calling.

"Henes!" she gasped. "The patient is mad. You must return to bed instantly, Earthling."

"Nonsense, woman!" Cliff brushed past her and strode down the hall. "I'm as well as any man in the city. And I'm going away from here."

The nurse pattered after him, clutching at his arm. He shook her off. An orderly, a great bleached-skinned hulk of a drylander, came from a side hall, blocking his way. Cliff flung him aside as if he had been a child.

He was in the outer office then, marching past the astonished and protesting registrar into the reception hall. Other orderlies came running, but these fell back under his grim threats. A lift stopped at the floor; the door opened. Cliff flung himself inside and was whisked away to the lower regions.

Reaching the main entrance of the building, he looked out over the central square of Risapar with satisfaction. The city was in darkness save for the twinkling cold-white lights

of the square and the roadways. The pedestrian ways and moving platforms were almost deserted. Cliff drew a breath of relief and stepped out between the great columns of the portal.

And then he was stopped short in his tracks by a sound that came to his ears. A sharp click, directly behind him, followed by a whir as of some swiftly rotating mechanism. He wheeled about to look into the grim visage of the Secret Service operative who had first accosted him and into the violet glare of light that sprang from a pistol-like contrivance that was thrust in his face. A languorous, numbing sensation flashed over his body and his knees sagged.

"Now you'll talk, buddy," the operative growled. "Get down there to the corner where you see that small private ronsal. Quick!"

Everything within him cried out against it, but Cliff was without power to refuse. The wily operative was using a hypno-ray, one of those devilish contrivances that rob a man of his will and render him utterly subjective to the will of another. Like an automaton Cliff faced about; as in a dream he walked jerkily to where the small ronsal was waiting at the roadside.

The second operative, the one he had seen in Lintarg's reception hall, was inside the ronsal. The one with the hypno-ray backed Cliff against the side of the vehicle, in the shadow.

"Now!" he snarled, bringing the violet glare closer, "You'll tell us how you got here from Terra. Make it fast, young fellow."

Cliff shut his eyes, endeavoring to blot out the violet glare that had him in its power. But to no avail. He struggled mightily to clamp his jaws tight that his lips might not speak the words. But in his consciousness that other will was beating his down—a will inferior to his own had it not been supplemented by the fiendish energy of the violet glare. Mechanically his voice repeated the fatal words:

"Carl Vetter's space car ... hurled across void in less than an hour ... projector of car in cavern deep in mesa ... Arizona—in desert ... due south of Tuba City...."

"Enough." The violet glare was extinguished.

Cliff had vague knowledge that both operatives were now in the small ronsal. He heard the faint whine of the vehicle's starting generators; battled desperately to regain control of his own movements. But too late he succeeded. With a swift rush the wheelless cab had risen from the nickel-cobalt roadway and lurched off into one of the express traffic lanes. By the time his brain had cleared of the hypno-ray's influence, it was lost to his view.

The stark awfulness of the thing he had done smote Cliff with overwhelming force. He had betrayed Vetter, his benefactor; he had broken his solemn promise to Thia. Thia the beautiful, the impulsive, who was in such grave danger. True, he could not have helped it—it was impossible for man

to fight the energies of the hypno-ray. But that made the thing none the less calamitous.

He rushed shouting into the square, to a waiting ronsal of the public transportation system.

Of the swift ride along Canal Pyramus toward the city limits he took little heed. At the back of his brain was hammering the dread certainty that he would arrive too late. Even now the word was being flung earthward through the ether—agents of the Secret Service would be at Vetter's laboratory in the mesa within an hour.

Lucky he had not been asked any details regarding the Martian terminal of the space tube. If Thia were still there, she at least might be warned. If she had gone to Earth ... Cliff shuddered.

Sykes had done this thing, smugly complacent Leonard Sykes, who had refused Cliff the chance Vetter later gave him. Sykes, somehow, had learned of Vetter's space tube. Unable to locate it, he had used his vast wealth and political influence to corrupt even the League of Terra Secret Service. And now he would ruin Vetter. Thia, whatever her secret connection with the project, was in danger of exposure—perhaps of death. There was a mystery here, of course, in the Risapar terminal of the space tube—shady dealings, maybe, between Vetter and these drylanders of Thia's. No matter.

They had given Cliff his coveted chance of recovery and he was throwing in his lot with theirs.

The ronsal stopped at Cliff's destination. When it had slid off into the night he clambered down the stair to the lower level of the canal bank. How different from when he had staggered up these same steps with useless arms dangling!

By the dim illumination of the flickering lights above, he made out the approximate location of the hidden entrance of the underground passages which communicated with the cavern of the projector. It had remained indelibly written in his memory.

Then he was tearing at the thick moss of the sloping bank with his fingers. It resisted with the toughness of leather. Desperately he cast about for an implement. The iron rail of the stairway—he tore away a six foot section of its length as if it had been the lightest of bamboo and attacked the thick moss violently.

At length he had located the door frame. Of smooth metal, it was, and entirely unyielding. Between the strapped and studded wood of the door itself and the frame was not the smallest crack into which he might insert his improvised crowbar. But he located the outer plate of the lock eventually and went at it with the fury of a madman, his iron bar used as a battering ram.

He looked up anxiously to the pedestrian way at the top of the bank, fearing the din was attracting attention. But no

faces peered down at him as yet, and he went back to his task with renewed vigor.

Presently there was the snap of metal inside. The door yielded slightly. An inch, two inches. The iron bar crashed home again and again. Then, suddenly, the door swung inward, creaking protestingly, and Cliff was in the dark passage.

He ran frantically, blindly, bumping heavily against rough-hewn walls as he lost his sense of direction in the darkness. He came out into lighted passages that seemed familiar, yet gave him no indication as to whether his was on the right track. Into the darkness again and again, feeling his way, stumbling and panting, scratched and bruised by many contacts with the jagged stones of the passage walls.

It was a hopeless task, finding his way in the labyrinth of dark tunnels and lighted ones that were equally unfamiliar. He shouted occasionally, pausing to listen for replies. But none came.

God!—if Thia had gone! Or, if, even now, she was on her way to Earth in the space car ... what fate awaited her at the other end of the tube? Cliff could only imagine, and, imagining, he conjured up in his mind the most frightful of possibilities.

And then, amazingly, he had come out into the cavern of the space car. He saw that operators of the projector were at the controls. Instructions were being called out by the observer at the radio telescope. And, on the landing platform

at the entrance manhole of the car, was Maranu. Thia, in a boyish leathern garment, was entering the bullet-like vessel of the heavens.

"Stop!" Cliff was yelling as he ran toward the platform. "Wait, Thia—they know!"

But the girl was already inside, and Maranu faced him with an ugly leer as he mounted the platform. "She can't go, you fool!" Cliff gibbered, "Don't you understand? Terrestrial Secret Service—they will be waiting at the other end. The car must stay here."

Maranu's eyes narrowed. His burly form blocked the entrance port of the car. "So!" he rasped, "You think it must stay."

Cliff was upon him then, bearing him to the floor. In a flash he had crawled over his prostrate form and was in the airlock of the car. There was a yell from outside and the port cover swung home with a crash. Cliff heard the jangling of the bolts as it was fastened to its seats. But the import of this did not impress itself upon him then. He was too intent upon his quest of Thia.

"You monster, you've killed them!" Cliff heard Thia's voice beyond the door of the passenger compartment.

Bursting through, he halted in amazement. She was facing Carl Vetter, a new Vetter with disarranged hair and staring eyes in which bloodlust gleamed. His fingers clutched

the butt of a flame pistol and a heap of bodies was on the floor—bodies of the drylanders.

"You've been killing them all," Thia moaned, "And now you want to kill me. Oh, you vile traitor——"

"What's this?" Cliff yelled in amazement,

Thia turned swiftly and threw herself in his arms—those new strong arms that closed protectingly about her.

"You!" Vetter exclaimed, falling back. His face paled to ghastly whiteness. "You! And completely recovered."

"Yes, me, Vetter. What's the idea?" Cliff still was unable to credit his senses. That a man who had done the thing Vetter had done for him should be engaged in what was evidently nefarious business, was incredible. A murderer—Vetter? Impossible.

The buzzer shrilled viciously. They are sending the car across!

Vetter had recovered his equanimity and was raising the flame pistol. A maniacal gleam had come into his eyes.

"Stop!" Cliff snapped. "They're wise—at the other end. Waiting for you—the authorities."

"Wha-a-at!" Vetter lowered the muzzle of the pistol.

Again the buzzer shrilled—twice. They were speeding the start.

Cliff swung Thia in his arms and deposited her in one of the hammocks. Only one minute before that awful pressure

"No!" Vetter snarled. "She must die!" He flung up his arm with the pistol trained upon her.

Cliff sprang swiftly in a flying tackle, wrapping his arms about the big man's knees and bringing him to the floor with a terrific thud.

"Cleef! Cleef!" Thia was screaming. "Quickly—into the swing."

Vetter had struggled to his knees when Cliff threw himself into the nearest hammock. Murder was in his eyes and he raised the flame pistol toward Cliff, cursing. Truly, this was a new Vetter.

Then came the shuddering vibration of the car, the terrible pressure of acceleration. Cliff was pressed gasping into the cushions as the space car lurched off into the heavens.

Vetter's scream of agony rose high as he was crushed to the floor-plates. There was the sharp snapping of his bones; weak whimperings gasped painfully. Vetter had paid the penalty of his perfidy.

Still the awful pressure increased, driving Cliff deeper into the cushions with every passing second. He tried to move, tried to raise his voice in words of comfort to Thia. It

was utterly impossible. His vision lapsed under the smashing pressure; his breath came short.

There was silence in the speeding car, save for the throbbing of the pumps that supplied the oxygen they breathed. On the floor there were the dead drylanders—and Vetter. In the hammocks two living beings; inert; helpless.

At the end of the journey—what?

CHAPTER V

Understanding

After endless time it seemed the pressure of acceleration had eased slightly. Still Cliff was unable to move. But his brain was active and he pondered the strange situation.

What was this thing Vetter had done? Evidently there had been a plot to carry these drylanders of Thia's to Earth. Perhaps they were the piratical crew Cliff had thought. Perhaps Vetter, discovering this, had been slaying them as they entered the space car one by one. A qualm assailed the young pilot as he thought of his benefactor—a crushed mass there on the floor beneath the hammock.

But Vetter had intended to kill Thia; would have killed Cliff had not the space car leaped into the heavens in the nick

of time. And Thia was in no way responsible for whatever deeds of dishonor might have been contemplated by those she called her people. Cliff made up his mind on that point. She was too essentially feminine; too much of the tenderheartedness of womankind was in her makeup. She was the very personification of the ideal Cliff had always secretly cherished. Too *human*, though her eyes might flash fire when anger overcame her. A delectable and desirable creature....

The pressure was easing. Cliff found he could roll his eyes and that breathing was somewhat less difficult. But he was as yet unable to move his limbs or to speak. He assumed they had reached the mid-point of their journey and that deceleration had commenced for the long gradually slackening dash to Earth.

What was to become of them there? Cliff swore a mighty oath to himself that he'd battle for Thia against them all. Against his own world: against all Mars, if need be.

Definitely now, the pressure was less. He moved his legs and arms slowly and painfully. "Thia!" he managed to gasp.

"Y-yes," after anxious moments.

"You all right?"

"I—I am." A sob was in the girl's mellow voice.

The pressure suddenly was released entirely. Cliff made a move and was astonished to find his body drift out of the cushions and away from the hammock. Weightless! In a flash

he understood what had occurred; the receiving tube of vibrations from Earth had been discontinued. They were drifting in space, helplessly entombed in a closed vessel whose oxygen supply could last no more than ten hours—doomed.

"Thia!" he groaned.

Pushing against a stanchion of the hammock support, he drifted over to where the girl lay motionless. His fingers twined with hers.

All else was forgotten as instant revelation came to each that the other cared. No whispered words were needed, no stereotyped avowals. They *knew*. And, knowing, were speechless—forgetful for the moment of the hopelessness of their position.

"You understand what this means—the stopping of the space car?" Cliff asked gently, after a while.

"Yes—I know. We were let loose at the point where the transmitting and receiving tubes met in space. Something happened to cut off the power at the terrestrial station, and we are adrift. We shall die together, Cleef." Desperately, Thia fought back the sob that was in her throat.

To find happiness, undreamed-of happiness, and then to lose it! Cliff swallowed painfully, taking her in desperate enfolding arms as if by their new-found strength he might save her.

The pumps throbbed softly in the adjacent compartment.

Presently they were talking of other things. Resigned to the cruel fate, they would at least pass their last hours together in sympathetic understanding—and in sanity. Resolutely they turned their thoughts and conversation from the future, which might have been theirs, but now could never be.

And many things which had been puzzling Cliff became clear to him as Thia spoke of her past life.

As he had suspected, she was no drylander. Pampered, orphaned daughter of an influential patrician of Risapar, she had fled to the drylands two years previously to escape a distasteful marriage about to be forced upon her by the Eugenics Board of the Canal Cities Union. She reached the City of Diamonds, the walled city of fabulous wealth that lay in the drylands only a few miles from Risapar. And here she found refuge.

A plague visited her new home, decimating the population of the City of Diamonds and striking terror to the souls of all who dwelt within the city walls. Thia had been an angel of mercy, working day and night with the physicians, organizing squads of nurses, and herself going into the homes of the afflicted and ministering to them.

Thia passed swiftly over this phase, but Cliff was able to learn that the survivors, mostly males and only a few hundred in number, had set her up as their new ruler. This

they did in gratitude and in real appreciation of her organizing ability.

Then had come a demand for tribute from the Canal Cities Union. Her people had refused and had taken to the diamond mines and the maze of passages underneath their city, blasting the entrances shut to hide themselves from the militias sent against them.

Outlawed by the authorities and their lives forfeit, they had dwelt underneath the surface. Eventually they explored connecting passages and came upon the retreat of Vetter and his companions in the space tube development. They had bargained with Vetter to convey them to Earth and he had agreed to do so for a vast fortune in diamonds that was offered. But none of the drylanders would risk passage in the car until a man of sufficient courage, or sufficiently desperate, might be found. Thus Cliff had come into the picture.

Thia had successfully concealed from her people the fact that Cliff had escaped, and they had spent the past five days sending them across to Earth in the tiny bullet-like car. But today, with most of them gone, Thia had become suspicious. Maranu always guarded the entrance and her people had gone into the space car singly. And on Maranu's cruel face there was always that sinister smile. And today had come Thia's own turn; she had entered the car and had learned what had been happening ... Cliff himself had seen....

She shuddered as she glanced at the heap of corpses. Stirring they were, in their weightlessness. Shifting position

eerily.

"Lord!" Cliff muttered. "You think Vetter killed them all? Every trip was the same?"

"I do; I am sure of it."

"Why—in God's name why?"

Thia's eyes darkened to jet. "Maranu!" she whispered. "He and Vetter sold out to the Canal Cities Union. For additional payment of gold and precious stones they became the executioners—they——"

"Vetter—did—this!" Cliff marveled. "After what he did for me with Lintarg. How could he? I'm glad I gave the thing away."

"You—gave what away?" Thia's eyes were, wide upon him.

He told her swiftly of how he had been forced to tell of Vetter's Arizona retreat.

"You were not to blame," she exonerated him. "But, Cleef, I do not understand—these Secret Service—why should they care?"

Cliff told her bitterly of Leonard Sykes, his rancor returning. At least he had the treacherous murderer Vetter to thank for Lintarg——

"Hush—what was that?" Thia interrupted him.

There was the sound of metal contacting with the shell of the car somewhere about the entrance port. Their bodies drifted toward that side of the vessel. Some object of considerable mass had approached them, bringing this simulation of gravitational force by its attraction. A heavy thud followed and the space car lurched violently.

"A rocket ship!" Cliff exulted. "We're saved, Thia, we're saved. It could be nothing else out here—nothing but a space liner."

Choking with emotion, he held her fiercely close.

The sound of heavy footsteps resounded on the shell of the space car. Men in vacuum-tight apparel were out there making a rescue connection. In a few minutes they'd be inside.

Cliff's jubilation gave way to swift realization.

"Thia," he husked. "They'll take you. By the treaty between the Canal Cities Union and League of Terra your return will be demanded."

"They'll take you, too, my Cleef," sadly, "for you will be considered as an accomplice. There is evidence that Vetter sent you to Lintarg—he paid——"

Cliff grabbed up the traitor's flame pistol from the floor. He'd not let them take her! Better to die here together than that——

The entrance manhole was open and someone was coming through the airlock. A vacuum-sealed connection had been established with the rescuing vessel.

"Chet!" exclaimed Cliff as a square-shouldered, smiling youngster came through the door, "Chet Andrews, by all that's good and holy!"

Andrews, his bosom pal in the old day—pilot of the H-4—good old Chet was here!

"Yeah, it's me." His friend drifted near, pulling himself along from stanchion to stanchion. "Put away that thing," he grinned, eyeing the flame pistol, "We're taking you aboard, you bonehead."

"No!" Cliff was suddenly panicky. "You don't know, Chet—Thia here—they'll return her to Mars. There's a death sentence——"

"Such boneheadedness!" Chet continued to grin. "You don't think we'd stand for that, do you? Your old pals? Not much."

"Sure there's a way out?" Cliff set the pistol down.

"Sure—absolutely—come on."

Though he saw not how, Cliff believed him. Holding fast to Thia, who helped as best she could in the awkward absence of appreciable gravity, he made his way through the airlock after Chet.

In the artificial gravity of the H-4, they moved naturally again. Chet was chuckling with glee as he led the two toward the master stateroom of the liner.

"Got a surprise for you, Cliff," he boasted,

"What?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

And then they were inside the room and Cliff was staring incredulously at a pudgy, smiling man who sat by the library table. Others of Cliff's friends were grouped about the man—Davis, Trent, Thomas. But Cliff had eyes only for the pudgy one and mad rage surged up in him.

"Leonard Sykes!" he bellowed. "You dirty swine!"

He plunged forward. More double-dealing, he supposed. Well, at least he'd have the satisfaction of repaying Sykes

"Easy now!" "Cut it out, pilot!" "Don't be a bonehead!" The soothing words of friends were in his ears as they hemmed him in, holding him off from the man he intended to pulverize. Thia had drawn back against the wall and stood staring.

"Let me at him!" Cliff yelled, "I'll mop the floor with him. You know what he did?"

"Yeah, we know what he did," Chet Andrews drawled, thrusting his face close to Cliff's and hanging tight to his wrists. "He fixed you up, that's what he did. Fixed things with Lintarg—Sykes did, not Vetter—don't be a bonehead all your life."

"Sykes—did——" Cliff let his arms fall weakly at his side and moved to a chair, where he sat down dazedly. He stared at his former employer, who continued to smile. "Is this true, Mr. Sykes?"

"It is, my boy." Sykes' gaze was frank, kindly.

Cliff hunched himself dejectedly where he sat. It seemed as if he had been seventeen kinds of fool. "I—I'm sorry then, Mr. Sykes," he stammered. "I've been thinking all this time _____"

"I know what you've thought," returned Sykes, "and small wonder. I'll explain, if you will listen."

Cliff listened. The matron on board had taken charge of Thia and he gave his undivided attention to what the financier had to say.

"Barron," Sykes told him. "I had to do what I did—refuse the very reasonable request you made of me. Two Secret Service men were in the next room and I was acting in accordance with instructions. A serious situation had arisen between the League of Terra and the Canal Cities Union—what amounted to a threat of war. In some manner the Martian Union had learned of Vetter's machinations, though

they could not locate his apparatus on Mars nor could they find the condemned drylanders he was negotiating with. But their spies in America had the information that he intended to approach you, Cliff, in the matter of the trial trip. And they put it up to our Secret Service to trail you to Vetter's lair, using you as the bait with which to trap him. But his autogiro was too fast for their antiquated ships and they lost him. Hence came the attempt to get information from you by others of their number before your operation. Here again they blundered, or you out-smarted them, but finally they succeeded in locating Vetter's plant in Arizona and shut off the power there."

"Yes, they succeeded all right." said Cliff dryly. "But you, Mr. Sykes, how did you come to be out here? And how do you know all this?"

"We came out at once after you had left my office. I suspected what Vetter was up to, as he originally stole this invention from an old crony of mine. He worked on your resentment against me and on your former disability to get you to make this trial he dared not make himself. He was crafty, Vetter was."

"I'll say so!" growled Cliff, a light dawning on him. "Then Vetter didn't——"

"He did not," Sykes interrupted. "The letter of credit he gave you was forged; the supposed letter to Lintarg only blank paper. He had counted on Maranu to make away with you when you arrived, but Maranu failed him, I take it, on account of Thia's intervention."

Cliff nodded.

"But I have agents in Risapar, Barron, and I kept in touch with them by etherphone. They arranged everything with Lintarg, even to the new letter of credit—and kept their mouths shut, too."

"Then you, not Vetter, did this—for me!" Consumed with chagrin, Cliff listened as Sykes went on with the story.

Though he did not know the location of Vetter's projector, Sykes did know of the existence of the space tube. He had come out here in anticipation of just such a thing as had happened; had hovered in space with the H-4 midway between Mars and Earth, hoping to rescue anyone who might be set adrift in the space car. He had kept in touch with the situation by means of etherphone conversations with his agents on both Earth and Mars. And here he was, Johnny-on-the-spot!

Cliff could restrain himself no longer. He pleaded with Sykes for forgiveness. Murderous rage had been in his heart, and misunderstanding. But Sykes would have none of his apologies, and his old buddies made sport of his embarrassment. It was good to have friends like these!

A little later Thia returned with the matron and came at once to Cliff's side. He observed with pride the admiring, envious glances of his buddies.

"And what about us, Mr. Sykes?" Cliff asked, drawing Thia to him. "This girl can not return to Mars, you know."

"Nor to Earth." Sykes' gaze was solemn. "As far as that goes, Barron, you are no better off yourself. Both of you are exiles. You must know the status of diplomatic relations between the League of Terra and the Canal Cities Union. Even though there was double-dealing on the part of the Union when they bought Maranu and Vetter off without advising the League, they will deny it and will still insist that we keep the letter of the law on extradition. Neither of you may be harbored safely on Terra."

"I've always wanted to visit Callisto," Cliff said vaguely. He had heard of the idyllic beauty of that satellite of Jupiter from returning adventurers.

Leonard Sykes permitted himself a chuckle. "You read my mind, Barron," he said. "It is the very place for you and your bride."

"Bride!" blankly.

"Within ten minutes." Sykes beamed expansively.

With a gurgle of delight Thia crossed to where he sat and hugged him enthusiastically. Sykes reddened painfully, and every man in the room was consumed with envy.

A space pilot is vested with the same authority as is the captain of an ocean-going vessel of Earth. And so it was that Cliff and Thia were made one in a simple ceremony performed by Chet Andrews.

"Now we come to the means of getting you two to Callisto," said Sykes, when the congratulations and felicitations were over. "Of course it is impossible for the H-4 to carry you there; the ship would be missed by the Interplanetary Police if she were to be away for so long."

"What then?" Cliff asked.

The financier's eyes twinkled. "You've been itching for a long time to sit at the controls of an ethership, haven't you Barron?"

"I'll say so!" Cliff looked down at his strong hands, so lately clawed and useless. "Ever—ever since——"

"Exactly." Sykes grinned understandingly. "Well how would you like to take over the H-4's tender?"

"You—you mean——"

"I mean I'm giving you the Hornet. Take her and go to Callisto with your charming wife. And, some day perhaps we shall pay you a visit there—some of the boys and myself. What do you say?"

Cliff said nothing. He couldn't speak for the fulness of his heart, but his grip said more than mere words.

"It'll be a fine little ship for a honeymoon," Sykes added, his eyes misting and his voice wistful.

When the tiny ethership Hornet slipped from her airlock in the side of the H-4, Thia was beside Cliff at the controls.

They waved a farewell to Chet and Sykes as Cliff maneuvered to pass the forward port of the H-4. And then the Hornet drove off into the blackness of the star-studded heavens.

They passed the bullet-like shell that was the tomb of Vetter and the last lot of drylanders he had murdered.

"I did all I could for them," Thia murmured.

"Yes." Cliff set a course for the orbit of Jupiter. "You've done far more than your share, my dear."

"You're not sorry?" she whispered dreamily.

"Sorry!" Cliff looked off toward the H-4; saw the sudden flare of her stern rocket tubes as she made for Terra. "Sorry! Why, I'm the luckiest man in the universe. I've always been a drifter, a lover of far-away places. Earth was no more my home than Mars or Venus. And now I'll not only have a new home and the means of traveling through the heavens when I like—I'll have *you*."

Thia dropped her tired head to his shoulder. "I too," she sighed blissfully. "What more could I ask?"

They sat thus, silent for many minutes, while the Hornet drove on into the void toward the new land and the new life that held such promise of happiness. And when next they spoke, it was only of the future.

Callisto, is second in size of Jupiter's satellites. It is 2,960 miles in diameter, which is over one-third the diameter of the earth. Its orbit is about 2,300,000 miles from Jupiter. Its name, with an English termination, indicates "most beautiful."

THE END

[The end of *Thia of the Drylands* by Harold Vincent Schoepflin (as Harl Vincent)]